

YALE INSTITUTE OF SACRED MUSIC PRESENTS

GREAT ORGAN MUSIC AT YALE

MARTIN JEAN, ORGAN

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7:30 PM

WOOLSEY HALL



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GREAT ORGAN MUSIC AT YALE

MARTIN JEAN, ORGAN

Symphony No. 9, Op. 70, “Gothique”

Charles-Marie Widor

Moderato

(1844–1937)

Andante sostenuto

Allegro

Moderato

INTERMISSION

Symphonie-Passion, Op. 23

Marcel Dupré

Le monde dans l'attente du Sauveur (The world awaiting the Savior)

(1886–1971)

Nativité

Crucifixion

Résurrection

The great flowering of French organ music in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as exemplified by the pair of Christmas-themed works on today's program, had its roots in the so-called French organ school that sprang up during the reign of Louis XIV. Like their counterparts in the Romantic era, the organ masters of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were strongly influenced by contemporary developments in organ technology and design. The distinctive stops and mixtures that became standard features of the “classical” French organ, as well as its light, sensitive action, are reflected in the cleanly differentiated colors, refined melodies, and delicate *agréments*, or ornaments, that characterize the music of composers like Louis Couperin and his son François.

By the turn of the nineteenth century, however, European organ builders had grown set in their ways, and many early Romantic composers turned to alternative mediums such as the orchestra, the piano, and opera that offered a wider spectrum of tone colors and emotional expression. Not until 1841, when the great organ builder Aristide Cavaillé-Coll (1811–1899) unveiled the first of his iconic instruments at the Abbey of St. Denis in Paris, did the organ begin to reclaim its central position in French musical life. César Franck's

Grande pièce symphonique of 1860, inspired by the newly installed Cavaillé-Coll organ in the neo-Gothic Basilica of Sainte-Clothilde, heralded the ascendancy of the modern symphonic organ as represented by the kaleidoscopic organ symphonies of Charles-Marie Widor, his protégé Louis Vierne, and his pupil Marcel Dupré.

Charles-Marie Widor, *Symphony No. 9, Op. 70, “Gothique”*

Widor’s name is inextricably linked to that of Cavaillé-Coll. In 1870, at age twenty-eight, Widor was appointed acting organist of the Church of Saint-Sulpice, in Paris’s Latin Quarter. There he became the custodian of the five-manual, 102-stop organ that Cavaillé-Coll had installed a decade earlier. Widor considered it the finest organ in all of France, if not the world. “It’s when I felt the 6,000 pipes of the Saint-Sulpice organ vibrating under my hands and feet that I took to writing my first four organ symphonies,” he recalled. “I didn’t seek any particular style or form. I wrote feeling them deeply, asking myself if they were inspired by Bach or Mendelssohn. No! I was listening to the sonorousness of Saint-Sulpice, and naturally I sought to extract from it a musical fabric—trying to make pieces that, while being free, featured some contrapuntal procedures.” Widor credited Cavaillé-Coll’s innovations with enabling composers to achieve continuous, sustained crescendos and decrescendos—an effect that was impossible on the French classical organ—as well as “a whole blossoming of wonderful colors—a rich palette of the most diverse shades: harmonic flutes, gambas, bassoons, English horns, trumpets, celestes, flute stops and reed stops of a quality and variety unknown before.”

The origin of the term “organ symphony”—in the sense of a multimovement solo work of symphonic splendor and proportions—is obscure, but it was Widor and Vierne who established it as a hallmark of the French Romantic school. Widor’s ten organ symphonies and Vierne’s six exploit the sonorous and timbral resources of the symphonic organ to the fullest. Although Widor welcomed the heightened expressivity of Cavaillé-Coll’s organs, asserting that “henceforth one will have to exercise the same care with the combination of timbres in an organ composition as in an orchestral work,” he cautioned against ignoring “the essential characteristics of the instrument” and converting it into “a pseudo-orchestra.” He was particularly anxious to preserve the fundamentally religious character of the organ at a time when it was being detached from its liturgical function by the growing trend for organ recitals and by secular works like Camille Saint-Saëns’s “Organ” Symphony. This concern helps explain why Widor highlighted traditional Catholic chants in his last two organ symphonies. Plainsong was, for him, the very essence of the Catholic faith. “I can no longer think of any organ art as holy which is not consecrated to the church through its themes, whether it be from the chorale or from the Gregorian chant,” he told the organist and humanitarian Albert Schweitzer.

In the case of the Symphony No. 9 of 1895, the chant is the introit from the mass for Christmas Day, “Puer natus est” (A Child Is Born). Midway through the third movement Widor introduces the well-known tune in the pedal part, underpinning a festive fugue

in the upper voices. Later he brings it into the foreground as the seminal theme of the finale, followed by six densely contrapuntal variations and a brilliant, toccata-like coda. (In later years, Widor liked to play the last movement on its own during midnight mass on Christmas at Saint-Sulpice, to put parishioners in a suitably reverential mood.) The symphony's subtitle, "Gothique," alludes to the medieval Abbey of Saint-Ouen in Rouen, for which in 1890 Cavaillé-Coll had designed an instrument that Widor compared to a masterpiece by Michelangelo, and that survives unaltered to the present day. Some listeners have interpreted Widor's first-movement Moderato as an aural image of the abbey's Gothic architecture, others as an anguished prelude to the celebration of Christ's birth. Either way, its dissonant chromaticism is alleviated by the beatific serenity of the Andante sostenuto. The symphony's "Gothic" atmosphere is enhanced by Widor's pervasive use of counterpoint, which he defined as "the art of writing luminously" in which "each note has its value in the whole . . . sparkling as the facets of a diamond."

