



The Peoria Chapter
American Guild of Organists

In Recital

Jonathan Wessler

Cathedral of St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception
Peoria, Illinois

January 22, 2011

Program

Vêpres des fêtes du commun de la Sainte Vierge, op. 18

Marcel Dupré
(1886–1971)

- I. While the king sitteth at his table, my spikenard sendeth out the perfume thereof
- II. His left hand is under my head, and his right hand doth embrace me
- III. I am black but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem
- IV. Lo, the winter is past
- V. How fair and how pleasant art thou

Fantaisie et Fugue, op. 18, no. 6

Alexandre Pierre François Boëly
(1785–1858)

Pastorale

César Franck
(1822–1890)

Master Tallis' Testament

Herbert Howells
(1892 – 1983)

Prelude and Liebestod from *Tristan und Isolde* (1859)

Richard Wagner
(1813–1883)
transcribed by Edwin H. Lemare
(1865–1934)

Sonata no. 5 in F-sharp major, op. 111

Josef Gabriel Rheinberger
(1839–1901)

- I. Grave—Allegro moderato—Tempo I
- II. Adagio non troppo—Allegro—L'istesso tempo
- III. Finale. Allegro maestoso

Program Notes

Marcel Dupré was an extraordinarily gifted musician. His skills as an organist, and especially as an improvisator, were second to none and gained him worldwide fame. In 1919, Dupré was serving an extended term as interim organist at the Cathedral of Notre Dame during the absence of titular organist Louis Vierne. On the Feast of the Assumption of that year, Claude Johnson, one of the directors of the Rolls-Royce company, was present at the Vespers celebration. He was so impressed with Dupré's improvisations after each of the sung chants that he offered Dupré 1500 francs to write them down and publish them. Dupré gladly obliged, and the result was a set of fifteen short, colorful meditations entitled *Vêpres des fêtes du commun de la Sainte Vierge* (Vespers of common feasts of the Holy Virgin). These delightful pieces launched Dupré's international career as a concert organist.

The fifteen pieces are grouped into three sets corresponding to the chants traditionally sung at Vespers for feasts of the Virgin Mary. The first set, which will be performed this evening, contains five antiphons to texts from the Song of Songs. (The second set includes four verses of the ninth-century Marian hymn *Ave Maris Stella*, and the final set is comprised of six verses of the *Magnificat*, the song of Mary.) The first antiphon, with massive tutti chords in the hands and a sturdy melody in the pedal, contrasts nicely with the second, registered simply with the foundation stops and marked *tranquillo*. The third antiphon makes use of the harmonic flute stop as a gentle solo voice floating over a mystical accompaniment. The fourth begins as a fugue with a rapid sixteenth-note subject and concludes with a smooth diminuendo and a virtuosic pedal line. The final antiphon is a soaring meditation registered for foundation stops at various pitch levels.

Alexandre Pierre François Boëly bridged the gap between the organ traditions of the classical and romantic periods in France. He installed the first German-style pedalboard in France on his organ at St. Germain l'Auxerrois in order to play the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, whom he admired deeply. The *Fantaisie et Fugue* is the sixth piece in Boëly's *12 Pièces pour Orgue*, published in 1856. Despite its title, this collection may have been written on a pedal piano, as Boëly had been dismissed from his post as organist of St. Germain l'Auxerrois in 1851 on account of his music being "too serious." The

possibility that Boëly may not have had regular access to an organ may explain some of the more pianistic textures in this piece, especially towards the end. The fantasy begins with rapid figuration that cascades up and down the keyboard, ushering in an austere fugue. The fugue eventually incorporates material from the fantasy, building in complexity until the fantasy returns in the home key. An animated coda brings the work to a close.

The organ music of César Franck ushered in a new era for the literature of the instrument. Aside from the works of Felix Mendelssohn in Germany, there had been very little serious organ music written since the death of Bach. The *pastorale* was a popular genre in nineteenth-century France; it typically depicts an idyllic countryside scene interrupted briefly by a storm. Though many French *pastorales* create vivid impressions of wind, lightning, and avalanches, Franck portrays the storm as more of a gentle rain shower. Franck's *Pastorale* shows the composer's lighter side in its attractive melody and straightforward formal design.

Though Herbert Howells is best known for his Anglican choral music, he wrote more pieces for the organ than almost any other twentieth-century British composer. His unique harmonic language uses standard tonal sonorities in wonderfully unexpected ways. *Master Tallis' Testament* was composed in 1940 and published in 1953 as part of a set of six pieces for organ. Howells had given the world premiere performance of Ralph Vaughan Williams' *Fantasia on a theme of Thomas Tallis* in 1910, a piece that most certainly influenced *Master Tallis' Testament*. Unlike Vaughan Williams, Howells does not base his piece on an actual melody by Tallis; Howells rather harmonizes a theme of his own devising in a way reminiscent of the modal harmony Tallis would have used, sprinkling his distinctive flavor throughout. The theme is followed by two variations: the first explores the theme's canonic potential (perhaps as homage to Tallis' famous canon?), and the second greatly increases the harmonic complexity over an immense crescendo. At the end, the final phrase of the melody is repeated on the organ's softest stops as a coda.

