

Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
2022-23 Overture Concert Organ Series No. 3
February 20, 2024
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This third concert of our Overture Concert Organ Series features Chelsea Chen, in a program dominated by French music. She opens with the brilliant *Litanies* by Jehan Alain, and then presents arrangements of two well-known piano miniatures by Debussy: *The Girl With the Flaxen Hair* and *Arabesque No. 2*. Ms. Chen plays her own *Three Taiwanese Folksongs* before closing the first half with a work by Maurice Duruflé, *Prelude and Fugue on ALAIN*: a powerful work written in memory of the tragically short-lived Jehan Alain. The second half opens on the lighter note, with John Weaver's jazzy *Variations on "Sine Nomine."* Next is a work by J. S. Bach, his impressive *Prelude and Fugue in D Major*, written for the court of Weimar. Ms. Chen closes this program with a pair of virtuoso works by Louis Vierne, *Naiades* and the high-spirited *Finale* from his *Symphony No. 6*.

Jehan Alain (1911-1940)
Litanies

Jehan Alain was born in Saint-Germain-en-Laye (now effectively a western suburb of sprawling Paris), into a highly musical family. His father Albert was a composer and longtime organist at Saint Germain's parish church, while his brother Olivier was a pianist, composer and musicologist, and his sister Marie-Claire was an internationally-celebrated organ soloist. After studying initially with his father, Jehan became a student at the Paris Conservatory in 1929, studying sporadically there until 1939, when he was awarded the first prizes in organ and improvisation. He had to step away from the Conservatory on a few occasions due to illness and compulsory military service in 1933-34. In the late 1930s, he earned his living as an organist at a small church in a northern Paris and at one of the city's synagogues. Alain's life was cut tragically short by World War II. In late 1939 he was mobilized into the French army as a motorcycle dispatch rider. He was one of the thousands of French soldiers evacuated by the British following Germany's invasion of Belgium in May 1940. Alain promptly returned to France, rejoining the army. He died in June 1940, during a single-handed attack on a German patrol. He was posthumously awarded the Croix de Guerre, France's highest military honor.

Alain composed *Litanies* in 1937. It is a brilliant, sometimes exuberant piece, tied together by a short refrain heard at the beginning, which reappears in many forms during the piece. This form refers to the traditional Catholic litany, where a series

of petitions are interspersed with a repeating chant response. A note Alain included in his manuscript describes its more personal intent: “When the Christian soul no longer finds new words in its distress to implore God’s mercy, it repeats ceaselessly and with a vehement faith the same invocation. Reason has reached its limit. Alone, faith continues its ascent.”

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

***The Girl With the Flaxen Hair* (arr. Léon Roques)**

***Arabesque No. 2* (arr. Léon Roques)**

As we have heard before at these concerts, the colorful piano music of Claude Debussy translates beautifully to the organ. Ms. Chen next presents a pair of transcriptions by Debussy’s contemporary, Léon Roques. *The Girl With the Flaxen Hair* (*La fille aux cheveux de lin*) comes from his first book of piano *Préludes*, published in 1910. The title refers to an 1852 poem by Charles-Marie-René Leconte de Lisle, which begins:

*Sur la luzerne en fleur assise,
Qui chante dès le frais matin?
C’est la fille aux cheveux de lin,
La belle aux lèvres de cerise.*
[Seated among the flowering alfalfa,
who is singing in the cool morning?
It is the girl with the flaxen hair,
the beauty with the cherry lips.]

While Leconte de Lisle’s poem is full of Romantic description of the girl and the poet’s desire for her, Debussy’s prelude is more atmospheric: a wistful Impressionist portrait. A sinuous melody above shimmering harmonies leads to a slightly more impassioned episode. Then, a brief return of the opening melody introduces a serene ending.

Among his earliest published works, Debussy’s *Two Arabesques* (1891) are among his most frequently-performed piano works, and like *The Girl With the Flaxen Hair*, they have also been arranged for many different instruments and ensembles. The term “arabesque” refers to a design element in Islamic art and architecture: winding, intertwining lines based upon the natural patterns of vines and foliage. It is the perfect description of the ornate figure heard at the beginning of *Arabesque No. 2*. Roque’s organ transcription makes the most of the work’s capricious

changes in mood, from the playful opening, through a couple of momentarily serious epodes, a suddenly forceful coda, and a quiet, tongue-in-cheek ending.

