

Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
2022-23 Overture Concert Organ Series No. 2
November 11, 2023
J. Michael Allsen

We welcome the distinguished soloist Ken Cowan for the second concert of this season's organ series. He and his wife, violinist Lisa Shihoten, performed on this series in 2017. After opening with a familiar work by Widor, he presents part of a sonata by Widor's British contemporary Edward Elgar. Rounding out the first half are a profound work by Rachel Laurin based upon plainchant and an impressive showpiece for pedals by George Thalben-Ball. The second half opens with music by Bach, his enormous *Prelude and Fugue in E minor*. Next are a pair of smaller pieces: a spirited work by Swedish composer Gunnar Idenstram, and a quiet, reflective piece by William Grant Still. To close, Mr. Cowan presents his version of a stunning virtuoso piano work by Liszt, the *Mephisto Waltz No. 1*.

Charles-Marie Widor (1844-1937)

Symphony No. 6 in G minor, Op. 42, No. 2 - movement 1, Allegro

Charles-Marie Widor had a long career as one of France's greatest organists, beginning with his appointment at age 25 as organist at the church of Saint-Sulpice in Paris, a position he would hold for some 64 years. In 1890, he also succeeded César Franck as organ professor at the Paris Conservatory, where he would be a powerful influence over the next generation of French organists and organ composers. As a composer, Widor wrote four operas and a host of works for orchestra, chorus, and chamber ensemble, but it is his organ works that are known today. Particularly popular are his ten symphonies for solo organ. These are large multimovement works designed to exploit the vast range of timbres available on a new generation of large organs, pioneered in the 19th century by organ builder Aristide Cavallé-Coll. The organ Widor played at Saint-Sulpice, rebuilt by Cavallé-Coll in 1862, is widely considered to be the builder's masterpiece. Widor's *Symphony No. 6* is one of four organ symphonies he published in 1879 as his Op 42. Widor played its premiere on August 24, 1878, at the inauguration of a magnificent new Cavallé-Coll instrument installed in the Palais de Trocadero, a Paris concert hall. Its opening *Allegro* is among his more frequently-played works today. It opens with a thundering chorale theme that serves as the basis for a free set of variations. Widor's dense, sometimes intensely chromatic counterpoint throughout testifies to his devoted study of J. S. Bach.

Edward Elgar (1857-1934)

Sonata in G, Op. 28 - movements 3 and 4

The great British composer Edward Elgar was the son of a church organist, and eventually succeeded his father as organist at Saint George's Catholic Church in Worcester. Many of his closest friends and colleagues served as organists at England's great cathedrals, including William Done, Hugh Blair, and Ivor Atkins at Worcester, and George Robertson Sinclair at Hereford. (Sinclair—together with his bulldog Dan!—was among the close friends Elgar would celebrate in his 1899 *Enigma Variations*.) However, Elgar wrote only a few works for organ, and the *Sonata in G* heard here is certainly the most substantial of them. (What is sometimes known as the *Sonata No. 2*, was actually an arrangement by Ivor Atkins of a suite Elgar had written for brass band in 1930.) Elgar composed the work in 1895 for Hugh Blair, possibly for the dedication of a new organ at Worcester Cathedral. This enormous instrument, designed by Robert Hope-Jones, was actually a combination of two large organs already in the church, and Elgar's sonata was designed for the vast range of stops it had available. Blair's premiere of the work on July 8, 1895 was disappointing: a friend of the composer wrote that he had "made a terrible mess of poor Elgar's sonata." Though there were rumors that Blair was drunk at the time, the quality of the performance probably had more to do with the fact Elgar had sent him the score for this very challenging piece only four days before the performance!

The *Sonata in G* is laid out in four movements, the last two of which are played here. The slow movement (*Andante tranquillo*) has a lovely, flowing main theme, that sounds like an elder sibling to the famous *Nimrod* movement in the *Enigma Variations*. (The *Andante tranquillo* theme comes from an earlier sketch for a cello piece titled *Dreams*.) There is a brief hint of tragedy in the middle of the movement, before the hushed theme returns. The final movement (*Presto (Comodo)*) is set in sonata form, beginning with a restless main theme. The contrasting idea is marchlike, but reserved. At the beginning of the development section, Elgar brings back the third movement's main theme. This melody reappears at the end, after the recapitulation, as an introduction to the forceful coda.

Rachel Laurin (1960-2023)

Poème symphonique pour le temps de l'Avent, Op. 69

Rachel Laurin died earlier this year, on August 12, a few days after her 62nd birthday, following a long battle with cancer. One of Canada's leading organists

and composers, she was born in Québec. After studies at the Conservatoire de musique du Québec à Montréal, she took a position as organist at the Oratoire Saint-Joseph du Mont-Royal, Montréal—the famous basilica which stands at the highest point in the city—and she later became an improvisation instructor at the Conservatoire. Laurin maintained a busy, international career as a soloist, and was a prolific composer: she wrote hundreds of works for organ and other solo instruments, voice, choir, and orchestra.

