



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue  
in the City of New York**

**The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, OBE, DD, *Rector*  
John Scott, LVO, D. Mus., *Organist and Director of Music*  
[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)**

**Saturday, February 4, 2012**

***Solemn Requiem for Gerre Hancock  
at 11am***

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The Reverend Canon John Andrew, Rector *Emeritus*  
and  
The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, Rector

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*A SERMON IN TWO PARTS FOR GERRE HANCOCK*

***Part I: Fr Andrew***

This is a sermon with two parts by two preachers.

In the Name of the true and living God, Father Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

*“O God, my heart is ready, my heart is ready; I will sing and give praise with the best member that I have” [Ps 108:1]*

I have chosen this verse from the Psalms not merely because it is the motto of this Church of Saint Thomas but that it encapsulates the character of the great man whose soul we commend to God today. His musical genius flowed from that ready heart of his. His amazing capacity for improvisation at the organ stemmed from it; restless for perfection in the fingers he used to produce heavenly sounds; restless for perfection in the voices of the many generations in the Choir School he encouraged and inspired; restless for perfection in the miracles of their blending in the worship of the Lord he loved. He never stopped. He never gave in. Physical weakness and pain never cowed his priestliness. Yes: priestliness. Around him like a cloak was his priestly readiness to spend himself — and his expectation that others in his care and guidance would honor his Lord by their readiness to give more than they imagined they could ever give in worship.

Uncle Gerre, as generations would call him, had a ready heart for friendship of the committed souls who shared his vision, leading often to the robust loyalty of professional disciples who caught his spirit. He showed them something of the music of Heaven, as a priest should. He knew what he was talking about, and he talked a lot about it. Blend this readiness of heart with a lightness of spirit and an earthiness of Texan humor and you can see a portrait emerging of a genius musician who loved his Lord, and laughed. He gladdened our hearts with the funny things he could come out with. One Easter Eve, as we were giving pots of flowers from around the Pascal Candle to the children and Gerre was improvising gently during the distribution my ear caught a distinct rendering of the song, the “Easter Parade”. I can still recall the laughter. Such was the partnership: twenty-five happy years of it. I submitted to his authority always when I would rehearse the priest’s part of the Versicles and Responses set for

that day's Evensong. I needed to. As a former chorister myself, when I went off key he would require me to put it right.

In all those twenty-five years of musical partnership — and social friendship — we only had one scolding row, and it was within my first six weeks as rector, just around Christmas time. A young Australian diplomat at the U.N., a devout Anglican and knowledgeable with Church music came with his future wife of Spanish descent to discuss the musical details of their forthcoming Wedding. His preferences and hopes were very impressive and persuasive. When he had finished I turned to his future wife and said, "Wonderful suggestions. Now do you have any?" "Oh, Father," she said, "I would love 'Ave Maria', and hummed the tune." "Wonderful!" — And then I saw Gerre's face. Pea green with fury. "I am appalled sir. This is no real church music! This is prostituting the boys' voices..." His upper lip came out. And he protested more. I listened, and then my patience was exhausted. "Go down and learn the darn thing!" and exit Gerre.

There was silence in Heaven from the Music Office for two days. On the third day the voice of Gerre was on the phone, with all the happy chirpiness I knew.

"May I come up, Sir?"

"Delighted my dear Gerre."

He stood at my office door. "You won't believe this, Father, but the little so-and-so's learned the blessed thing in twelve minutes.

We cut a record-disc, our first recording together, the next month. The first number was the Ave Maria: a smash hit, Gerre hit the jackpot with our first recording. As he subsequently did in the settings he composed and are sung world-wide.

So began a quarter-century partnership, enriched by our beloved Judy. Full of hilarity, full of worship's sublime moments, which the sufferings he had to go through never diminished, his ready heart surmounted the depletion of his health. His ready heart of devotion to his wife and daughters never flagged.

Through our tears we know that Gerre, our beloved friend and God's ready servant, in Heaven prays for us as he casts a critical eye on the Angel Choir, for now he sees everything with a clarity of eyes that have seen God.

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## ***Part II: Fr Mead***

When I succeeded Father Andrew in 1996 as Rector, Dr. Hancock catechized me early on concerning a most vital matter. Gerre told me the story of his call to Saint Thomas as Organist and Master of Choristers in 1971. The task of finding the successor to William Self had been delegated to a lay leader who told Gerre that the Choir School would probably close, but that Gerre's pre-eminence as an improviser would provide Saint Thomas with a new musical signature. "Well," said Gerre, "I had run a little Men and Boys choir in Cincinnati, and I thought I'd be — *darned* — if I'd lie down and play dead and let that school be gone with the wind."

Gerre had not known when he began here in 1971 that the retiring Rector Dr. Morris would be succeeded by John Andrew, a Priest who celebrated liturgies demanding choral music

in the Anglican tradition – justifying and calling for the treble voices which the Choir School could produce. And so from 1972 forward the vision of our Choir School’s founder Dr. Noble was revived with transformative power by the new young partnership of the Rector and Director of Music. What had seemed in the turbulent decade of the 1960s to be an anachronism from the Middle Ages – a boarding school for boy choristers – was recovered and polished by that dynamic duo as the jewel of our heritage and the key to future success – success in an era when the mainline churches have on so many fronts been challenged by secularity and decline.

Saint Thomas simply would not be what it is today without Gerre Hancock. Attendance, buoyed by his enthusiasm and talent, soared. Between the time our website announcement about Gerre appeared at 10 pm on the day he died and that midnight, there were 960 hits (and many thousands since) – so much that we have added extra capacity to the site for the webcast of this Requiem lest it crash from overload. Churches around the country – from our mother Trinity Church Wall Street to Tennessee to California and around the world – have paid special tribute to Gerre since hearing of his death. His influence among church musicians is immense.

