

PROGRAM NOTES

M.M. Organ Recital

Matthew Dion, Organist
University Of Houston Moores School of Music

Friday, April 14th, 2023, 7:30pm
Christ Church Cathedral (Episcopal), Houston TX

Imperial March, Edward Elgar:

While the name Edward Elgar brings pieces like *Enigma Variations* and *Pomp and Circumstance* to mind, many of his other works are equally as elegant and riveting, but less known. “Imperial March” was first written in 1897 as Elgar’s opus 32 for full orchestra. The work was a commission from the British monarchy to celebrate the diamond jubilee of Queen Victoria (sixty years on the throne) and was played for the first time with the queen and other dignitaries in attendance at a private concert at the Crystal Palace in London on April 19th, 1897.

The piece has since been reworked as a transcription for organ by numerous composers and players, but the most well-known and successful was arranged by George C. Martin, finished in late 1897. Martin, the Organist of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London from 1888-1916, sought to create a transcription that is faithful to the composer’s original intentions, but also allowing for the organist to showcase various possibilities of the instrument. The work, not considered one of Elgar’s best or from his most mature period, is rarely known in its orchestral form today and is rarely performed outside of England with that instrumentation. However, it has become a staple in organ transcription repertoire being featured on organ concert programs and as a voluntary for church services.

Like many of Elgar’s pieces, the work embodies the compositional spirit of the day and society’s interest in “popular music.” Popular music of the day was often described as easy to listen and relate to. It did not embody the sound and reverence that existed in the music of the church (like works of R.V. Williams), or high romantic elements (in works of C.V. Stanford). The work is filled with vocal melodies and maintains a very tuneful atmosphere.

O Gott du Frommer Gott (Elf Choralvorspiele), Johannes Brahms:

Perhaps it is fitting that Brahms’ final compositions were some of his most simple pieces, written for the organ. Brahms’ Eleven Chorale Preludes were written during the summer of 1896, just after the death of his dear musical confidant, Clara Schumann. The preludes are settings of religious texts, most specifically Lutheran chorale melodies. The compilation of the eleven pieces has a confused history. While all eleven were found in an autographed manuscript on Brahms’ desk after his death in 1897, the first seven were originally numbered in a different order (1,5,2,6,7,3,4). The published order that we know today is based on an arrangement by William Kupfer who had numbered corrections from Brahms’ own hand in another copy. Ultimately it is debated whether Brahms intended the pieces to be published, however they were officially edited and published by Eusebius Mandyczewski, the editor of Breitkopf & Härtel in 1902. The pieces became popular soon after and were assigned opus number 122, as we know them as today.

The art of writing chorale preludes is deeply entrained into Brahms’ own German heritage. Pioneered by Dieterich Buxtehude and then elaborated upon by Johann Sebastian Bach, Brahms’ chorale-based works are his attempt at showcasing a cultural organ phenomenon. The conventions of the form remain quite similar in which Brahms paraphrases and elaborates the existing Lutheran chorale melodies. However, the use of counterpoint and harmony that showcases Baroque techniques includes significant romantic sensibilities. Most of the pieces are rather short and are only to be played *manualiter* or without pedal. While Brahms does indicate manual changes to highlight dynamic shifts, registrations and tempo markings are not indicated.

O Gott du Frommer Gott, number seven in the set, is one of the longest preludes, however it remains almost solely a piece for manuals only, except for an ominous pedal entrance in the final five measures. The work begins with one of Brahms’ favorite rhetorical gestures, the sigh motive which is presented through both ascending and descending

passages. He then introduces the theme on the softer manual with the tune almost always present in an unadorned fashion. The work continues this dialogue between the louder and softer sections.

Prelude and Fugue in E-Flat, BWV 552, Johann Sebastian Bach:

Bach's Prelude and Fugue in E-Flat serves as the beginning and end of one of his most important collections for the pipe organ: *Clavier-Übung III*. This highly polished and innovative collection is an excellent example of Bach's ambitions as an organ composer as he entered the latter half of his life. It is evident throughout Bach's *Clavier-Übung III* that he often takes numerous older and often cosmopolitan compositional elements and combines them to forge high-quality compositions. He also develops his own style and concept of form that will serve as a model for generations of composers and performers for the years to come.

Clavier-Übung III is Bach's only volume of the collection dedicated to the organ. Finished in 1736, Bach took a few years to polish and refine the works to be published in 1739. This work is the only prelude and fugue published in his lifetime.

