

### Preview

#### **Organists Bálint Karosi and Christopher Houlihan both come to town on April 19, but no need to choose**

by Daniel Hathaway



When it rains, it pours, and in April that's a good thing. Two stellar concert organists are set to play very different recitals in Cleveland on Friday, April 19, and happily, fans of organ music can catch both of them. 34-year-old Hungarian-born Bálint Karosi opens the Baldwin Wallace Bach Festival at 4 pm at Berea United Methodist Church with music by J.S. Bach's predecessors and the master himself, and 25-year-old Christopher Houlihan performs Vierne and Liszt at Fairmount Presbyterian Church in Cleveland Heights at 7:30 in a recital jointly sponsored by Fairmount Church and the Cleveland Chapter of the American Guild of Organists.

How different can two organists and two recitals be? With centuries of repertory to explore, "a longer history than any other instrument," Houlihan reminds us in a phone call from his home in New York, there can be plenty of differences. The instruments, for one thing. Karosi will play a baroque-style tracker instrument built by Rudolf Janke in Germany in 1974, while Houlihan will perform on the eclectic, 100-rank electro-pneumatic instrument built by Ohio's Schantz Co. in 1966 (incorporating elements of an earlier Holtkamp organ). For another thing, the two players come from different backgrounds and were inspired by very different influences.

Bálint Karosi was always musical but came late to the organ. "I began as a pianist but my first career successes were as a clarinetist" he said in a phone conversation from Boston, where he serves as organist and music director at First Lutheran Church. "I was seventeen when I switched," a move inspired in 2000 when he met Swiss organist Lionel Rogg and was simultaneously introduced to the organ and the discipline of improvisation. "He was the first person I ever heard who could improvise a four-part fugue in the style of Bach, then an overture in the French style."

Karosi was introduced to the world of early music and bitten by the historical performance movement when he arrived at Oberlin to begin its artist diploma program under James David Christie. There was nothing like the Oberlin program in his native country. "Historical performance is just now starting at the Liszt Academy in Hungary," he says,

“and my colleagues are becoming more and more interested in it.”

His interest in improvisation in all its many forms has expanded into a doctoral dissertation he's writing at Yale, and his fascination with early music has inspired a wildly popular Bach festival at his church in Boston that began in 2007. “Bach Around the Clock” now runs from 6am to 6pm on a date near Bach's birthday, is webcast by WGBH and “now we have more groups wanting to play than we have room for.”

Connecticut native Christopher Houlihan got an early start on the organ, beginning lessons with John Rose at Trinity College in Hartford at the age of 12, an experience which turned him in the direction of his current career. “He taught me the basics, how to play the pedals, and introduced me to my first Vierne Symphony. He developed my love of music and encouraged me to explore my personal relationship with music and bring my own personality to performances.”

Houlihan's musical education continued with two years of study at Juilliard with Paul Jacobs, “an incredibly eye-opening experience that challenged me in different ways” and then with a third teacher, Jean-Baptiste Robin in Versailles during a formative year in Paris when he also had the good fortune of serving as assistant organist at the American Cathedral. “It was an incredible year working with kids' choirs, accompanying the adult choirs. I even had an apartment in the tower of the cathedral!”

During his Paris sojourn Houlihan attended a series of concerts at Notre-Dame Cathedral featuring all of Louis Vierne's organ symphonies, which inspired a massive project back in the States. Last summer, he organized a multi-city tour called “Vierne 2012” which took him to six cities and six different organs for performances of all the Vierne symphonies in two concerts each on the same day. “I was so happy that audiences responded to this colorful, fun music that I love so much,” Houlihan said. “People who thought that the organ is a cold, remote or spooky instrument found that it grabbed their hearts.”

Bálint Karosi's program on April 19 has been planned to fit in with the Bach Festival's specifications. “They asked for a program including Bach's predecessors or students who were influenced by him”, though the repertory suits Karosi's own tastes. “We begin with Nikolaus Bruhns who was also a violinist; people who play multiple instruments interest me. He was also influenced by Buxtehude. Then a rarely performed trio probably by Fasch, and a concerto in G by Ernst, Bach's famous Weimar boss who died at eighteen of an infection. Very sad — he wrote beautiful music. Bach really liked this Italian influence. Then an aria by Couperin showing the grace of French music. Then the Buxtehude c-minor *Ciacona*. I like to think of these pieces as Bach's iPod selections — composers he admired and learned something from.”

Karosi will continue his program with an improvisation on a chorale which will be given to him on the spot and with Bach's own music: five fugues from *Art of Fugue*, the big Leipzig chorale prelude on *Komm, heiliger Geist*, “in the North German style of Reincken”, and the *Toccata and Fugue in C*, “probably written for an organ testing”.

Christopher Houlihan's program features only two big works, another idea inspired by a concert he heard in Paris. “There were only two pieces, Vierne's fourth symphony and

Liszt's *Fantasia on 'Ad nos, ad salutarem undam'*. I was overwhelmed by the pairing of the two composers who were both extreme and dramatic in different ways. I tend to be attracted to programs like that. Sometimes organ recitals are a potpourri. I like diving into meaty repertoire."

Though the Liszt will be the same on April 19, Houlihan will pair it with Vierne's third symphony in a continuing tribute to the famous organist of Notre-Dame de Paris, who died with his boots on at the console of its Cavaille-Cöll organ during a recital in 1937, and for whom Houlihan has a strong affinity. "He wore his heart on his sleeve and his music is filled with angst and moments of passion and sarcasm. His life was filled with tragedy and sadness, but a piece like the finale of the sixth symphony is so happy that it almost mocks the tragedies. He was a very troubled person who found release in writing music."

*Bálint Karosi opens the Baldwin Wallace Bach Festival on Friday, April 19 at 4 pm at Berea Methodist Church. Tickets required: call 440.826.8070.*

*Christopher Houlihan plays at Fairmount Presbyterian Church on Friday, April 19 at 7:30 pm. The concert is free.*

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