Chelsea Chen (b. 1983)

Three Taiwanese Folksongs

Ms. Chen provides the following note on her work: “As a 2006-07 Fulbright Scholar to Taiwan, I researched Taiwanese folk (vocal) music and traditional instruments. I composed *Three Taiwanese Folksongs* for a concert at Grace Baptist Church in Taipei. Each of these movements features variations on a folk melody from the early 1900s. *Four Seasons* is a song about playful young lovers, *The Cradle Song* is a soothing lullaby, and *Song of the Country Farmer* describes the life of a farmer in the southern part of Taiwan. I wrote and performed these movements to help introduce the pipe organ to audiences in Taiwan. Their lilting, pentatonic melodies are beloved by the general public.”

Maurice Duruflé (1902-1986)

Prelude and Fugue on ALAIN

Born in Normandy, Maurice Duruflé studied at the choir school of Rouen cathedral before enrolling at the Paris Conservatory at age 17. His early training left him with a lifelong fascination with plainchant, and chant would eventually make its way into many of his later compositions. He was enormously successful as a student in Paris, eventually winning first prizes in organ, fugue, harmony, piano accompaniment, and composition. Duruflé became the assistant to Louis Vierne at the cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris in 1927, and in 1929, he was named organist of the church of St-Étienne-du-Mont, a position he held for the rest of his life. He also served as professor of harmony at the Paris Conservatory from 1943-1970. A true perfectionist, Duruflé finished relatively few works in a 50-year career as a composer, works that were often revised many times.

One work that seems to have come to Duruflé relatively quickly, however, was his *Prelude and Fugue on ALAIN*. It was composed in 1942, in memory of Jehan Alain: Duruflé dedicated the score “to Jehan Alain, who died for France.” To honor Alain, he used a device employed by many composers, spelling out a name in musical pitches. (There are, for example, many works by Bach—and later composers paying tribute to Bach—that use the four-note motive B-flat - A - C - B-natural as a musical signature.) In this case, Duruflé invented a simple cipher that transformed “Alain” into the pitches A - D - A - A - F. This motive appears throughout the work, as does a paraphrase of the refrain used throughout Alain’s

Litanies. It has also been suggested that Duruflé was influenced by Debussy's popular *Arabesques* in the prelude's melodic style.

The Alain motive is worked into the winding triplet line that dominates the *Prelude*. References to the *Litanies* theme are much more exposed, appearing over the restless triplet lines, and the theme is finally stated in its original form near the end. The more solemn *Fugue* is masterful...as one would expect from a composer who had won the Conservatory's *premier prix* in fugue-writing. It is in fact a double fugue, with the Alain motive worked into the beginning of the opening subject. A second subject in sixteenth notes appears, and is eventually combined with the first, in a conclusion that ends with a thundering D Major chord.

John Weaver (1937-2021)

Variations on "Sine Nomine"

Born in Pennsylvania, organist John Weaver trained at Philadelphia's Curtis Institute and at the Union Theological Seminary. He later taught organ at the Curtis Institute (1972-2003), and also served as head of the organ department at New York's Juilliard School (1987-2004). In 1970, he was appointed organist at the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City, a position he held until his retirement in 2005. Weaver continued an active career as an organ soloist well into his 80s.

Weaver composed his *Variations on Sine Nomine* in 1994, as the third movement of his *Variations on Three Hymn Tunes*. The Anglican hymn tune *Sine Nomine* (associated with the All Saints Day hymn *For All the Saints*) was one of the original melodies Ralph Vaughan Williams composed for the 1906 edition of *The English Hymnal*. Weaver's variations on this foursquare, striding melody includes a witty reference to the hymn tune *Sarum*, the rather stodgy Victorian melody for *All the Saints* that Vaughan Williams discarded. But a third melody has the strongest influence, the American traditional hymn *When the Saints Go Marchin' In*, heard first in the pedals near the beginning. It colors Weaver's music even before it appears, however: the *Variations on Sine Nomine* has a jazz-style swing from beginning to end.