Laurin composed the *Poème symphonique pour le temps de l’Avent* (*Tone Poem for the Advent Season*) in 2013, for organist Isabelle Demers. (Demers played a memorable concert, including another work by Laurin, in Overture Hall in March 2022.) Demers premiered the *Poème symphonique* on December 1, 2013, on the newly-installed organ in the concert hall of Québec’s Palais Montcalm. The work is based upon the Latin plainchant hymn *Creator* (or *Conditor*) *alme siderum* from the Vespers service for the first Sunday in Advent. The *Poème symphonique* is a free set of variations on this melody, and Laurin also works in references to a *Kyrie* chant associated with Advent. However, the piece has deeper significance: throughout the score Laurin included cues that show it to be a spiritual journey. It begins with a delicate texture she calls “World of Stars.” After a powerful transition based upon the hymn, the texture thins for a quiet version of the *Kyrie*: a supplicative part of the Mass that is labeled “Our Pleas.” This grows more intense in a passage called “The Universal Sin,” and breaks into angular music identified as “Satan’s Snare” and a fierce passage for pedals for “A World of Sickness.” There is a turbulent battle, labelled “Power, Divine Glory,” continuing through “Our Prayers.” The texture thins for a quiet, almost dancelike version of the hymn (“Virginal Shrine, Victim Without Stain” and “By an Act of Love, to Cure Our Ills”). Here Laurin is quoting a setting of *Conditor alme siderum* by the early 15th-century composer Guillaume Du Fay. The “World of Stars” of the opening returns, and there is a statement of the *Kyrie* (“Our Prayers” and “Great Judge of All: Defend Us From Our Foes”) The bold climactic section that follows, labeled “Power, Honor, Praise and Glory” is meant to represent the verse:

Come in thy holy might, we pray;
Redeemer us for eternal day
From ev’ry pow’r of darkness, when
Thou judgest all the sons of men.

The piece closes with a hushed version of the opening “World of Stars” music, now marked “Amen. From Age to Age, Eternally.” The journey ends with a luminous C Major chord: “In Heaven, and Among Mortals.”

George Thalben-Ball (1896-1987)
Variations on a Theme of Paganini

There is a long tradition of virtuosos writing their own music: works that exploit their specialized knowledge of their instrument, and their own technical and expressive abilities. The tradition predates the early 19th-century violinist Niccolò Paganini (1782-1840), but it was Paganini who set the mold for many virtuosos to follow. Most of his music was composed to display his own impressive technique, including the ironically-named *24 Caprices for Solo Violin* he published in 1819. “Caprice” implies a fairly lightweight bit of music, but there is nothing light or easy about these pieces, which employ an astonishing battery of virtuoso violin techniques. The last and most famous of them all, *No.24*, included a theme and a dozen increasingly awe-inspiring variations. Paganini’s simple theme became a kind of musical touchstone for the idea of virtuosity, and since the early 19th century, Chopin, Brahms, Ysaÿe, Rachmaninoff and dozens of other composers have used its theme the basis for their own virtuoso works.

The Australian-born organist George Thalben-Ball traveled to London at age 14 to study at the Royal College of Music, and spent the rest of his career in Britain. In 1923, he became organist of London’s Temple Church, a position he held until his retirement in the early 1980s. In 1949, he was additionally appointed organist of the City of Birmingham and Birmingham University. Thalben-Ball was a well-known virtuoso with phenomenal technical abilities. His contribution to the *Paganini Variations* tradition dates from 1962. Its ten variations, played entirely on the pedals, are, true to the tradition, increasingly impressive: calling for wildly rapid figures, *glissandos*, and for two-, three-, four- and (in the astonishing Variation 10) *six(!)*-part harmony.

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)
Prelude and Fugue in E minor, BWV 548 (Wedge)

In 1723, Bach arrived in Leipzig to become Kantor at the Thomaskirche: a challenging position that involved not only leading the music at Leipzig’s central church, but supervising the music at all of the city’s main churches, and teaching the boys at the city’s choir school. Bach threw himself into the position with tremendous vigor, most notably completing five annual cycles of cantatas for the Thomaskirche, some 300 works in all. By 1728, however, his enthusiasm for the weekly grind of work as Thomaskantor seems to have faded. That year, he became the director of the Leipzig collegium musicum, a group of amateur musicians who gave informal concerts in one of the city’s coffee houses. Bach clearly relished the

chance to return to secular music-making, and he devoted much of his compositional energy to this group, writing new works, and adapting pieces he had written during his earlier jobs at Cöthen and Weimar. At the same time, he also became more active as a recitalist. Though he was not employed specifically as an organist in Leipzig, Bach already had a reputation as one of Germany's great organ virtuosos, and he occasionally played out-of-town concerts through the rest of his career. Though they are not well-documented, he probably gave public organ recitals in Leipzig as well, most likely on the relatively new organ at the Paulinerkirche. At least some of the masterful organ works he wrote late in his career, including the truly impressive *Prelude and Fugue in E minor*, composed sometime between 1727 and 1732, may have been written with these public concerts in mind.

