

Review

**Organist James O'Donnell
at St. Paul's, Akron (February 16)**

by Daniel Hathaway



Westminster Abbey organist James O'Donnell drew a large audience to St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Akron on Sunday afternoon, February 16, for a full-length recital that ran the historical gamut of organ literature by composers who were active from the 1700s to the 1970s.

O'Donnell chose the sort of roughly chronological program that was the norm for mid-twentieth century recitals, beginning with Louis Marchand and proceeding through J.S. Bach, Enrico Bossi, Edward Elgar, Maurice Duruflé, Marcel Dupré, Frank Bridge and William Walton, with a slight preference for British composers. Which, after all, is exactly why you come to hear the incumbent of a famous English post play a recital in the US, especially a musician as accomplished as this one.

O'Donnell led off with Marchand's *Grand Dialogue in C*, a work designed to show off the *Grands Jeux* of the French classical organ, with its fiery reeds and snarly *cornets* and *tierces*. St. Paul's organ, a large, 85-rank instrument built in 1952 by Möeller and rebuilt in 1995 by Wicks, is about the closest thing we have locally to an English cathedral organ. Designed to accompany choirs and to support the Anglican liturgy, this style of instrument doesn't quite have the vocabulary to speak good French, so the Marchand — a rather unmemorable piece to begin with — was already at a disadvantage. O'Donnell made it sound as noble as possible.

A sparkingly registered and flawlessly played account of Bach's first trio sonata followed. Here, O'Donnell used an open style of articulation that sounded a bit dry in St. Paul's acoustics but made Bach's strict but playful counterpoint come vividly to life. These sonatas have driven many organists to distraction, but though his quick tempos were on the daring side, O'Donnell's feet and fingers never got tangled.

Bossi's *Scherzo in g minor* used to be a standard showpiece among touring organists, and like most showpieces doesn't boast a lot of substance. O'Donnell tossed it off with more reverence than it probably deserves, calling forth a wide range of colors and dynamics from the instrument.

The big work on the first half was the opening movement of Elgar's *Sonata in G*, a symphonic piece whose subtle rhetoric and color changes O'Donnell handled masterfully.

After intermission, O'Donnell turned to twentieth-century French music by Duruflé and Dupré (who somehow acquired Mendelssohn's birth and death dates in the program). Duruflé's *Prelude and Fugue on the name of Alain* pays tribute to the organist and composer Jehan Alain (brother of Marie-Claire Alain) both through quotations from his *Litanies* and via an improbably craggy fugue subject made up of the letters of his surname. Dupré's *Cortège and litanie* is a solemn procession that — like the Duruflé fugue — gradually builds in intensity to a full organ climax.

Though their adjacency on the program pointed up similarities in the style of the two pieces, O'Donnell made them individually effective and interesting through his choices of registers and his keen sense of pace. He glided through the technical demands of both works with apparent ease.

Frank Bridge's *Adagio in E* provided a sentimental interlude (though one that suddenly expanded to full organ in midstream with the tune in the tuba stop) before a site-specific finale, Walton's coronation march *Orb and Sceptre*. Written for the Coronation of Elizabeth II in Westminster Abbey in 1953 and arranged for organ by O'Donnell's predecessor William McKie, it was predictably stirring — and had the whole row behind me beating out the time.

Speaking of site-specific pieces, O'Donnell responded to the audience's warm ovation with a cheerful encore: Louis Vierne's *Carillon de Westminster*, written by the organist of Notre-Dame in Paris in honor of the English organ builder Henry Willis and based on the clock chimes of the Palace of Westminster. A nice touch at the end of a fine recital.

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