

Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
2022-23 Overture Concert Organ Series No. 2
October 25, 2022
J. Michael Allsen

We welcome organist Christopher Houlihan for this second concert of our organ series. He opens with one of the most frequently-played works by Bach, the *Prelude and Fugue in A minor, BWV 543*. Robert Edward Smith's *An Introduction to the King of Instruments* will be an enjoyable "guided tour" of the Overture Concert Organ...narrated by our own Greg Zelek. Mr. Houlihan concludes with Franz Liszt's monumental *Fantasy and Fugue on "Ad nos, ad salutarem undam."*

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)
Prelude and Fugue in A minor, BWV 543

Bach's earliest professional position, at age 17, was in Weimar, at the court of Duke Johann Ernst III. Bach later described his position as a "court musician," but the court records actually describe him as a "lackey"—low-ranking musicians were apparently also expected to perform more menial work. It is probably not surprising that Bach left Weimar after only six months to take a much more attractive position as a church organist in Arnstadt, where he worked from 1703-07. After serving in a second organ position in Mühlhausen (1707-08), he was lured back to Weimar. The court organist, Johann Effler, had finished extensive renovations to the organ in the Duke's chapel, but his health was failing. Knowing Bach's growing reputation as an organ virtuoso and as an expert on organ construction, Effler invited Bach to Weimar to inspect the instrument and play an inaugural recital for the Duke in June of 1708. Bach was immediately offered the position of court organist. (Don't worry: the ailing Johann Effler was able to retire comfortably, with his full salary!) By July 1708, Bach was in Weimar, where he would remain until 1717, eventually serving as *Konzertmeister* (music director).

In his early years at Weimar, Bach concentrated primarily on keyboard works: many of the 48 preludes and fugues later published as *The Well-Tempered Clavier* were written there, as were all but three of the 46 Lutheran chorale preludes published in his *Orgelbüchlein*. The *Prelude and Fugue in A minor* also comes from this productive period. One of the prime influences on this work—and on many of his early organ works—was the style of his acknowledged master, Dieterich Buxtehude. In 1705, the 20-year-old Bach took a leave from his church position in Arnstadt to walk 280 miles to Lübeck, where he hoped to study with Buxtehude—the only truly long journey Bach ever made. Though he was not

exactly AWOL from Arnstadt, his employers complained that Bach had requested a four-week leave, but stayed away for “about four times that long.” Just how much he actually studied with Buxtehude is unclear, but several of his organ works over the next few years—including the masterful *Prelude and Fugue in A minor* heard here—clearly show his admiration for Buxtehude’s music.

The *Prelude* begins with a winding, subtly chromatic line in the manuals, eventually joined by a long-held pedal. The pedals and manuals then begin to explore the opening material together, all the way through to a dramatic conclusion. The *Fugue* is set in 6/8, lending a dancing quality to this intensely complex work. In the opening, the fugue subject is presented four times, lastly by the pedals. The fugue includes some long, chromatic episodes—typically passages without the fugue’s opening subject, though Bach subtly manages to work in fragments of this theme. The ending is dramatic: the writing for the manuals fades away, leaving the pedals exposed for a final showy passage. The work ends with a brilliant flourish from the manuals.

Robert Edward Smith (b. 1946)

***An Introduction to the King of Instruments:
Variations on an American Folk Tune***

Composer, harpsichordist, and church musician Robert Edward Smith joined the faculty of Trinity College (Hartford, CT) in 1979 and served as composer-in-residence there. He also taught at the Hartt School of Music from 1995-2011. As a composer, Smith has written music for vocal and instrumental ensembles of all sizes ranging from unaccompanied viola to symphony orchestra, as well as the 2011 chamber opera *A Place of Beauty*, on the life of art collector and philanthropist Isabella Stewart Gardner. His published music includes many sacred choral pieces and works for organ. As a harpsichordist, Smith holds the distinction of being the first person since the 18th century to perform in public the complete harpsichord literature of François Couperin. He was also a working church musician for nearly 50 years. Smith currently lives in Boston and devotes himself to composition. He composed the work heard here in 1978, and notes that:

“The variations were composed on commission from Michael Nemo, who was the founder of Towerhill Records. He wanted to produce a recording that illustrated to the listener what sounds a well-designed pipe organ could produce, taking as his model Britten’s *Young Person’s Guide to the Orchestra*. The commission was specifically for the recording, and would feature John Rose as organist playing the organ at Saint Joseph’s Cathedral

in Hartford, CT. Mr. Rose performed it live at Trinity College Chapel in Hartford after the recording was made.”

