

**By Timothy Jones**

May 13, 2019.....May 13, 2021. Two short years between the end of one milestone and the end of another—but both dates bookcase a foundation laid which has opened wonderful and unexpected opportunities in my life.

On an unusually warm **day in May 2019**, I walked across the field at Mercer University's Five Star Stadium to receive my **Bachelor of Music in Organ Performance**, and on an unusually cold day in May 2021 I stood with my family in the **Georgia State University Stadium to receive my Master's in Piano Pedagogy**. I had only dimly realized when I began my journey where it might take me, and **the road has ended up taking me in a totally unexpected direction. Along the way, many extraordinary people** have invested in my life to build the foundation enabling my launch into even greater adventures

My "piano debut" came at only two years old: one afternoon my parents discovered me playing the melody of Twila Paris' "Lamb of God" while holding myself up to the instrument with one hand, my eyes barely level with the keyboard. After being rejected by several piano teachers who said, "I wouldn't know *how* to teach a blind child!" they hesitantly approached Miss Patti Bennet, pianist at our church, to inquire if she was accepting new students into her studio—and if she would be willing to teach a blind child. Miss Patti's eyes flashed when my parents told her of the struggle they'd had getting musical training for me, and she indignantly declared, "Why, you teach a *blind* child the same way you would teach a *sighted* child!" Miss Patti not only accepted me under her tutelage, but designed from scratch an entire program of teaching me (having never taught a blind student before) and under her training I was soon winning multiple awards and scholarships. She built in me a love of great music—classical and romantic literature as well as the great works written for Sacred worship.

The rich liturgical traditions of the Methodist church we attended when I was very young, and the rich hymnody of the Baptist churches we later joined, inspired in me the desire to become a church musician. I had fallen in love with the grandeur of the organ at the Methodist church, and could imagine no greater joy than a career as a church organist and pianist, such as I had seen perform there each week. Mrs. Karen Bunn, Chapel organist at the Cathedral of St. Phillip, later became my organ teacher; it was she who led me to dare to dream that I could follow in the footsteps of famous blind organists such as Louis Vierne, Jean Langlais, Helmut Walcha, and even Louis Braille himself.

Again, however, I encountered walls—not due to my disability but due to others' reactions to it. The Dean of one college in north Georgia, esteemed for its music program, rejected me outright because "**you can't do the sight-reading test.**" When I pointed out that under such a restriction Langlais and Vierne would not have been welcome at this school, he was unmoved. Other colleges that were more accepting lacked the necessary resources to assist students with disabilities.

Then I considered Mercer.

I had previously held back from applying there, distrusting my own abilities and qualifications to meet Mercer's high standards academically or musically. However, after meeting with and playing for Dr. Mitchener and Dr. Altman, both were so enthusiastic, encouraging, and eager to have me enter Townsend School of Music that I began to hope this dream might be possible after all. To my delight and astonishment, not only was I accepted into the Organ Performance program, but I was granted a generous scholarship that enabled me financially to attend. Far more remarkable, however, was the level

of caring and personal investment shown by the faculty, administration, and fellow students which made it possible for me to succeed as a blind music major at Mercer.

There were some setbacks early on as accommodations needs were identified--such as being able to do my homework because I did not yet have any textbooks in braille. I remember that during those early weeks, Dean Keith himself even took time out of his busy schedule to make recordings of my textbooks so I would have as much access as possible to complete my work. Throughout my time at Mercer, he supported and encouraged me through his mentorship, numerous performance opportunities, and connections with other blind musicians such as Ken Medema. Over time, the Mercer staff was always most open to ways of improving their programs to be inclusive of the disabled. Disabilities Coordinator Katie Johnson completely revolutionized Mercer's Access and Accommodations office, from greater electronic access to the school's online portal, to streamlining the textbook acquisition process, to physically revamping the Access office itself for greater accessibility. Mercer's IT department invited me to consult with them on ways to make the entire school website more accessible to those with vision-related challenges, which were implemented during my time there.

The same level of commitment to student success was demonstrated by the faculty at Townsend. Dr. Mitchener never treated me differently because of my disability. His expertise in organ helped me to think outside the box and dramatically increased my abilities at the instrument. I had had a difficult time deciding between organ and piano as my major, and Dr. Altman provided immeasurable support; working with me to continue to build my piano skills so as to master both instruments without actually double majoring. Dr. Reddick and I often interacted casually, and during one of our discussions I learned there was a need to expand the percussion section of Townsend. I had recently inherited a vintage marimba from my grandfather—a gifted self-taught musician. In token of my gratefulness to Mercer and Townsend for all they had invested in me, I donated this instrument to the school to become a permanent part of the music program. I look forward to one day being able to tell my grandfather how his treasure is being used.

I would be remiss if I did not mention the tremendous support I received from other students in the School of Music. Richard Gress was one of my most helpful student mentors. Through his superb sight-reading skills, he not only assisted me with school projects but also with learning hymns for church. From music history to counterpoint and beyond, I can say I would not have my bachelor's degree today in organ performance without Richard's support. Another student who played a vital role in my success was Dustin Shelton. Being a graduate organ student, he was able to provide insight to my theory and musicianship classes on a level similar to that of my professors.