Gerre’s ashes were privately interred yesterday beneath the chancel pavement, near where the Choir Director conducts – a permanent tribute to Dr. Hancock’s place in our history. Dr. Scott is not quite standing on the spot (you can see and read the inscription on that side); but he is standing on the legacy of his predecessor.

Judith, Gerre’s beloved wife, was also his best friend and partner at the organ and in the chancel. For some years she left Saint Thomas to be a Director of Music in her own right. Gerre clearly missed her, and early on in my time I suggested he ask her back – I thought it would strengthen Gerre’s tenure, especially as he contended with physical pain stemming from heart and other surgical procedures. When Judy rejoined him and once more became his Associate Organist, I saw their love and devotion to each other. Judith was Gerre’s great mainstay and support. And as we think of the challenges that children of church musicians face (for example, no Sundays together, at least not much), we admire the love evident in the Hancock family, love reflected by Debbie and Lisa, cherished daughters of this musical superstar couple.

Gerre mentored many other children over generations – the alumni of the Choir School, and they are grieving a paternal loss too. Their families, like Hannah with the boy Samuel in the Bible (I Sam 1:28), “lent them to the Lord” as boarding choristers. But Gerre, together with Mr. Clem their longtime Headmaster during those years, helped turn those boys into men, including some outstanding musicians, priests, and other professionals and leaders of accomplishment. It is good to see so many of them; they are family.

We all know Gerre could be very, very funny. Once I told him a young woman in the congregation, who became a seminarian and whom Saint Thomas sponsored for ordination, worked at Radio City Music Hall as one of the dressers for The Rockettes. Gerre deadpanned, did I know if she was looking for an assistant? In a different life Gerre could have been a musical comedian like Victor Borge. His sidesplitting humor and keyboard mastery, his genius – animated by the rich timbre of his voice resonating from Lubbock, Texas – could find its way (as we have heard) into the Saint Thomas sanctuary. And why shouldn’t Church be and include fun? The Sacrifice of Jesus Christ is, yes, heartbreaking; but his Resurrection means that, after all, the Christian life is a Divine Comedy.

In one of my first Christmas seasons at Saint Thomas there was a service of lessons and carols in the mid-week. It’s popular and attracts a crowd. Off went the procession from the ambulatory with Gerre at the console playing a magnificent intro to “Hark the Herald Angels Sing.” The problem was, the first hymn as printed in the leaflet was “O Come All Ye Faithful.”

I didn't catch it at first but the Headmaster Mr. Roland-Adams did, and keeping his alarm under control whispered the mistake to Gerre on the organ bench as the solemn train behind the processional cross and candles was leaving the station. Not missing a beat, Gerre leaned into an improvisation which then led to a medley of various carol tunes and at last we landed at "O Come All Ye Faithful." It was like a great trailer truck, a lorry juggernaut, backing into a garage from a New York side street – I am amazed how they do it. Walking up to me after the service, Gerre said with a grin, "Father, it's been a great pleasure working for you."

Gerre told the story – it was published in *The Diapason* – of how that brilliant improvising started. As a youngster he had practiced hard and done well for a big piano recital. When he got home his father said, "Gerre, it's time to practice." "Surely not," he replied, "not today." "Yes, we practice every day," said his father. So Gerre deliberately played some notes wrong, and from the other room his father chastised him on the unusual mistake. But Gerre kept on in the same mode, making something out of it. "I enjoyed the rise I got out of my father," said Gerre, "and you can make whatever Freudian sense of it that you will, but that began my love of improvisation." And you know, although Father Andrew and I certainly remember Judith at the console practicing, we can't recall seeing Gerre there for that purpose! He seemed to sit at the console only to play for services!

At a pre-Evensong rehearsal in the chancel Gerre once relieved me of a great anxiety as the officiant. I couldn't complete a phrase in a collect because I ran out of breath. With a gentle smile, Gerre said, "Father, whatever is wrong with taking a breath? Just chant, breathe, and continue." With gratitude for that kind moment of instruction, I see Gerre's face every time I chant with the choir.

As we have heard, Gerre was a man of real faith and devotion, with real sympathy for the work of priesthood. The sacred texts of the repertoire moved him, but more than that, the Lord himself was at the center of Gerre's life. Gerre was tough and worked hard; but his faith also enabled him to persevere, with courage and tenacity, over the years. He said his prayers. His work was utterly his vocation from God. He loved Judith and his two "girls." He broke the records and outlived his doctors' predictions. It was an honor to work with him. The young man from Lubbock became a New York Yankee; and he was received back by the University of Texas with distinction – they created a department in the Butler School of Music for Gerre and Judith to develop a degree program in organ and sacred music.

I last saw Gerre at our midnight Mass this past Christmas, where we reserved a front pew on the Gospel side of the center aisle for him and Judith. As the grand procession began its way down the center I looked at him but he had his eyes closed and was looking up, singing heartily, what else? – "O Come All Ye Faithful." When I got back from my post-Christmas break, waiting for me was a beautiful note from Gerre. But I did not know that he was so infirm by that time that he may not have seen my reply. Judith told me that by then he was asking for texts by John Donne – one of which is our offertory anthem in this Requiem. Judith, Deborah and Lisa were there with him. Gerre died in Judith's arms. God is great and good, and his servant is in his unveiled presence now, a presence most certainly including music. As we said in the beginning: "O God my heart is ready!" His soul, delivered now from "the burden of the flesh," is "in joy and felicity; and may he rise with Christ in glory."

As for the heritage to which Gerre devoted his life to secure for our beloved Saint Thomas Church and Choir School, to borrow his phrase: "Long may we wave."

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.