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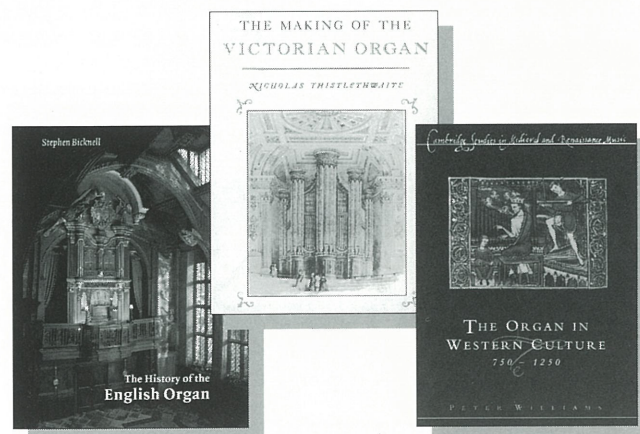
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Messiaen et son Circle

The Programme

Sinfonia de la Cantate 29

J S Bach transcr. Marcel Dupré
Dupré's love of the organ music of J S Bach dates from around the First World War when, after being declared unfit for military service, he determined to learn all of Bach's music for the instrument. He then performed Bach's complete oeuvre for organ from memory at a series of concerts in Paris in 1920, and also transcribed a number of works himself. Any transcription of the Sinfonia from Cantata 29 is particularly apposite, for Bach himself also reworked this material several times. It started life as the first movement of the E major Partita for solo violin, which Bach composed in Cöthen in 1720, and was then transcribed for the lute. The need for a wedding cantata in 1729 prompted him to score it for orchestra as part of BWV 120a, and then in 1731 he reused it as part of Cantata 29, the work which was performed at the inauguration of Leipzig town council on 27th August 1731. Although it is not particularly well known outside the circle of Bach specialists, Cantata 29 has another claim to fame: its second movement is the original version of the 'Gratias agimus tibi' from the B minor Mass.

Two extracts from Livre d'orgue

Chants d'Oiseaux; Les Yeux dans les Roues

Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992)
As well as being a celebrated performer, Marcel Dupré was also a distinguished teacher who numbered both Jehan Alain and Olivier Messiaen among his pupils. Where Alain's work was largely centred around the organ, however, Messiaen was destined to make his mark in much wider fields, and his greatest popular success is probably the massive 'Turangalila-symphonie' which he finished in 1948. He then set out on a search for leaner, less opulent and flamboyant textures, and during the early 1950s works flowed from his pen with less fluency than during his earlier career as he struggled to find a new means of expression. One of the works which did emerge during this period is the seven-movement 'Livre d'Orgue' (1951), featuring the use of extremely complicated rhythmic relationships and Hindu rhythms. Birdsong, too, appears in the pastoral fourth movement, 'Chants d'Oiseaux'. Messiaen was an avid ornithologist, and here we hear both the blackbird and the robin.

'Les Yeux dans les Roues' takes as its starting point a quotation from the Old Testament: "The four wheels had rims and spokes; and their rims were full of eyes round about." The terrifying vision which opens the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel is vividly brought to life by Messiaen's prominent use of the pedals and by his extensive use of chromaticism. Messiaen gave the first performance of the score in 1952.

Cortège et Litanie

Marcel Dupré (1886-1971)

Although it was clear from Marcel Dupré's earliest years that he was destined to be an organist, his performances in the Bach recitals at the Conservatoire in 1920 revealed him as an artist of international calibre. He also found time to write a series of five pieces of incidental music for a dramatic production. Among these was the Cortège et Litanie, a work which he then transcribed for piano but re-arranged for organ before making a further version for organ and orchestra. Dupré gave its first performance on the magnificent 234-stop organ in Wanamaker's store in Philadelphia during 1923.

Verset pour la Fête de la Dédicace

Olivier Messiaen

This was Messiaen's first work for the organ since 'Livre d'orgue', and was composed in December 1960 as a testpiece for students at the Paris Conservatoire. The score opens with the Alleluia for the Dedication of a Church from the Proper of the Mass, but this is quickly swept away by a rhapsodic passage marked "avec une joie étrange" in imitation of a song-thrush. A slightly extended version of the plainsong follows, but the thrush makes its presence felt again, and a final attempt from the plainsong evaporates as the work ends very quietly with one of Messiaen's favourite markings: 'extatique'.

Litanies

Jehan Alain (1911-1940)

Alain is thought to have composed Litanies following the death of his sister, Marie-Odile, in a climbing accident in 1937, though his other sister, Marie-Claire, is sure that she heard fragments of the piece before that date. What is beyond doubt is the seriousness of his intentions when he

Thursday 16th July

wrote it: in his short preface Alain writes, "When the Christian soul in distress can no longer find any new words to implore the mercy of God, it repeats the same invocation over and over again in a blind faith. The limits of reason are reached." He also indicated later that its performance was to be physically exhausting. "Prayer is not a lament, but an overpowering tornado flattening everything in its way. It's also an obsession: you must fill men's ears with it - and God's ears too! If, at the end, you don't feel wrung out, it means you've neither understood it nor played it as I want it played."

Prelude and Fugue on the name of Alain, Op 7

Maurice Duruflé (1902-1986)

Alain's violent death as a soldier in 1940 robbed music of a composer of immense potential, and several of his colleagues were so shocked that they composed musical tributes to him. Among these are the Chant Héroïque by Jean Langlais, and Maurice Duruflé's Prelude and Fugue, Op 7, a work which dates from 1942 and in which both movements begin with a theme which is a musical translation of the letters of Alain's name. Duruflé takes the tribute further, however, by quoting the plainsong-like theme from the beginning of Alain's 'Litanies' in the Prelude's reflective conclusion. By contrast, the fugue is a contrapuntal tour-de-force which ends in a brilliant blaze of D major.

Improvisation

Olivier Latry

The Performer

Olivier Latry is titulaire des grandes orgues de Notre-Dame de Paris, and professor of organ at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique in Paris. His appointment to the premier cathedral in France in 1985 at the age of 23 thrust him on to the international scene. He has toured to more than thirty different countries, and his recordings feature music by Bach, Mozart and composers of the French romantic school.

His musical sympathies are broad, always illuminated by musicological awareness. He is also recognised as one of today's most brilliant exponents of the art of improvisation.



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