

Review

Peter Richard Conte on the Skinner organ in Stambaugh Auditorium (April 28)

by Robert Rollin



Peter Richard Conte's Sunday afternoon Stambaugh Auditorium organ concert was a delight. The large, recently renovated Skinner organ, putatively a gem of its type, was certainly put through its paces. The program, full of interesting highlights, included music from the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth-century organ literature.

Conte, who presides at the mammoth organs at Macy's in Philadelphia (formerly Wanamaker's) and Longwood Gardens in Kennett Square, PA as well as serving as music director at St. Clement's Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, performed two interesting transcriptions of his own during the first half. The *Mondscheinmusik* from Richard Strauss' opera *Capriccio*, *opus 85* provided evocative post-Wagnerian harmony and tone color. Originally an orchestral interlude, the transcription provided the opportunity to feature string and French horn organ timbres. The music, enriched with many non-chord tones, presented lovely translucent accompaniment to beautiful melodic material.

Otto Nicolai's lusty comic opera overture to *The Merry Wives of Windsor* provided source material for Conte's second transcription. Here the irrepressible Falstaff pursues two married women who ultimately throw him into the river. The tuneful music was delightful as it picked up speed to a splashy rousing conclusion. Unfortunately some of the fully registered passages were so thick as to sometimes obscure the main melody's sound.

The seventeenth century music was an interesting mix. Charles Marie Widor, whose career as organist and composer straddled the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, transcribed several J. S. Bach movements in an organ work entitled *Bach Memento* from which Conte chose two. The *Pastorale* had a charming arioso melody. The *Mattheus-Final*, based on the *St. Matthew Passion's* last movement, had some powerfully registered fortissimo passages.

Johann Sebastian Bach himself transcribed a three-movement violin concerto by little known German composer Johann Ernst (1635-1715). The *Grave* was the most enchanting in its gorgeous graceful melody. The *Presto* seemed to be dominated by ascending se-

quences that gave this closing movement great charm. The Baroque style registration seemed to work well on the Skinner organ.

The two other nineteenth century pieces were Lichtenstein-born Joseph Rheinberger's *Agitato* from *Sonata XI, opus 148* and Belgian Alexandre Guilmant's *Marche Religieuse*. Both pieces were original works for the organ, and seemed well written for the instrument. Rheinberger trained at the Munich Conservatory. His selection had an interesting succession of freely treated harmonies. Guilmant's march started in conventional fashion, but soon turned into a stimulating fugato. Conte's performances were excellent.

Conte also transcribed legendary violinist/composer Fritz Kreisler's *Variations on a Theme of Archangelo Corelli*. Kreisler flourished in the early twentieth century, when rules of compositional attribution were freer than today. He actually composed some original works that he attributed to older composers, but later admitted they were his own. Like the *Corelli Variations*, much of his music has great appeal. This transcription was especially effective. Conte used some lovely soft colors in the quiet variation, and a stunningly amusing 32-foot stop at the end of several phrases.

Twentieth century organist/composer Richard Elmore's oeuvre provided two works: *Night Song*, and *Fantasy on Nursery Tunes*. The former had many refreshingly soft passages that emphasized flutes and reeds. The colors were a relief from some of the overly full registrations in other works. The latter was a diversion quoting *Three Blind Mice*, *London Bridge is Falling Down*, and *Pop Goes the Weasel*. Conte played both works with panache.

The concert closed with a stirring performance of Finnish composer Jean Sibelius's *Finlandia*, as transcribed beautifully by Canadian organist/composer Herbert Austin Fricker. Conte deserves special praise for choosing so interesting a program.

Published on clevelandclassical.com April 30, 2013