

## Preview

### **NEOSonicFest: Third concert features organist Jonathan Moyer in “Music from the Abyss” on March 31**

by Mike Telin



Most listeners encounter the organ through church services, which rarely venture into avant-garde music. NEOSonicFest’s third concert on Monday, March 31 at 7:30 pm at the Church of the Covenant will offer a different view of organ music, according to recitalist Jonathan William Moyer.

“If people come with a different set of expectations and open themselves to new and exciting sounds from the organ, I think it will be a very entertaining evening,” Moyer told us in a phone conversation. “And these are works that are rarely performed because there’s not often a context to do them in. Even at conventions and festivals they shy away from these stronger, more modern expressions.”

Moyer, who is assistant professor of organ at Oberlin in addition to his position as music director and organist at the Covenant, went on to describe his program in detail.

He’ll open the gates to the Abyss with Johann Sebastian Bach’s chorale, *Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir, BWV 686*, which translates as “Out of deep need I cry to you, Lord.” “This is a fantastic setting of the chorale for six voices — four in the hands and two in the pedal, both feet playing simultaneously. I wanted to start with it to make a grand statement, then we’ll immediately surge into the 20th century.”

That surge begins with the music of Olivier Messiaen, the 20th century French visionary who attracted Moyer’s admiration early on. “His ability to connect his music to a lot of religious, spiritual, mysterious ideas is unique among composers. Especially important is the idea of timelessness. The way he is able to achieve a kind of eternal repose in his music is very magical. With his emphasis on natural elements like bird songs, wind, fire, and drops of water, he’s trying to bring the natural world into the ecclesiastical one through an instrument that is associated with church. His music speaks a language that is unique but very appealing.”

Monday’s concert will include Messiaen’s 1951 *Les mains de l’abîme* (“The Hands of the Abyss”) from the composer’s *Livre d’orgue*, a piece Moyer says is more intense than

many of his compositions. “He wrote it during a period when he was experimenting with serialism and it really is his most experimental piece. It is liturgical — all of the movements of *Livre d'orgue* are associated with different liturgical seasons — but this particular movement is associated with Lent and the cry from the Abyss. He shows off the extreme lowest stops and the extreme highest stops of the organ, and together they form this very interesting dialogue between the two worlds. It’s quite compelling.”

Dutch composer Piet Kee’s *Four Pieces for Manuals* will provide a lighter moment in the program as well as continue the theme. “They’re a nice little sonic reprieve that highlight some musical ideas in the other pieces,” Moyer said. “Kee uses fragments from the chorale, *Aus tiefer Not*, and some of the pieces use serial techniques. One of the movements is a *ciacona* — actually a tone row repeated in an ostinato that highlights the softer, more delicate sounds of the organ.”

After that little musical intermission, the audience can re-fasten its seatbelts for Gyorgi Ligeti’s notorious *Volumina*, a work built around tonal clusters that challenge the lungs of the instrument. “It begins with a full compass cluster involving the entire organ which makes an amazing impact, a true sonic experience.”

Why notorious? “The premiere was cancelled. It was supposed to be in the Bremen Cathedral, and the organist was preparing it on another organ nearby.” Moyer told us. “Those huge clusters put an enormous strain on the winding system and the blower overloaded and started to burn. The people at the Bremen Cathedral heard about this. They saw the piece as something that was written to destroy organs and they refused to have it performed. It was premiered later in Stockholm.”

*Volumina* also puts a strain on the performer. “It requires a lot of unusual techniques. You’re playing clusters with your arms, and some very physical passages that leave you winded at the end,” Moyer noted. “I’m using two assistants and at points they jump in on the action as well, playing clusters and pulling stops.” And pulling stops out only half-way produces sounds the public rarely gets to hear.

Arnold Schoenberg avoided writing for the organ because he didn’t like all of its octave doublings and its inability to make subtle changes of dynamics, but he did compose *Variations on a Recitative*, op. 40 at the request of a publisher. “Schoenberg wrote only the pitches he desired to be heard and it actually goes off the compass of the keyboard,” Moyer said. “Carl Weinrich prepared an edition that was based on the Princeton University Chapel organ, rewriting passages for certain registrations that would take into account the octave displacements that Schoenberg wrote. But even that is difficult to perform from because it was geared toward that particular organ.”

“I actually perform from Schoenberg’s original score. I’ve done it several times and I just reorient it to whatever organ I’m playing on. It takes quite a bit of time but it makes more sense for me because I can really explore the possibilities of that instrument in expressing Schoenberg’s music. He only wrote in the dynamics so it’s up to the performer to choose stops, registrations and any other things the performer wishes to express. It’s an amazing piece. It’s not completely serial but it is a masterpiece of counterpoint and motivic devel-

opment. He even sneaks in a quote of the four pitches that spell Bach's name in German, so towards the end in the pedal you get this long homage to Bach."

Moyer will bring his audience back into the light with one of William Bolcom's *Gospel Preludes*, "Nearer, My God, to Thee." "It will bring the recital to a very gentle end — we've been through the Abyss and we ascend maybe a little bit closer to the divine," Moyer said. "The *Gospel Preludes* are all wonderful, but this particular one is quite dense and explores a lot of dissonant aleatoric figures. The tune gradually begins to emerge amid chimes — I have my assistants play these on handbells — that are rung in an ostinato pattern repeated over a long incantation. It ends in a very serene D major. It's very beautiful."

*Daniel Hathaway contributed to this article.*

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