

Twentieth-Century Organ Music: Tradition, Reaction, and Innovation

Date du récital/Date of recital: May 17, 2017

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This recital explores the ways in which composers of the past century have responded to the organ's rich sonic palette and its potential for unparalleled virtuosity. From echoes of Romanticism to exploration of new sound worlds and techniques, one finds the most diverse styles of organ music in the 20th century than in any other era. Tonight, we will hear the “King of Instruments” speak with many different accents—everything from profound reflections of faith to irreverent shrieks and apocalyptic roars.

“Moderato” from *Symphonie romane*, op. 73 – Charles-Marie Widor (1844-1937)

We begin with wafts of incense and a musical meditation on Christ's Resurrection. Written in 1899, Charles-Marie Widor's *Symphonie romane*—his 10th and final organ symphony—unites Gregorian chant with Wagnerian drama in a reflection on Easter. Curiously, it was not originally written for the Cavaillé-Coll instrument at the Church of Saint-Sulpice in Paris, where Widor was titular organist for nearly 64 years. Rather, Widor dedicated the symphony to the memory of Saint Sernin, finding inspiration in the Romanesque architecture of a basilica in Toulouse that honors him.

The first movement begins with free melodies that climb up the keyboard like rising incense, setting a mystical backdrop against which the Gradual for Easter Day, “Haec dies,” enters. Widor weaves this theme throughout the entire work in a variety of rhythmic and harmonic guises. The fluctuation of dynamics and texture eventually builds to an exciting climax, a moment recalling the music of one of the most influential composers in turn-of-the-century Paris: Richard Wagner. After a triumphant proclamation of “Haec dies” on full organ, hints of the chant appear in various forms, and the piece eventually unwinds into prayerful repose.

Souvenir – John Cage (1912-1992)

As one of the leading figures of the avant-garde movement, American composer John Cage distanced himself from any notion of tradition. The iconoclast is most popularly known for works involving chance and unprecedented use of silence, although he also contributed a small (yet important) output to the organ repertoire. In response to a commission from the American Guild of Organists, “Souvenir” was composed in 1983 and later premiered in San Francisco the following year.

Over the course of seven minutes, one hears only seven pitches: C, D, E-flat, F, G, A-flat, B-flat. Cage, however, varies their presentation through different gestures, hypnotic rhythms, and textures ranging from lone solos to harsh clusters. Although the score appears bare, its unassuming simplicity leaves much to the player's—and listener's—imagination. This performance incorporates the distant murmurs of the front “Echo” organ as well as some bizarre sounds (honking reeds, high-pitched solos, and growling bass voices) to conjure an otherworldly souvenir.

Rhapsody in D-flat, op. 17 no. 1 – Herbert Howells (1892-1983)

Herbert Howells is mostly known today for his prolific contribution to Anglican choral music, although he wrote a significant corpus of organ works. Drawing on the orchestral capabilities of English cathedral organs, Howells's music offers the player ample opportunity to display the instrument's dynamic range and symphonic possibilities. This piece, like much of his other music, bears a balanced architecture; the hushed beginning presents a rustic, folk-like theme, which builds to a powerful climax and gradually tapers back to the organ's softest whispers.

His first Rhapsody was composed in August 1915, a time when England (and the rest of Europe) was shaken by the devastation of the first World War. Perhaps one can interpret its overall tranquility as a prayer for peace in a war-torn world. This work is dedicated to another well-respected organist and close friend of Howells, Harold Darke.

Shogaku – Bengt Hambraeus (1928-2000)

This next piece is truly a melting pot of international traditions and sounds: Asian music as imagined by a Swedish composer living in Montréal! Professor of Composition at McGill University from 1972 to 2000, Bengt Hambraeus enriched the organ repertoire by venturing into completely new sonic territory. Much of his music also demands extended techniques from both the player and instrument, such as clusters, manipulation of wind pressure, and half-drawn stops.

“Shogaku,” which literally means “mouth organ music,” evokes the unique timbre of a traditional Japanese instrument (the “sho”) made from bamboo and a free reed. With recurring rhythms, hypnotic gestures, and the gravitation around limited pitches, Hambraeus suggests the spirit of East Asian ritual music. Exotic sound colors further augment this meditative atmosphere, although towards the end, one will hear noises unlike anything else heard tonight. In an exciting detour, the player must execute violent tone clusters with his or her entire body—hands, arms, and feet. Hambraeus, in his preface, colorfully observes that in this moment, the “sword has severed the solemn peace.” This clamor subsides abruptly back to the stillness of the opening. With only the highest pitches of the organ sounding, we are left feeling suspended in time and space.

“Communion” and “Sortie” from *Messe de la Pentecôte* – Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992)

Inspired by the mysticism of the Eucharist and the treasury of Sacred Scripture, Olivier Messiaen incorporated his Catholic faith into nearly every aspect of his oeuvre. He served as titular organist at the Église de la Sainte-Trinité in Paris from 1931 until his death in 1992, a post that provided him ample inspiration to write *Messe de la Pentecôte*. A culmination of several years of improvisation, he first performed it at La Trinité in 1951 within the context of Pentecost Mass.