Together with BWV 540 (Tocatta in F major), it is the longest of Bach's organ preludia. It combines the elements of a French overture, an Italian concerto, and a German Fugue all at the same time. As the prelude unfolds, the reprises of the first theme are shortened like a Vivaldi concerto. There are no toccata-like passages, and the musical writing does not embody the trends of the day. The markings of *forte* and *piano* in the second theme show that at least two manuals were needed for dynamic contrast.

The triple fugue includes symbols of the Holy Trinity. The same theme occurs in the connected fugues, but each time with a different character. The first fugue is majestic and vocal, like a *ricercar*, with a very homophonic texture. The second section, a *spiel-fugue*, is youthful and light in texture imitating the son of God and is very keyboard oriented with only two to three voices throughout. Finally, the third represents the holy spirit and is filled with numerous florid gestures combining the elements of the previous two fugues in a very architectural construction. The fugue in E-Flat has become known in English speaking countries as the "St. Anne" because of the fugue subject's resemblance to the well-known hymn tune by William Croft.

Evening Song, David Hurd:

Originally conceived as an improvisation, David Hurd composed this simple piece in 1978 when he was only twenty-eight years old. The work features many softer colors of the organ and the composition's rhythm seeks to create a "reposeful evening atmosphere." The main theme material of the work is presented in triads throughout, and after a brief exposition, the theme is developed both through dynamic and timbre shifts. The piece then retracts to its original simple texture and dynamic with the initial theme played in the pedal to end the work. "Evening Song" remained unpublished until noted conductor and organist Philip Brunelle expressed interest in including the piece in the American Guild of Organists ninetieth anniversary organ anthology which was published in 1986. The collection however soon fell out of print. It was then included in Morning Star's African American Organ Anthology series published in 2002.

In speaking to David about the piece, he states:

"I consider Evening Song as one of my three earliest organ pieces, although it came twelve years after Fugue in F and Passacaglia in d, both of which were composed when I was in high school."

David Hurd is widely regarded as one of the most important and influential sacred musicians of today. He currently serves as organist and choirmaster at the historic church of Saint Mary the Virgin in Times Square, New York City. He also served as Professor of Sacred Music and Director of Chapel Music at the General Theological Seminary, Chelsea, New York City, for 39 years. As a composer he has composed over one hundred works for numerous instrumental and vocal combinations.

Jig for the Feet: Totentanz (Organ Book III), William Albright:

William Albright is one of the most important composers of his generation in the United States. Born in Indiana, Albright began piano lessons at the age of five and went on to study at the Julliard Preparatory Music School, The Eastman School of Music, and the University of Michigan where he studied composition with Ross Lee Finney and

organ with Marilyn Mason. During his time at the University of Michigan, he received a Fulbright grant to study organ in Paris with Olivier Messiaen. Messiaen became one of Albright's greatest inspirations. Upon his graduation from the university, Albright was appointed professor of composition at the University of Michigan where he taught from 1970 to his death in 1998.

Albright's compositional style is hard to define. His music combines ideals of tonal and non-tonal classical elements with American popular and other nonwestern elements. He was also a major enthusiast of ragtime and recorded numerous piano rags of Scott Joplin and others, which served as important inspiration in his compositions.

Composed in 1977-78, Albright's Organ Book III is inspired by his mentor Olivier Messiaen and his composition *Livre d'Orgue*. Along with Organ Books I and II, these pieces are some of Albright's best-known and most loved works. The "Jig for the Feet (Totentanz)" is one of the hardest in the set and is a rare example in the organ repertoire of a piece for pedals only. While short, Albright's Jig for the Feet requires a nimble technique of the organist, where they are required to play very florid passages of four note chords and difficult glissandos. The work also employs every ounce of technique for the pedals and features a few quirky registrations.

Lied (Douze Pièces), Gaston Litaize:

An important member of the school of blind French organists that dominated in the twentieth century, Gaston Litaize is a name that is not well known outside of organist circles, but certainly is one who should be. Litaize received his first formal education from the National Institute of the Blind in Paris. He would go on to study organ with Marcel Dupré receiving a first prize in organ.

Litaize served in three major capacities throughout his life. For many years he served as a director and broadcaster of religious radio programs on Parisian radio stations, often playing and directing five or more programs a week. He also served as organist at the church of Saint François-Xavier, Paris for over forty-five years, and as a noted pedagogue, taught organ at the National Institute of the Blind and the St. Maur des Fossés Conservatoire. He taught an entire generation of leading organists including noted organist Olivier Latry. He was also a prolific concert artist, embarking on numerous concert tours of Europe and the USA.

