Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia
Alan Harler, Artistic Director
John French, Associate Conductor

The Kimmel Center Organ Series

Program

Festival Te Deum.......................................................... Benjamin Britten
  Erin Swanson, soprano

Jubilate Deo.......................................................... Benjamin Britten

Messe Solennelle..................................................... Louis Vierne
  Kyrie
  Gloria
  Sanctus
  Benedictus
  Agnus Dei
  Ashley Elisabeth Alden, soprano
  AJ Walker, tenor
  Jennifer Beatty, alto
  Ryan Tibbetts, bass

Intermission

Four Motets ............................................................ Marcel Dupré
  O Salutaris
  Tantum Ergo
  Ave Maria
  Laudate
  Jennifer Beatty, alto

Psalm 90 ............................................................... Charles Ives
  Erin Swanson, soprano
  Joshua Hartman, tenor

Laudes Organi ........................................................ Zoltán Kodály
  Alan Harler, conductor
  Michael Stairs, organ
  Mendelssohn Club Chorus
Program Notes

This evening’s concert is a celebration of music for voice and organ. It features works by two legendary virtuoso organists (Louis Vierne and Marcel Dupré) and two composers known best for their vocal and choral music (Benjamin Britten and Zoltan Kodály). The fifth composer, Charles Ives, spanned both worlds, an organ virtuoso whose vocal and choral writing forms the largest part of his ouvre.

Britten Festival Te Deum, Op. 32 and Jubilate Deo

This year marks the centenary of the birth of Benjamin Britten (1913-1976), who was born, auspiciously enough, on the feast of St. Cecilia, patron saint of musicians. Britten was a precocious musician who studied piano and viola and began to compose at an early age. This early music was substantial – Britten compiled themes he wrote as early as age 10 into his 1934 Simple Symphony. At 15, he began private study with Frank Bridge, who broadened Britten’s musical horizons and instilled in him a meticulous attention to the craft of composition. At 17, Britten entered the Royal College of Music, where he studied composition with John Ireland. This was not a felicitous pairing, for Ireland represented that English pastoral neo-Romanticism that Britten rejected. Nevertheless, he won several composition prizes and, more importantly, was able to hear his music performed.

Following graduation from the RCM, Britten found work writing scores for documentary films produced by the British Post Office. This brought him into contact with the young poet W. H. Auden, who was writing the narration, and the two became collaborators. Britten’s music was not achieving much critical success and he was becoming despondent about his prospects as a composer in pre-war England. When Auden left England for Canada in 1939, Britten followed. He settled in New York, where the vibrant musical scene proved a tonic for him. He began a period of intense musical creativity, composing such significant works as the Violin Concerto, the Sinfonia da Requiem, and the operetta Paul Bunyan. He returned to England in 1942, re-energized as a composer.

The Festival Te Deum was written in 1944 for the centenary of St. Mark’s Church, Swindon, and was premiered by the church choir. The Te Deum is an ancient Latin hymn of praise and thanksgiving that has become part of the traditional Anglican morning service. The English translation that Britten set originally appeared in the 16th century in the first Book of Common Prayer. The hymn consists of three parts – a song praising God and ending with a doxology, a middle section in praise of Jesus, and a concluding prayer of supplication – and Britten’s setting reflects those divisions. The opening organ music features block chords with a two-note appoggiatura, like a harp or psaltery accompanying a psalm, in a steady ¾ meter. The text laid over that unfolds in a long, beautiful unison melody with an ever-changing meter. Britten was an absolute master at setting English text, and the complex rhythmic pattern exactly matches the cadence of the language, allowing the text to be presented naturally and with great clarity. The rhythm of the text and the
organ accompaniment rarely align, providing a tension that propels the music forward. The middle section of the work features choral fanfares echoed by the organ, interspersed with highly rhythmic, almost madrigal-like music. The final section begins with a soprano solo, reprising the opening theme. In an interesting role reversal, there is a modulatory section over a rising bass line, an effect which is stock in trade for an organ improvisation but which here is set for the choir, while the organ has the melody in the left hand and pedal. The music reaches a climax in a glorious E-major and suddenly becomes hushed for the last line, “let me never be confounded.” In a brilliant touch, the soprano solo repeats that last line, but in a dissonant key which only resolves on the final pitch.