“Communion: Les oiseaux et les sources” is inspired by the Song of the Three from the Book of Daniel. Three holy children are thrown into a fiery furnace, yet walk safely through the flames and join all of creation (including springs of water and birds) in praising God. Messiaen colorfully paints this picture with his unique harmonic language and rhythms taken from Hindu and ancient Greek music. One hears hints of birdsong and genuine calls (those of the cuckoo, nightingale, and black robin), as well as undulating waves and drops of water. Lush strings from the opening eventually return in representing another theme: the love of God encapsulated in the Eucharist. The movement's conclusion captures God's vast power in a striking contrast of register—a solo flute melody slowly ascends to the top, while the feet answer with the lowest notes of the organ. The opening of the Sortie, with its virtuosic swirling around the keyboard, recalls the gusts of wind that marked the Holy Spirit's descent upon the Twelve Apostles. After its gradual

unwinding, we hear another evocation of bird calls, although this time, it is the lark that utters shouts of “Alleluia.” The coda brings us back to a furious toccata, ultimately ending with a cataclysmic roar on full organ.

-Intermission-

***Paraphrase pour orgue* – Claire Delbos (1906-1959)**

Perhaps one of the most obscure personalities in tonight’s program is Claire Delbos, the first wife of Olivier Messiaen. The violinist and composer was, nevertheless, an importance influence in Messiaen’s formation, serving as the dedicatee of his *Thème et variations* (1932) for violin and piano as well as his song cycle *Poèmes pour Mi* (1936). Suffering from a tragic mental deterioration following an operation, much of Delbos’s biography is still shrouded in mystery; Messiaen never mentioned her in his public interviews, and her compositions are not known in the classical canon. Near the end of her short life, Messiaen was unable to care for Claire himself, and she remained in an institution until her death in 1959.

Paraphrase pour orgue was premiered by Messiaen in an organ concert at La Trinité on March 14, 1939. One particular audience member, the American composer and critic Virgil Thomson, was fascinated by the work. In his article “More and More from Paris,” he deems it “full of interesting chaos,” and rightly so. The suite musically depicts the End Times as described in the Book of Revelation, although one cannot help but hear it as an expression of her tortured inner life. With its low clusters, harsh dissonances, and eerie sound colors, the first movement evokes the calamities that precede Christ’s Second Coming. A rising ostinato (the resurrection of the dead) builds to an arresting climax, after which one hears a free paraphrase on the Agnus Dei from the Gregorian Mass for Easter Day, *Missa Lux et Origo*. This apocalyptic vision gives way to hopeful expectation; in the second movement, the faithful pray for the intercession of the Virgin Mary. The following movement (a four-measure interlude) paraphrases the Alleluia chant from the Solemnity of All Saints, while the finale incorporates both the Sanctus from *Missa de Angelis* and the Magnificat on the Sixth Tone. Delbos concludes the work with a toccata that proclaims Christ’s triumphant return.

“Jig for the Feet: Totentanz” from *Organbook III* – William Albright (1944-1998)

The organ music of American composer William Albright draws on a wide range of influences: ragtime, jazz, non-Western traditions, and even techniques of one of his composition teachers Olivier Messiaen. Composed in 1978 as a set of etudes for a small instrument, his *Organbook III* fuses tradition with innovation. Each movement either tackles a certain technical aspect or showcases a specific timbre of the instrument, objectives not unlike the many French *Livre d’orgue*’s of the 17th century. Albright, however, gives each movement his own personal flair.

As its name implies, “Jig for the Feet” is a dazzling, humorous work for solo pedal. The player’s feet dance up and down the pedalboard in perpetual motion...perhaps this explains the subtitle *Totentanz* (“dance of death”)! After suspenseful pauses, a growling bass line announces an ominous interlude. The work concludes with a diabolical tarantella made even more exciting with glissandi and chords—all played by the feet!

Fantasy and Fugue in D Minor, op. 135b – Max Reger (1873-1916)

Considered by Paul Hindemith to be “the last giant in music,” Max Reger was one of the most prolific composers to ever write for the organ, a feat considering that he composed some of the instrument’s most difficult music in relatively short periods of time. Reger’s musical style is

essentially a concoction of various influences: contrapuntal techniques that he admired in Bach's music, Brahmsian lyricism, and Wagnerian drama—all imbued with his own highly chromatic language that sometimes verges on atonality. As his last work for organ, opus 135b shows Reger at the very height of his compositional prowess.

The monumental *Fantasy and Fugue in D minor* was completed in April 1916, right at the end of his life and while all of Europe was torn by the disastrous effects of World War I. One will immediately notice that the music is always shifting, a loose musical form augmented by the kaleidoscopic changes of sounds demanded from the instrument. In the *Fantasy*, tortuous episodes and virtuosic passages alternate with moments of tender repose. The *fugue* begins with the organ's softest whispers, eventually building in volume and speed to a climax halfway through the movement. Reger then introduces a second *fugue*, this time a vivacious dance laden with eerie undertones. Like Albright's *jig*, one might consider this a "dance of death" that maniacally suggests both the brutality of war and Reger's own decline. After a dramatic buildup, the two *fugue* subjects merge together and bring the work to its remarkable conclusion.