

In Conversation with Joseph Nolan

Thoughts about the organ and its repertoire

The organ and its repertoire, which spans many centuries, is regarded in awe by some and disdain by (too many) others. Critics of the organ have often described it as a machine that never breathes, played by clan-like, rather odd people called organists! It is perhaps the inherent link of the organ to the church, coupled with the uncomfortable truth that there is a substantial amount of substandard repertoire written for the instrument. Some organists also have an unfortunate tendency to sight-read this substandard repertoire in public before and after church services, which is not helpful for putting forward the organ in the best light. You then have issues at the other end of the spectrum with very fine organists playing music that is completely inaccessible to the most hardened and educated classical music lovers. More than once I seen music critics' start an organ concert review with 'after steeling myself at the bar with a drink....I attended an organ recital'.

Whilst the above reads as very much on the negative side of the coin, the wonderful aspect of being an organist is playing at the innumerable spectacular venues which house organs (great and small!) all over the world. Playing Widor in France on instruments he himself played and composed organ symphonies for, or playing Bach on organs the master himself played in Germany is truly interacting and experiencing history in the present day. To touch and experiment with repertoire designed for a particular historical instrument is both a thrill and a privilege that is difficult to describe in words. These organs also tend to have the distinct advantage of being housed in magnificent buildings and you would have to be a short sighted individual not to appreciate the privilege you have been afforded. The historical organs at which I have recorded discs, such as at St Sulpice Paris, St Ouen Rouen and most recently St Bavo, Haarlem, play you, not the other way round. You cannot force your will on these instruments. As such they inform you greatly as a player.

A very wide breadth of knowledge is required to play the organ in an informed and stylistic manner, such is the breadth and depth of repertoire written for the instrument. Matters of early fingering patterns (e.g. Frescobaldi) were very varied in European countries, as were the compass of keyboards/pedal boards and stop lists. Composers often had strong national identities, though some inspired each other and drew on other countries compositional styles and flavours. This is very much reflected in a huge variety of compositional styles from English composers such as Orlando Gibbons to the Iberian Battle organ composers such as Cabanilles in Spain and Portugal.

French Classical music (De Grigny, Couperin etc) brings many interpretative questions regarding ornamentation and knowledge of composers' registrations (e.g. Plein Jeu, Tierce en Taille) and stylistic problems such as when to play rhythms inégale (unequal or even). French classical music also really only does come alive on the organs that they were written for, such as organs as at Poitiers Cathedral (or very good modern copies) which utilised unequal, or other, temperaments. Unequal temperament offers a particular tuning method, giving the music a thrilling and unique sound by not dividing an octave into equal parts, but by dividing other rational intervals.

In more contemporary organ music, composers such as Jehan Alain and Olivier Messiaen require very specific stops (drawing of different pitches and sounds on the organ) and significant acoustics (said indeed to be 'half of an organ'). Messiaen's organ music is built on his own deep Catholic faith and so much hinges on the acoustic (very large at La Trinite Paris where Messiaen was organist) for the music to have integrity and an appropriate sound world. I would also comment that, for me, Messiaen's organ music has no place in the Concert Hall given its profound religious aesthetic.

However from a purely personal perspective it is the French Symphonic School that is of great fascination and, in particular, it's headline figure, Charles-Marie Widor. In France the organ as an instrument was in an appalling state in terms of musical standards after the violence of the French Revolution. It was Widor and his organ symphonies, composed to fulfil the capabilities of Cavaille-Coll's symphonic organs, who inspired so many great French musicians in his wake such as Vierne

(known as Widor junior) Tournemire, Messiaen (who Widor taught composition) and Duruflé and Dupre, though it is alleged that both of these composer/organists were not always as grateful to their teacher as they might have been.

Widor is an example to all organists today in that over and above everything else, he was a wonderful all-round musician. He composed a vast amount of music, was by all accounts a fine concert pianist, a fine conductor of major orchestras in France and composed opera, music for ballet and virtually all musical disciplines. Widor was also a very well-read intellectual with a keen interest in many forms of artistic disciplines and well-versed in the political matters of the day. Above all, Widor understood that for the organ to be relevant in society and to be well regarded by his musical peers, that this musical and personal social breadth was crucial to the acceptance of the organ as a genuine art form. It is documented that Widor attempted with varying success to pass these ideals onto his greatest (and often in conflict) pupils, Vierne and Dupre.

From a personal perspective, working with other musicians in orchestras as a conductor or organ soloist, conducting choirs, accompanying singing lessons or attending orchestral/operatic events of quality has had an enormous impact on my musical development and judgement. These experiences inform your choices of tempi (many metronome markings in the music of Widor and Vierne are incorrect), articulation, rhythm (a very serious issue in organ playing) pacing and use of colour in the execution of serious organ repertoire such as Liszt's Ad Nos or Reubke's 94th Psalm. The reader of this blog who is new to the organ world might be surprised that there is a distinct lack of organ compositions by mainstream orchestral and operatic composers (barring Bach and Messiaen of course) It perhaps no surprise that this has also resulted in the Poulenc Organ Concerto and Saint-Saens Organ Symphony being flag bearers in orchestral seasons that feature the organ. Barber's Toccata Festiva is a fabulous work for organ and orchestra and is slowly becoming more visible and occasionally the organ and orchestral works of Widor and Guilmant are heard.

Hats should be therefore taken off to the current and distinguished Head of Organ Studies at the Julliard School in New York, Paul Jacobs, who is leading a significant drive for new works to be composed for organ and orchestra and for the organ to be given its due respect as an "instrument invented by human genius".

Dr. Joseph Nolan 2018

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17 October 2018, 11am
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