

Carol Anne Williams

D.M.A., ARAM, Dip RAM, AD (Yale), FRCO, FTCL, ARCM, San Diego Civic Organist Emerita

Dr. Carol Williams is a world-renowned concert organist and composer whose career has been marked by groundbreaking achievements, a deep passion for the organ, and a commitment to expanding its audience through diverse musical genres and innovative projects. Below are some detailed exploration of her life, accomplishments, history, engagements, hobbies, and advice for students.

Life and Background

Dr. Carol Anne Williams, born in 1962 in Great Britain to a Welsh musical family, showed prodigious talent from an early age. She could read music before she could read English, began private lessons at age five, and performed organ recitals across the UK by age eight, chauffeured by her father. Her grandmother and father were organists, and her mother played the piano, but Carol was the only one “crazy enough” to pursue music as a career, driven by what she describes as a stubborn streak.

Her formal training began at the Royal Academy of Music in London, where she studied organ under David Sanger, earning the prestigious Recital Diploma, LRAMs in organ and piano, and all major organ performance prizes. She also studied harpsichord with Virginia Black. During this time, she became a Fellow of the Royal College of Organists, a Fellow of Trinity College London, and an Associate of the Royal College of Music.

She later studied with Daniel Roth at St. Sulpice in Paris, where Charles-Marie Widor had been temporary organist for 63 years.

Moving to the United States in 1995, Williams pursued postgraduate studies at Yale University under Thomas Murray, where she served as University Chapel Organist and received an Artist Diploma along with the Charles Ives Prize for outstanding achievement. She then earned her Doctor of Musical Arts (D.M.A.) degree from the Manhattan School of Music under McNeil Robinson, receiving the Helen Cohn Award.

Williams has lived in various parts of the U.S., including San Diego, where she served as Civic Organist from 2001 to 2016, Virginia and Georgia, before returning to her native UK with her husband, Kerry Bell, a retired video producer and rock and roll drummer. She is currently performing internationally and teaching in her own studio.

Accomplishments

Dr. Williams has achieved numerous milestones:

- **First Female Civic Organist in the U.S.:** In October 2001, she became the first woman to hold the title of Civic Organist for San Diego, serving until 2016. She was also Artistic Director of the Spreckels Organ Society, producing North America’s largest organ festival. Upon stepping down, she was honored as San Diego Civic Organist Emerita for her 15 years of service.
- **Global Performances:** Williams has performed at prestigious venues worldwide, including St. Sulpice and Notre Dame in Paris, Westminster Abbey, St. Paul’s Cathedral, King’s College Cambridge, Walt Disney Concert Hall, and Washington National Cathedral. She has collaborated with orchestras like the BBC Concert Orchestra, San Diego Symphony, and Beijing Symphony, including inaugural recitals at Beijing’s Forbidden City Concert Hall.
- **Media and Outreach:** She hosts *TourBus*, a documentary series exploring pipe organs globally, and *On the Bench with Dr. Carol*, a YouTube talk show interviewing musicians. She has been featured in the national-awareness video *Pulling Out All the Stops* and

performed at the Virgil Fox Memorial Concert at Riverside Church, New York, and the 10th anniversary celebration of the Walk Disney Hall Organ in Los Angeles.

- **Compositions and Recordings:** Williams has composed over 30 works and released 20 CDs and 15 DVDs. Her performances blend classical, jazz, blues, pop, and even rock, reflecting her eclectic approach.
- **Charitable Work:** She has raised significant funds through performances, including over \$15,000 during a 12-hour marathon concert for wounded warriors, showcasing her endurance and commitment to social causes.

History and Career Path

Williams' career reflects her versatility and dedication to the organ, which she calls the "King of Instruments." Her early exposure to music in a Welsh family laid the foundation for her lifelong passion. Her studies with renowned teachers like David Sanger, Daniel Roth, Thomas Murray, and McNeil Robinson shaped her technical and artistic prowess. Each teacher offered unique insights: Murray demonstrated with phenomenal technique, while Robinson challenged her with innovative exercises like sight-reading fugues while singing in tonic sol-fa.