Perhaps the most influential musician of the nineteenth century after Beethoven, Richard Wagner transformed our perception of harmony. His music exploits the possibilities of the tonal system by thwarting our

expectations of where certain harmonies are “supposed” to go. Wagner’s opera *Tristan und Isolde* (1859) tells the mythical story of the lovers Tristan and Isolde, who, unable to coexist peacefully due to a number of complex social and political factors, finally die, the former of a wound sustained in a duel, the latter from heartbreak. Throughout the opera, the tension between the lovers and their circumstances is depicted musically by the continual avoidance of harmonic resting places: time and again, the music teases this resolution, only to turn a corner at the last possible instant. Only at the very end of the four-hour drama do we finally receive the resolution—a resolution that musically paints a picture of the lovers who are united at last, but only in death. The introduction (prelude) and the final aria (the Liebestod—literally, the “love-death”) were extracted from the opera by Wagner and combined into an orchestral concert piece, which the great British organist Edwin H. Lemare transcribed for the organ.

The prelude begins with a chord over which more ink has been spilled than any other sonority in music history. This harmonically ambiguous chord is so significant that it has been termed the “Tristan chord.” It appears many times in the prelude as well as in the opera at large, never resolving to the harmony to which it “should.” Three short motives (called “leitmotives”) form the melodic basis of the prelude, and the music builds slowly to a massive climax in which all three leitmotives are heard repeatedly in close succession until the Tristan chord breaks in, spoiling the resolution and dejectedly returning the music to where it began. The Liebestod is based on another ascending leitmotif that appears constantly, accompanied by other melodies. Lemare’s organ transcription of the Liebestod is particularly demanding, requiring at several points that the organist play on three manual keyboards simultaneously in order to render the orchestral colors effectively. The Liebestod also builds to a climax that results in the final resolution of the harmony for which the operagoer has been anticipating for four hours. At the very end of the Liebestod, the Tristan chord appears once more, but this time it finally resolves as it “should,” and the music fades peacefully away.

Josef Gabriel Rheinberger was a Liechtensteinian composer and professor at the Munich Conservatory. He published almost 200 works, including operas, symphonies, chamber music, and masses and other sacred choral works. While he was lauded during his life as a respected teacher of composition, he

is best remembered today for his twenty organ sonatas (all that were completed of a planned cycle of twenty-four sonatas, one in each major and minor key). The 1908 Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians described Rheinberger's organ sonatas as "the most valuable addition to organ music since the time of Mendelssohn." Indeed, they deserve more attention than they generally receive today. Rheinberger's organ sonatas blend the Germanic contrapuntal tradition with the romantic aesthetic: his musical style combines the harmonic language of Mendelssohn and the contrapuntal brilliance of Bach.

Rheinberger wrote his fifth organ sonata in F-sharp major in 1878. The opening movement is a large fugue framed by an introduction and coda in F-sharp minor. The fugue subject is announced simultaneously with its countersubject, and the two always reappear together. In the second movement, a lyrical solo melody wafts up and down the keyboard until it is interrupted by a robust scherzo. The lyrical melody returns in the end, accompanied by triplet figuration. The vivacious finale exhibits Rheinberger's unique take on sonata form with respect to the organ. He introduces the resilient secondary theme in a distant key instead of a closely related key, and transitions to an unprecedented tertiary theme and sequence in lieu of a traditional development. To balance out the form, he provides a lengthy coda that passes dramatically (albeit briefly) through F major before ending triumphantly in the home key of F-sharp major.



Jonathan Wessler is currently in his third year of study at the Eastman School of Music, pursuing a Doctor of Musical Arts degree in organ performance with William Porter. He previously earned the Bachelor of Music degree in organ performance from the Oberlin Conservatory of Music and the Master of Sacred Music degree from the University of Notre Dame. Past teachers include Sherry Seckler, Christiaan Teeuwsen, David Boe, and Craig Cramer. In addition, he has performed in master classes with Marie-Louise Langlais, Daniel Roth, Olivier Latry, Michel Bouvard, Hans Fagius, and Jon Laukvik. Jonathan holds the Colleague certificate from the American Guild of Organists and was a finalist in the 2007 Arthur Poister Organ Competition. He serves as the assistant organist at Third Presbyterian Church in Rochester, New York, and as the principal continuo player for the Peoria Bach Festival in Peoria, Illinois, where he also has been a featured performer on the organ and the harpsichord. Jonathan is a six-year alumnus of the acclaimed Lutheran Summer Music Academy and Festival. He lives in Rochester, New York, with his wife, Joy, and their one-year-old daughter, Julia.