The massive *Prelude* is laid out in a way that resembles contemporary concerto movements: it begins with a stern passage that serves as a *ritornello*: an idea that is repeated several times during the course of the moment, both to tie the piece together and to serve as a springboard for new, contrasting ideas. The equally massive *Fugue*, some 231 measures long, is Bach's longest fugue, and certainly one of his most spectacular essays in this form. Its subject gave this fugue its nickname. Heard unaccompanied at the beginning of the fugue, the subject begins on the note E, and the theme that follows expand gradually above and below that pitch, creating a kind of musical "wedge." After exploring this subject thoroughly in fugal style, Bach inserts a huge episode (a section of a fugue where the subject is not present): freeform and flashy passages that resemble an improvised toccata. The ending is largely an identical repeat of the opening section.

Gunnar Idenstam (b. 1961)

Scherzo II (Yoik) from Cathedral Music

The Swedish organist, composer, and folk musician Gunnar Idenstam channels a wide variety of influences in his work, from music by Bach and Dupré, to classic 1970s Rock, Heavy Metal, and Pop (he has collaborated with ABBA's Benny Anderssen), New Age music, and folk styles from throughout Sweden. Mr. Cowan presents a selection from Idenstam's 17-movement *Cathedral Music*, composed in 1995-96. The *Scherzo* heard here is based upon a musical tradition of the Sámi, an indigenous people who live in the tundra that stretches across of the northern reaches of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Kola Peninsula in northwest Russia. (Idenstam was born in this far northern part of Sweden.) The *yoik* is an ancient Sámi song form: freeform, often improvised, and usually wordless. For the Sámi, a *yoik* is a deeply meaningful expression of a soul: of a person, an animal, a tree, or

any part of the environment. Ancestors can be addressed through a *yoik*, and each Sámi child receives his or her own *yoik*. Idenstam's *Scherzo* is a sometimes playful piece that he describes as follows: “[It] is based on a song (*yoik*) from Lapland, accompanied by lively triplet figures and New Age harmonies. The rhythm is gradually shifted from 6/8 time to popular waltz time and then back to 6/8 time.”

William Grant Still (1895-1978)

Reverie

William Grant Still, who would eventually be known as the “Dean of African-American composers,” was born in a small town in Mississippi. He studied music at Wilburforce University in Ohio, but had to withdraw in order to earn a living. Still worked as an arranger for the early blues composer W. C. Handy, and was eventually able to enroll at Oberlin College, though his college study was again cut short, this time by service in the Navy during World War I. After the war, Handy invited him to New York City, where he spent the next several years earning his living as an arranger: writing music for Handy and other popular singers and bands, and doing orchestrations for Broadway shows. Still's breakthrough work in what he referred to as “serious music” was his *Afro-American Symphony*, a work that incorporated the blues, spirituals and other Black musical idioms. With its October 1931 premiere by the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra, it became the first work by a Black composer to be programmed by a major American orchestra. In 1934, Still relocated to Los Angeles, where he would spend the rest of his life. He worked occasionally scoring music for Hollywood and, later, television, and had a successful career working as an independent composer. Still left behind an impressive musical legacy of concert music: five operas, four ballets, five symphonies, eight symphonic poems, and a host of smaller works for orchestra, chamber ensembles, chorus, and solo voice. His *Reverie*, written in 1962 for a commission by the American Guild of Organists, is one of only two works Still wrote for organ. It is a brief and introspective work, whose main theme subtly evokes the feel of a Black spiritual.

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

***Mephisto Waltz. No. 1 (The Dance in the Village Inn)*, arr. Ken Cowan**

Franz Liszt was the preeminent piano virtuoso of the 19th century. 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 had little time to develop his composing skills. Liszt's concert tours in the 1830s and 1840s were nothing short of phenomenal—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 took a turn away from these showy pieces. Among other experiments, he began to explore the idea of program music: works that tell a story or which are based upon poems, paintings, or other nonmusical inspirations. Most famous are a series of symphonic poems written in Weimar, but he also wrote programmatic works for piano. Like many Romantic artists, Liszt was fascinated with the legend of Faust, most familiar in Germany in the versions by Goethe and Nikolaus Lenau. This is the dark story of the scholar Faust, who makes a deal with the Devil (Mephistofeles), exchanging his soul for universal knowledge and the pleasures of the world.

Between 1856 and 1861, Liszt sketched out an orchestral piece, *Two Episodes from Lenau's Faust*, at the same time producing a solo piano version of the second part, *Dance in the Village Inn*. He published this piano piece in 1862 as the first of four *Mephisto Waltzes* he would write over the next 20 years, The *Mephisto Waltz No. 1*, heard here in an adaptation for organ by Mr. Cowan, depicts the part of the story where Faust and Mephistofeles walk into an inn. Mephistofeles picks up a fiddle and begins to play a dance tune, bewitching the people in the inn, including Gretchen, who is then seduced by Faust. This is no typical lilting and pretty 19th-century waltz, but a series of fierce, aggressive dances that show the Devil whipping the customers at the inn into a frenzy. In the middle there are a couple of slower, seductive episodes, (marked *expressivo amoroso*) before Liszt returns to the wild character off the opening. At the very end there is a mysterious episode that shows Faust leading the innocent Gretchen away, before the piece ends in a ferocious coda.