Britten’s 1961 Jubilate Deo is a setting of Psalm 100, and like the Festival Te Deum, was written for liturgical use, this time for St. George’s Chapel in Windsor Castle. It is a spirited, joyous work. The organ music is filled with runs and detached, staccato notes, almost like birdsong. The choral parts are presented antiphonally, with sopranos and tenors answered by the altos and basses. The lines are almost unison, but the upper voice in each pairing has a slightly more ornamented line. A middle section is more hushed and introspective, but the joyful music quickly returns and the piece ends with a brilliant “amen.”

Vierne Messe Solennelle in C-sharp minor, Op. 16

Louis Vierne (1870-1937) was born with severe cataracts that rendered him essentially blind. When he was six, he underwent an experimental procedure that restored some vision, but he could only read oversized text and wrote music at an easel using a large pad and thick crayon. He was a precocious musical talent who studied theory, piano and violin at Paris’ Institute for Blind Youth, where he met the composer and organist César Franck, who steered him toward the organ. He soon began private harmony lessons with Franck and enrolled in his organ course at the Conservatoire de Paris. When Franck was tragically killed in a traffic accident, Vierne began studying with Franck’s successor, Charles-Marie Widor. He rapidly developed into a virtuoso performer with a mastery of improvisation. He became Widor’s assistant at the Conservatoire and his deputy organist at the fashionable Church of St. Sulpice. In 1900, he won the prestigious post of organist-titulaire of Notre Dame Cathedral. While it was prestigious, the position was neither lucrative nor very musically satisfying, for the organ was in very poor repair. Vierne spent the better part of the next two decades concertizing to raise money for its restoration, with tours in England and the U.S., including an appearance in Philadelphia where he performed on the great Wanamaker Organ. Vierne never achieved an academic position at the Conservatoire, despite having served as an unpaid assistant for 19 years, but he did teach some of the most prominent organists and musicians of the next generation, including Nadia Boulanger, Marcel Dupré and Maurice Duruflé. In June 1937, Vierne was giving a recital on the now restored Notre Dame organ, assisted by his student Duruflé, when he suffered a fatal heart attack. As he collapsed, his foot struck the E pedal, and the single tone echoed throughout the
The cathedral, a wonderfully poetic and fitting end for a man who had devoted his life to his art.

The *Messe Solennelle in C-sharp minor* was written between 1898 and 1900. Vierne originally planned to set it for chorus and orchestra, but Widor persuaded him to prepare a two organ version instead. It was premiered in 1901 at St. Sulpice, with Widor and Vierne at the church’s two organ consoles. The term *Solemn Mass* usually signifies a High Mass, in which all the parts of the Ordinary are sung, but Vierne’s *Messe Solennelle* omits the *Credo*. It was evidently intended for liturgical use, since the opening for the *Gloria* is not set but rather is meant to be intoned by the celebrant. There is a strong chromatic flavor to the *Messe Solennelle* and Vierne displays considerable harmonic freedom. While *solennelle* does not mean serious in this context, there is something foreboding in the descending line of the organ that opens the *Kyrie*. The chorus enters sequentially with a chant-like melody that outlines the C-sharp minor triad. A middle section displays more harmonic freedom before returning at last to the opening melody. The *Gloria* has a similar tripartite structure. After the opening is intoned, the organ immediately takes up an arch-like phrase, creating the feeling that the music was already in motion during the intonation. A long central section, starting with the *Domine Deus*, is more introspective, with a somewhat *misterioso* organ accompaniment. The final *Agnus Dei* is the most lyrical movement, with a long, gentle chant-like melody. An organ line like bells softly ringing and a quiet *dona nobis pacem* brings the work to a close. This evening’s performance uses an arrangement for solo organ created by the distinguished Hungarian organist and composer Zsigmond Szathmáry.