Litaize did compose, but not as prolifically as his colleagues of that generation. *Douze Pièces*, his most well-known and performed collection, was completed in 1937 and published in 1939. The reviews that soon followed the publication were widely negative, as Litaize's melodic and harmonic choices are often angular and less tuneful. However, this collection is an excellent example of music written pre-World War II, which drastically changed the direction of composition in France. "Lied", number three in the set, is dedicated to another French organist, Guy Lambert and is one of the most tuneful of the set. The piece maintains a poetic and melodic line throughout as the title Lied suggests (like the German Lieder or art song), but he experiments with possibilities to alter the main theme.

Dieu Parmi Nous (La Nativité du Seigneur), Olivier Messiaen:

A more well-known member of the twentieth century French organ school, Olivier Messiaen's music transcends many aspects of composition, pushing harmony and rhythm to a place where others would not. Messiaen along with Jean Langlais and Gaston Litaize were classmates at the Paris Conservatoire, all entering the organ class the same year to study with Marcel Dupré. Messiaen soon became a well-respected musician, teacher, and composer throughout the world. He served as organist at the Church of La Trinité in Paris for over sixty years where he updated and revised the Aristide Cavaillé-Coll organ, fostering one of the best examples of a fusion between the symphonic ideals of Cavaillé-Coll as well as the neo classic elements and preferences of organ building of that day.

Olivier Messiaen's compositions are numerous, written for many musical combinations including for voice, orchestra, chamber works, piano, and organ but they are almost always religious in nature. He wrote many of these works during his time as Professor of Harmony at the Paris Conservatoire where he taught some of the most important composers of the later twentieth century including Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen.

La Nativité du Seigneur however is one of his earlier works, and like Litaize's *Douze Pièces*, the collection was written before World War II. *La Nativité* was written and published in 1935 when Messiaen was only twenty-seven years old. The work features nine movements all depicting meditations on the nativity of Christ. The work was premiered in February 1936 at La Trinité and was premiered by organists Jean-Yves Daniel Lesur (1-3), Jean Langlais (1-4), and Jean Jacques Grunenwald (7-9). Overall early critiques of the work were rather negative, with critics often surmising

that there were too many slow movements next to each other in the work, and that the heightened chromaticism and rhythmic elements made them difficult to depict the imagery of the nativity. However, today it is widely regarded as one of the most important and exciting pieces of organ repertoire in the canon.

“Dieu Parmi Nous”, the final movement of the set, number nine is a kaleidoscopic work that features very dense textures and features very exciting timbre possibilities. Messiaen bases the movement on the following bible verses:

“Words of the communicant, of the Virgin, of the whole church: He that created me has rested in my tabernacle, the Word is made flesh and dwells in me. My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.” ~Ecclesiastes; John 1:14; Luke 1:46

The work features three main themes, each being presented in the first bars of the work. The first is a vigorous chromatic descent, like Christ’s descent to earth from heaven. The second is an intimate and gentle depiction of the spiritual union we seek with Christ. The third is of jubilation. The work is highly intricate and intense for some listeners but is an exciting example of Messiaen’s compositional accomplishments.

A WORD OF THANKS

Thank you for being here at tonight’s concert. These last two years have been lifechanging, and I am so grateful to celebrate all of that with you tonight. I have so many people to thank:

Thank you to the wonderful teachers at the University of Houston’s Moores School of Music, especially Daryl Robinson, Dr. Matthew Dirst, and Dr. Barbara Rose Lange who are serving as my MM recital committee members.

I’d like to thank Christ Church Cathedral/Robert Simpson and Saint Anne’s Catholic Community/Tom Jaber, the church communities I have served during the duration of this degree. Bob, Tom, and the members of these communities have had a significant impact on my life and have been a huge part of my formation. They will always be in my heart.

I give great thanks to God my wonderful partner Anne who has been a constant support to me in my life and who is truly my person. I am grateful she has been by my side, even while being apart in school. Her love and support have been unending, and I will cherish that always.

I must give thanks to my wonderful parents Michael and Heidi, my sister Holly, and the rest of my family who have always supported especially during the years of getting my education. I have the best family I could ever ask for, and my parents have worked very hard to provide every opportunity for both my sister and me.

Finally, the greatest thanks goes to Daryl Robinson, my teacher. Over the last two years, Daryl has been a major part of my life spending countless hours shaping my knowledge of technique, the organ, music, and life. Daryl has done so much for the Organ Program, and really the city of Houston as a whole. Tonight’s concert would not be possible without him.

Thank you all for being here tonight. I wish you all the best in the coming weeks and months.

Matthew Dion