Her tenure as San Diego's Civic Organist involved weekly concerts at the Spreckels Organ Pavilion, a massive outdoor organ with 73 ranks of pipes, where she played diverse programs ranging from Vienne's *Toccata in Bb minor* to blues, rock 'n roll and Broadway tunes.

Her return to the UK in recent years has allowed her to continue her international career while maintaining ties to the U.S. for performances.

Engagements

Williams maintains a busy schedule, performing an average of 75 concerts annually worldwide. Notable engagements include:

- Concerts at iconic venues like Notre Dame, St. Paul's Cathedral, and Walt Disney Concert Hall.
- A tribute to The Doors at the 2017 International Summer Organ Festival in San Diego, showcasing her ability to blend rock with organ music.
- Performances for charitable causes, such as her 12-hour marathon concert.
- Regular Sunday concerts at the Spreckels Organ Pavilion during her tenure, drawing up to 4,200 attendees for summer events.
- Upcoming performances listed on her website (melcot.com) and Patreon, where she shares updates with subscribers.

Her programs often include classical works, transcriptions (e.g., Duke Ellington's *Solitude* or Karl Jenkins' compositions), and popular music, reflecting her goal to make the organ accessible to new audiences.

Hobbies

Carol has a great fondness for animals especially horsemanship. Still always a deep integration of music into her personal life. She and her husband, Kerry Bell, share a love for music, with Kerry being a retired rock drummer. They own various organs, a grand piano, a drum set at home, where they "let it rip" with music, indicating a playful and creative home environment. Their dog, Wolfgang Amadeus Bell, adds a lighthearted touch to their lives vocalizing when Carol plays solo.

Williams' work on *TourBus* and *On the Bench with Dr. Carol* has interest in storytelling, travel, and connecting with other musicians, which could be considered extensions of her hobbies.

Advice for Students

Dr. Williams has shared valuable advice for young musicians, drawn from her own experiences and interviews with others:

- **Never Stop Being a Student:** Her teacher David Sanger advised her to remain a lifelong learner, a principle she emphasizes for students.
- **Be Pliable and Seize Opportunities:** Williams believes young artists especially women must be adaptable, taking every chance to perform, broadcast, or promote their work, whether through concerts, social media, or projects like her YouTube series.
- **Make Time to Smell the Roses:** In her *On the Bench* series, one memorable piece of advice she highlighted was to balance dedication with enjoying life, be involved with hobbies ensuring musicians avoid burnout.
- **Create Your Own Path:** Reflecting on gender imbalances in the organ world, she encourages students to forge their own opportunities rather than waiting for systemic change. She attributes her success to her proactive approach, noting that she hasn't noticed significant barriers as a woman because she focused on creating her unique career.

Insights from Interviews

Williams' *On the Bench with Dr. Carol* series involves conversations with musical artists, where she explores their experiences and advice. Her own interviews, such as one republished for the 2022 AGO National Convention in Seattle, highlight her engaging personality and eclectic approach. She recounts memorable experiences, like playing for Princess Diana and battling cold weather during outdoor performances, which she says affects "hands, feet, and brain."

Her media appearances, including radio programs and the *Pulling Out All the Stops* video, showcase her ability to communicate her love for the organ. She emphasizes its versatility, from classical to theatrical and pop, aiming to make audiences "feel good" through her performances.

Conclusion

Dr. Carol Williams is a world traveling trailblazer whose career blends rigorous classical training with an adventurous spirit, bringing the organ to diverse audiences through concerts, media, and charitable work. Her life reflects a deep-rooted passion for music, nurtured from childhood, and her accomplishments include breaking gender barriers, performing globally, and creating innovative content like *TourBus*. Her hobbies hobbies, music and travel, emphasize lifelong learning, adaptability, and balance. For the latest on her engagements, visit her website melcot.com.

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