

# Palmer Christian

## A Biography

### Marilyn Mason



Palmer Christian

Palmer Christian was born May 3, 1885, in Kankakee, Illinois, and died February 19, 1949, in Ann Arbor, Michigan. His sudden death was the result of an aneurysm, although he had not been feeling well for the previous year. His early music studies were with Clarence Dickinson and Arthur Olaf Anderson at the American Conservatory in Chicago. He studied with Karl Straube at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Leipzig (1909 – 1910) and with Guilmant in Paris (1910 – 1911).

Christian was municipal organist in Denver, Colorado in 1920 and 1921 and for a year was organist at the Grove Park Inn in Ashville, North Carolina. He and Mrs. Christian spoke fondly of that residency. In 1924, Christian became Professor of Music and University Organist at The University of Michigan. The home Palmer and Lois Christian built in 1929 on Devonshire is as modern and stylish today as it was then. He played six transcontinental tours in the United States and was invited to be the American representative at the International Organ — Orchestra Concert, held in the Wanamaker Auditorium in New York City in 1925. He spoke glowingly of this occasion. In 1929, he was awarded the honorary degree of Doctor of Music by the American Conservatory of Music.

In his dress, he was near-perfect. His clothes were tailored, sometimes by a tailor in Windsor; he always wore matching jacket and trousers, vest and tie. His matching necktie, handkerchief, and sometimes matching stockings were a part of the sophisticated look he enjoyed. He was tall and slender. His hands were expressive and his long fingers seemed to envelop the keys. His playing was expressive, sometimes reflective and often declamatory but always stemming from the innately sensitive musician that he was.

Some of the principles in his teaching are expressed in his paper on "Registration," which he delivered at an M.T.N.A. Convention in 1940.

"Good taste in the use of tone-color should be one of the outstanding characteristics of all organists..."

...In the preparation of a new work, after a general survey, first attention must be paid to architectural proportion, to breadth of melodic line, to phrasing, to harmonic coloring. After this the perfection of any technical passages should be undertaken. You will note that nothing has been said about registration; it is usually better to postpone this part of the preparation until the more fundamental processes have been accomplished. This by no means implies that registration is incidental, or that it can be left to the inspiration of the moment for public performance...

Registration must recognize the virtues of contrast, of blend, the character of the melodic line (fragmentary as well as extended), proportions of the piece as a whole, acoustics, resources of the instrument at hand. There should be great attention paid to individuality of color — to a simplification rather than too much mixing...

Any interpretive artist must learn something more than the notes, and this something surely includes coloring, whether we are singers, violinists, pianists, or organists..."