Marcel Dupré, *Symphonie-Passion*, Op. 23

The Christmas theme is more explicitly evoked in Marcel Dupré's *Symphonie-Passion*, or *Passion Symphony*, whose four movements trace a dramatic narrative from "the world awaiting the Savior" to the Nativity, Christ's Crucifixion, and, finally, the Resurrection. Ironically, the work's own genesis is connected not with a church but with a commercial emporium: it was tailor-made for the famous Grand Court Organ in Wanamaker's (now Macy's) Department Store in Philadelphia. Originally built for the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, the instrument had been rescued by John Wanamaker and installed in his store's palatial seven-story atrium. The businessman's music-loving son and heir, Rodman, envisioned their prize possession as embodying "all the tonal glory of the orchestra." Accordingly, he set up a factory in the store's attic and hired a full-time crew to make the organ even more resplendently symphonic. The resulting behemoth would eventually boast six keyboards and 28,750 pipes – a dream come true for Dupré, who was one of several renowned virtuosos brought in to put the mighty instrument through its paces.

On December 8, 1921, Dupré improvised a preliminary version of the *Symphonie-Passion* at Wanamaker's, based, as had long been the custom, on themes submitted by the public. Although the official premiere in London's Westminster Cathedral didn't take place for another four years, this early draft – and his first encounter with the Grand Court Organ – held a special place in the composer's memory bank. "I will never forget that evening," he wrote in his memoirs, "when, having received themes for the improvisation, I found that several of them were plainsong melodies – *Jesu Redemptor*, *Adeste fideles*, *Stabat Mater*, and *Adoro Tè*. In a flash I had the vision of a symphony in four movements--the world waiting for the coming of the Savior, the Nativity, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection – all of which eventually became my *Passion Symphony*, which I commenced to compose on my return to France. When my plan was announced by Dr. Russell, the whole audience stood up, and I played in a state of excitement that I have rarely known." Like Dupré, Alexander

Russell—the director of music for the Wanamaker stores—had studied with Widor and was a passionate advocate of the symphonic organ. When Rodman Wanamaker gave the go-ahead to further enlarge the instrument in 1924, he put Dupré on the payroll as a consultant.

Born into a musical family in Rouen (his father was the organist *titulaire* at Saint-Ouen), Dupré was taken as a boy to the Church of Saint-Sulpice to meet Widor. He recalled that the great man “placed me next to him on the bench and explained to me many details of the plan of the organ.” Dupré would go on to become Widor’s pupil, then his assistant, and ultimately his successor at Saint-Sulpice. Yet if Cavaillé-Coll’s organs remained his lifelong touchstones, he placed the Wanamaker organ in a class by itself. In the judgment of another great French composer-organist, Olivier Messiaen, Dupré’s *Symphonie-Passion* is “one of the masterpieces of organ music. The staccato chords . . . in ‘The World Awaiting the Savior’; the light of the star, the oboe solo impregnated with Hindu modes, the marches of the shepherds and the Magi, and the exquisite prayer of the angels evoked by ‘Adeste fideles’ in the ‘Nativity’; the suffering, horribly pulsating, and bleak, frozen image of the sorrowful Mother portrayed in the ‘Crucifixion’; the marvelous use of the organ reeds in the chromatic counterpoint, the constantly amassing brightness, and the great bursts of sound in the ‘Resurrection’—all this was and is magnificent, at Saint-Sulpice, at Notre-Dame, at the Trocadéro, and upon many other fine instruments.” But, he added, “I am certain that when played on the six-manual Wanamaker organ, and by Marcel Dupré himself, it was the grandest, the most sublime, the most powerful.”

Notes © by Harry Haskell

Harry Haskell is a regular program annotator for New York’s Carnegie Hall and Metropolitan Opera and the Pierre Boulez Saal in Berlin. He is the author of *The Early Music Revival: A History*, winner of the Prix des Muses in musicology awarded by the Fondation Singer-Polignac, and editor of *The Attentive Listener: Three Centuries of Music Criticism*.

Martin Jean is known worldwide for his playing, which has been described by *The Kansas City Star* as having “visceral intensity, expressive eloquence, and exquisite elegance.” He is interested in a wide variety of repertoire and has performed on four continents and in nearly all 50 U.S. states. He was awarded first place at the international Grand Prix de Chartres in 1986, and in 1992 at the National Young Artists Competition in Organ Performance. Professor Jean earned his master of music degree and artist diploma from the University of Michigan, where he studied with Robert Glasgow, and spent a sabbatical studying with Harald Vogel in northern Germany in fall 1999. In 2001 he presented a cycle of the complete organ works of Bach at Yale, and his compact discs of *The Seven Last Words of Christ* by Charles Tournemire and the complete Six Symphonies of Louis Vierne, both recorded in Woolsey Hall, have been released by Loft Recordings to great acclaim. Recordings of the organ symphonies and *Stations of the Cross* of Marcel Dupré are forthcoming on the Delos label.

In addition to his duties as Director of the Yale Institute of Sacred Music, Professor Jean teaches a studio of graduate-level organ students. He is on the board of directors of the Lutheran Music Program.

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