**Dupré Four Motets, Op. 9**

It was only natural that Marcel Dupré (1886-1971) would become an organist. His father was organist at St. Ouen in Rouen, which featured one of the finest organs in France, and family friends included the Conservatoire organ professor Guilmant and the organ builder Cavaillé-Coll. Dupré began lessons at an early age, first with his father and then with Guilmant, and it soon became apparent that he was a prodigy. He was appointed organist at Saint-Vivien in Rouen at age 11. He was admitted to the Conservatoire de Paris at 16, where he studied with Vierne and Widor and systematically won first-place prizes in piano, organ and fugue. He won the Prix de Rome, France’s most important composition prize, in 1912 for his secular cantata *Psyche*. Dupré maintained an incredibly active concert career, appearing in well over 2000 recitals around the world, including extensive tours of the U.S. While his technique was extraordinary, his improvisational skills were the stuff of legend. He could extemporize entire organ symphonies and fully realized fugues. His American premiere, on Philadelphia’s acclaimed Wanamaker organ, featured an astounding improvised symphony that he later turned into his *Symphonie-Passion*.

Dupré composed the Four Motets in 1914. *O Salutaris* is a fragment of a communion hymn written by St. Thomas Aquinas and traditionally used in the benediction service. The expansive melody and the contrasting countermelody are based loosely
on the traditional chant music. Dupré sets the text in a polyphonic fashion, which is contrasted with the homophonic organ accompaniment. He deviates from the standard text twice, at the end of the verse, repeating the words “da robur, fer auxilium” (give us your strength, bring us your aid), a very understandable sentiment for a piece written at the beginning of World War I. Like O Salutaris, the Tantum Ergo is also a fragment of an Aquinas hymn used in the benediction service. It begins with a long, descending chromatic line in the organ, very reminiscent of the opening of the Kyrie in the Vierne Messe Solennelle, and may have been an homage to his former teacher. There is a strong contrapuntal flavor to the organ accompaniment, which contrasts the simpler homophonic setting of the text. The Ave Maria is set for treble voice and organ. There is a wonderful sense of innocence in the music, with its long, lyrical vocal line gently supported by soft organ chords. Laudate is a setting of Psalm 117 for two organs and chorus. It begins with a majestic organ prelude that ushers in a very declamatory setting of the opening text. A middle section is more introspective, but gradually swells to a fortissimo statement of the text “the Lord’s truth endures forever,” and the motet ends with a restatement of the opening music.

Ives Psalm 90

Charles Ives (1874-1954) was one of the most original and remarkable composers ever. He was a precocious talent, both as a performer and composer. He was a professional organist from the age of 14 and introduced his virtuoso organ piece Variations on America in recital at the age of 17. Under the influence of his equally remarkable father, he developed a unique musical idiom which was totally without antecedent and which included techniques like polytonality, polyrhythm, chord clusters, unresolved dissonances, microtonal music, spatial music (ensembles placed in spatially distinct locations and often requiring separate conductors) and aleatoric music (chance music, in which tempos, rhythms and sometime pitches unfold at the discretion of the performers), all of which are now staples of contemporary music. Ives’ style is so idiosyncratic and distinctive that his music has an amazing freshness of sound, belying the fact that it was written a century ago.

Ives’ setting of Psalm 90 is one of the choral masterpieces of the 20th century. He probably began work on it in the late 1880’s or early 1890’s, trying it out on his father’s long-suffering church choir. He used it again during his brief tenure as music director of New York City’s fashionable Central Presbyterian Church in 1902. Both scores were lost, so he reconstructed (or recomposed) the work in 1923. It is Ives’ most complex choral work, and the only composition with which he was entirely satisfied. Psalm 90 displays Ives’ wonderful gift for melody and his mastery at setting English, using complex and irregular rhythms that match the cadence of the language. He often ends phrases with a thick chord composed of thirds stacked one on top of the other, and in one memorable section, has the choir start on a unison pitch and then constantly divide, moving by whole steps until a massive 22-part whole tone chord covering three octaves is formed, and then reversing the process until the choir again reaches a unison. The organ maintains a C pedal
throughout the piece, creating a center of gravity that eventually draws the music back to a quiet C major for the final four verses of the psalm. Three sets of chimes or bells and a low gong enter sequentially, repeating different patterns and rhythms, like the pealing of church bells in the distance, leaving at the end a soft, dissonant chord hovering over the C pedal.