When I walked the field that lovely May morning in 2019 to receive my *summa cum laude*, I knew that the gifts and sacrifices of many had made possible my success.

My time at Mercer had helped me re-define my career goals, and I realized that a career solely in church music—especially given the changes in church music over the past few decades---might be untenable. I had therefore determined to go next to Bob Jones University to study Piano Pedagogy. However, some months prior to graduation I learned that BJU had dismantled their *entire Graduate Music program*. God had firmly closed a door in my face, and I had no idea of the next step in His leading.

But God did not leave me to wonder for long. Later that same month, my mom (a Mercer Atlanta Alumnus) met another MUA graduate at the Atlanta Greek Festival. Her friend—a music education

major—shared that Georgia State had an excellent music program—including a Graduate degree program in Piano Pedagogy. I applied over Christmas 2018, and—as is often the case when God opens a door—things fell into place incredibly quickly. Ella Chamis of the School of Music and Disability Coordinator Tina Vires did a fabulous job making sure I had everything necessary for my program of study. Dr. Geoffrey Haydon’s thorough knowledge of classical and jazz piano, along with his personally-developed program for teaching visually-impaired pianists to orient themselves on the keyboard through “mapping,” enabled my piano skills to reach new heights. He even on his own time taught me how to tune pianos, opening another possibility for future self-support. Dr. Besalyan’s piano literature class and Dr. Gallo’s pedagogy classes added to this foundation, providing a wealth of possibilities for teaching piano to students of all ages, especially those with disabilities.

However, I still faced the problem of what to do for a career. My professors at both Mercer and Georgia State told me that musicians cannot survive on concertizing and playing in church alone. The term “starving artists” is real, and requires the musician to have a versatile portfolio for survival.

Therefore, my path turned from a focus solely on performance to one on education. Remembering what a positive influence private rehabilitation / education organizations had been in my life, I had hopes of obtaining a permanent music teaching position at either the Center for the Visually Impaired in Atlanta or the Vision Rehab Services in Cobb County or both. I had also planned after graduation to set up my own music studio, where I would teach piano and / or beginning organ, as well as the reading of music in braille, and assistive technology skills for visually-impaired musicians to enable academic and career success. I hoped to supplement these sources of income with piano tuning and performing event music.

Enter Covid.

Due to the pandemic, which came into full-force in early 2020, not only was my education severely impacted, but I began to realize that opportunities for either teaching or performing would be severely limited into the foreseeable future. Though I tried to launch “By Faith Music Academy,” pandemic fears and restrictions limited me to very few students, most of those virtual. Thanks to Dr. Haydon’s teaching me to tune pianos. I had that possible area of support as well, but I was still on the apprentice-level even with that. By mid-2020, I could not foresee anything that would greatly change or enhance my ability to employ my musical skills in a self-supporting manner.

**One day in January 2021, something prompted me to look at that day’s listserv for MENVI—the Music Education Network for the Visually Impaired. An ad was listed in that day’s post for a short-term Internship position with the Library of Congress’s *Aspiring Leaders Internship Program*, a newly-created outreach to provide students with disabilities a transition from college to employment. One of the positions available required proofreading braille music scores that had been digitized from the hard copy collection—which would necessitate extreme fluency in reading complicated scores in the Music Braille code—a skill I had honed during my six years of music degree study. Since I had personally experienced the struggle of obtaining music in braille to continue my college studies, assisting the Library in this area sparked my interest. I knew that building the digital repository would give blind musicians more access to music repertoire; even in a pandemic. Interestingly, the Internship was only open to applicants enrolled in or *freshly graduated from an accredited college/university*. This paid Internship program lasted ten weeks.**

**At the end of the internship, my boss informed me of a newly-opening, full-time position as a Librarian of Braille Music with the Library of Congress. She encouraged me to watch for the posting on the USA**

Jobs website and apply if I was interested. The job listing was posted on August 24, 2021. The application deadline was extended twice and the listing finally closed on October 5. After another month, I was interviewed; a month later, my references were contacted. Finally, just before Christmas, I was given a conditional offer, which I accepted. On Thursday, January 20, I was given a definite Final Offer, and accepted the latest possible starting date of February 28, so as to have ample time to locate housing in D.C. since instead of teleworking, this job requires my relocating to Washington, D.C. On Saturday, February 12, I will be moving to my new home.

During my freshman year at Mercer, a student journalist named Marin Guta once interviewed me for *The Mercer Cluster*. I said in that interview that I wanted to be somewhere serving God, whether that be at home or abroad. If someone had told me then I would be serving Him in Washington, D.C.--making music available to the blind through braille music—I would never have believed it. There are too many “God-incidences” in all this for me to doubt that God is in control, and that—even when He sends us into unknown territories to carry out our part of His Great Commission, He always gives us the tools we need to fulfill the mission. The new adventure I’m beginning soon is God’s gift, made possible by His working in my life through the many people who believed in me, cared about me, invested in me, and never let the presence of my disabilities hinder their faith in me. I can never repay all of them the debt of gratitude I owe, but hope to “pay forward” this debt by similarly investing in the lives of others through my work at the Library of Congress; opening doors to music literacy for a new generation of visually impaired musicians and composers.