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)
Prelude and Fugue in D Major, BWV 532

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 as well. 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, where he would remain until 1717, eventually serving as *Konzertmeister* (music director). In his early years at Weimar, Bach concentrated primarily on keyboard works. The court chapel had a fine, newly-renovated organ, and the Duke was apparently a great fan of Bach's organ works. According to Bach's obituary, the Duke's encouragement "fired him with the desire to try every possible artistry in his treatment of the organ." 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*.

His *Prelude and Fugue in D Major, BWV 532*, written in about 1710, was one of the most imposing works he composed in Weimar. (The bravura style of this work made it a particular favorite of Romantic pianists, and there are transcriptions by Liszt and Busoni. There is also a colorful orchestral arrangement from 1929 by Respighi.) The opening *Prelude* unfolds in three sections, beginning with flashy scale passages from pedals and manuals, a hallmark of the north German style. The lengthy middle section explores a series of repeated motives in a dense, constantly modulating texture. A pause and dramatic rising flourish open the concluding section, a forceful ending that finally finds its way to D Major. The subject of the *Fugue* is a witty 16th-note figure in two parts that becomes particularly impressive when it is laid out on the pedals. Near the end, the pedals have a short cadenza sweeping up two octaves before a surprisingly abrupt conclusion. One of the 18th-century manuscript copies of this work includes the remark: "In this piece one must really let the feet kick around a lot."

Louis Vierne (1870-1937)
Naiades from Pièces de Fantaisie, Op. 55, No. 4
Finale from Symphony No. 6 in B minor, Op. 59

Though he was born nearly blind, Louis Vierne was able to study at the Paris Conservatory, where he became a devoted disciple of César Franck. At age 22, he

became assistant organist to Charles-Marie Widor at the Parisian church of Sainte-Supplique, and in 1900 Vierne became principal organist at Notre-Dame de Paris, a position he held until his death in 1937. Vierne in fact died on the cathedral's organ bench. On June 2, 1937, he was playing what was scheduled to be his final public recital at Notre-Dame, to an audience of 3000. He had just finished one of his own works and was getting ready to play an improvisation on a theme that had been submitted by a member of the audience, when he suddenly lost consciousness and died, victim a heart attack or massive stroke. (His assistant, Maurice Duruflé, was in the organ loft with him.) Vierne was a fine composer and a phenomenal improviser, but his vision problems made getting his music down on paper increasingly difficult, and he would eventually write most of his works using Braille. Despite this, his catalog includes over 60 opus numbers published during his lifetime—primarily organ and piano music, but also several choral and orchestral pieces. One ongoing concern for Vierne was the state of Notre-Dame's enormous organ. The famed builder Aristide Cavallé-Coll had rebuilt the cathedral's organ in the 1860s, but it was in poor repair by the turn of the century, and Vierne worked throughout his career to support its renovation, even undertaking American tours to raise funds. [Note: After several renovations by Vierne and his successors, Notre-Dame's organ was completely rebuilt in 1992. The organ, described by the group Friends of Notre-Dame de Paris as the “largest organ in France,” suffered only relatively minor damage during the disastrous 2019 fire. It is currently undergoing cleaning and restoration, and plans are to have it reinstalled in the cathedral later this year.]

Ms. Chen closes with a pair of Vierne works, beginning with *Naiades, Op. 55, No. 4 (Water Nymphs)* one of the pieces in his fourth and final suite of “fantasies” for organ, published in 1927. (It was also one of the pieces Vierne played on his final, fateful concert.) It is a work combining virtuosity—in the guise of a neverending, and distinctly aquatic flow of 16th notes—and a few tender Impressionistic moments.

Like several of his French colleagues, Vierne wrote organ symphonies designed both as virtuoso display pieces, and works that would showcase the largest organs of the day. His *Symphony No. 6*, the last of his organ symphonies, was completed in 1930, and dedicated to the Canadian organ virtuoso Lynwood Farnham. Farnham died later that year, however, and the work was premiered in 1934 at Notre-Dame by Duruflé. Its fifth and final movement, *Finale*, is heard here. After a couple of brusque flourishes, Vierne presents an exuberant, syncopated, and highly chromatic refrain that ties the movement together. There are a couple of contrasting episodes: an even more extravagantly chromatic passage, and a more

relaxed set of variations on a quirky theme introduced on the pedalboard. The final refrain becomes a wild showpiece for the pedals.

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