**Kodály Laudes Organi**

Zoltán Kodály (1882-1967) grew up in rural Hungary where he had ample opportunity to become acquainted with the rich traditions of native folk music that played such an important part in his musical life. With little formal training, he learned piano, violin, viola and cello and began writing music. When he entered Budapest University to study modern languages, he also enrolled at the Franz Liszt Academy of Music and studied composition. It was there that he met Bela Bartók, who became a lifelong friend and collaborator. Kodály had written his doctoral thesis on the structure of Hungarian folksong, and he and Bartók began a serious effort to collect and archive Hungarian folksong. Their first collection, published in 1906, was an unexpected scholarly success and helped validate the fledgling discipline of ethnomusicology.

Kodály’s success as a composer took somewhat longer to achieve. His first major break came with the 1923 premiere of *Psalmus hungaricus*, an oratorio based on a 16th century Hungarian translation of Psalm 55. This was followed in 1926 by his singspiel *Háry János*, dealing with the tall tales recounted by a colorful folkloric character, and the orchestral suite he drew from *Háry János* received international acclaim. The influences on Kodály’s musical palette were quite eclectic. In addition to folksong, he was profoundly influenced by the music of Debussy (he studied for a year with Widor in Paris), but he also assimilated Renaissance polyphony, Gregorian chant, and the Classical styles of Mozart and Haydn. His music is highly rhythmic and, while fundamentally tonal, is liberally seasoned with dissonance and unusual modulations.

Kodály was also an innovator in primary music education and strove to make music an integral part of the school curriculum. Music was taught primarily through singing, solfege (interval training using the syllables do, re, mi, etc. assigned to the pitches of the scale) and other vocal exercises, and Kodály believed the instructional materials should be of the highest artistic quality. He compiled an enormous collection of folksong arrangements and exercises that form the basis of what is now known as the Kodály method.

*Laudes Organi* (In Praise of the Organ) was commissioned by the American Guild of Organists and premiered at its 1966 national convention. It would be the last piece that Kodály composed. Rather than a solo organ work, Kodály wrote a work for chorus and organ with a text taken from a 12th century Latin poem. While the text reads somewhat like a manual of organ instruction, it is not clear if the poem was meant to be taken literally, figuratively, or even humorously. It could just as easily
refer to singing, and this ambiguity probably appealed to Kodály. The poem was annotated with note names for each syllable of the text, making this the earliest notated score, and Kodály draws on that original melody for much of the thematic material in Laudes Organi. The work opens with a long, imposing, majestic organ prelude. The text is divided into sections, each separated by an organ interlude. Kodály gives the organ prominence, explaining, “The choir sings comments to the playing of the organ...The thought was given by the old Latin words: listen to the different possibilities of sound on the organ.” The music moves through polyphonic sections with intertwining melodies and countermelodies, beautifully harmonized homophonic sections, and canons offset by a single beat, creating a kind of Ivesian dissonance. Kodály takes advantage of what opportunities for tone painting that the text provides – the text about musicians training like soldiers acquires a rather martial air, and the text about the middle voices flying nimbly through notes, jumping about melodiously ends with complex, overlapping melismas and an unexpected cadence. The work ends with a magnificent fugue based on the original melody. Toward the end of the fugue, there is an additional verse, almost like a postscript. It memorializes Guido d’Arezzo, the 11th century monk who developed solfege and the use of hand gestures to indicate the solfege syllables, both important components of the Kodály method. He sets that text as a familiar vocal exercise, a series descending intervals all starting from the same pitch, which ripples through the texture of the fugue. A glorious choral “amen” followed by a brief but equally imposing organ postlude bring Laudes Organi to a close.

– Michael Moore

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