This is one of a few works by Smith that draw upon the rich heritage of early American hymnody. In this case, it is the tune *Pisgah*. This melody, attributed to J.C. Lowry (possibly Joseph C. Lowery), which first appeared in the shape-note collection *The Kentucky Harmony* in 1816. “Shape-note” or “Sacred Harp” music is a uniquely American tradition, beginning in the late 18th century. Four-part hymns, anthems, and “fuging tunes” were printed in a notation in which variously-shaped noteheads represented solfege syllables. This music often has a rough-edged, sturdy beauty, and many of these tunes survive in modern hymnals. In the case of *Pisgah*, it is usually paired with the 18th-century Isaac Watts hymn *When I Can Read My Title Clear*. In describing the variations, Smith writes:

“Each variation features a particular rank of pipes: principals, flutes, reeds, mixtures, etc., each of which is introduced by the narrator. After the last variation, the work ends with a rondeau, which repeats the order of ranks presented in the variations, but without the vocal introduction. The rondeau ends with its theme played above the hymn tune as a sort of hymn descant.”

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Fantasy and Fugue on “Ad nos, ad salutarem undam”

Franz Liszt was the preeminent piano virtuoso of the 19th century, and the model for many pianists to follow. He was also an imaginative and ground-breaking composer, but as a young man, he was so much in demand as a soloist that he was allowed little time to develop his composing skills. Liszt’s concert tours in the 1830s and 1840s were nothing short of sensational—contemporaries used the term “Lisztomania” to describe the frenzy surrounding his playing. He performed hundreds of concerts to packed houses throughout Europe, and produced for the most part compositions that focused on his own technical showmanship, rather than musical content. It was not until he settled in Weimar in 1848, taking a secure and stable job as music director to the Weimar court, that Liszt’s music takes a turn away from these showy pieces.

In 1848, Liszt attended the premiere of Giacomo Meyerbeer’s huge, five-act grand opera *Le prophète* in Paris and was deeply impressed. *Le prophète*, set against the background of Dutch religious upheaval in the early 16th century, is based upon the life of the Anabaptist leader John of Leiden. John was able to establish a religious state in the city of Münster, proclaiming himself “King of New

Jerusalem,” before his eventual downfall and death by torture. Liszt studied Meyerbeer’s score closely, and in 1849-50 completed a set of three *Illustrations du Prophète* for solo piano. Virtuoso transcriptions of music from popular operas were nothing new at the time—Liszt himself had written dozens of them in previous years—but the *Illustrations du Prophète* were built on another scale. This set, lasting nearly 40 minutes in total, very freely adapts Meyerbeer’s music, sometimes reordering and fragmenting themes to make new musical connections. In the winter of 1850, he completed what was essentially a fourth *Illustration* from the opera, his *Fantasy and Fugue on “Ad nos, ad salutarem undam”*—this one written not for piano but rather for organ. Liszt became interested in the organ during in his Weimar years, at least partly inspired by a deep reverence for Bach—who had of course held the same the same job as Liszt in Weimar 135 years earlier. The *Fantasy and Fugue* was the first of some 45 works for organ Liszt would compose over the next 20 years. However, though Liszt was a phenomenal pianist, he was less skilled as an organist; in particular, he never seems to have mastered the pedals. The work was premiered by one of his students, Alexander Winterperger, as part of the dedication of a new organ in Merseberg Cathedral, on September 26, 1855.

The *Fantasy and Fugue* is an enormous virtuoso work, sprawling over some 765 measures, and lasting nearly half an hour. In the opera, the chorale *Ad nos, ad salutarem undam* (*Come to us, to the waves of salvation*) is sung by a trio of sinister Anabaptist priests, who will eventually have a hand in John of Leiden’s destruction. It appears in the opera’s first act, as the priests recruit peasants to start a religious rebellion. Meyerbeer apparently found the melody in a 17th-century hymnal. Liszt’s *Fantasy and Fugue* is laid out in three large sections, opening with a brief and dissonant introduction, before he introduces the rather creepy chorale melody. After a mysterious, atmospheric transition, Liszt begins a long, free development of this theme. After the music reaches a roaring climax, there is another quiet transition into the second large section (*Adagio*). This opens with a simple, unadorned statement of the melody, and moves through six calm variations. This section closes with an agitated and highly dissonant passage—Liszt makes extensive use of the whole-tone scale here—that leads into the *Fugue*. In keeping with the dimensions of the *Fantasy*, the *Fugue* is massive, some eight minutes long. This was the first time Liszt used a fully-developed fugue in his works, though he uses a thoroughly unorthodox version of this traditional form. The piece ends with a colossal, fiercely triumphant statement of the chorale.