

## Organist Jonathan Ryan to perform at Stambaugh Auditorium September 28

by Daniel Hathaway



American organist Jonathan Ryan will open this season's organ series on the E.M. Skinner instrument in Youngstown's Stambaugh Auditorium on Sunday, September 28 at 4:00 pm.

Ryan, who is currently assistant music director at Christ Episcopal Church in Greenwich, Connecticut, began his professional studies with Todd Wilson at the Cleveland Institute of Music before moving on to graduate studies at Eastman.

We spoke to the organist as he was preparing for his recital on the Late Summer Organ Festival at the Fraumünster in Zürich. Ryan, whose lineage is partially Swiss, was asked to perform a program totally devoted to American music, something one rarely comes across, especially in Europe. "I'm enjoying that challenge," he said in a telephone conversation as he listed his repertory choices, which included music by the late Chicago composer Leo Sowerby, Dudley Buck ("his *Last Rose of Summer*, which turns out to be a well-known tune in Europe") and five of Calvin Hampton's *Dances*. "I had to learn some new repertoire for Zürich," he noted

Ryan's choices for Switzerland were also made with the Fraumünster organs in mind. "Stambaugh is an entirely different style of instrument," he said, which led him to some interesting decisions.

He'll begin his program on Sunday with another Sowerby work, *Pageant*, a piece written for Vatican organist Fernando Germani, who was famous for his pedal technique and scoffed at other compositions that sought to give him a run for his money. "I especially enjoy playing it when the console is visible and the audience can see what I'm doing," Ryan said. After the extended opening pedal solo, the piece takes the form of theme and variations. "Sowerby does a convincing job of incorporating its technical aspects with musical form," Ryan noted, "but it's incredibly virtuosic for the feet."

Sowerby will be followed by “the only transcription on the program,” Johann Sebastian Bach’s organ version of Vivaldi’s double violin concerto in d minor, which Ryan particularly enjoys playing “because of the passion in Vivaldi and Italian baroque music.”

Some of Jonathan Ryan’s Zürich program will also appear at Stambaugh in a set of preludes on American hymn tunes from three generations of composers. “Zachary Wadsworth and I were students at Eastman. I commissioned his *Prelude on “Resignation”* for my first recording project. It’s inspired by Brahms’s chorale preludes of op. 122. George Shearing’s *Come Away to the Skies* turns particularly jazzy toward the end of the piece. And George Baker’s early 90s *Berceuse* celebrates the French symphonic style. It’s based on *Away in a Manger*, and you’ll hear both tunes at the end.”

The first half of the recital will end with Herbert Howells’s *Rhapsody in c-sharp minor*, “a piece with an interesting history. It was written at York during World War I when the composer couldn’t sleep during an air raid. It’s extremely powerful and full of wonderful sentiment that seems contemporary even today. It will also show off the dynamic effects of the Skinner.”

Ryan will end his recital with a work that was born in a department store during a tour by a famous Parisian organist. “In 1921, Marcel Dupré played a concert on the John Wanamaker organ in Philadelphia. The first half featured Dupré with Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra, and for the second, he was asked to improvise a four-movement symphony based on themes he received during the intermission,” Ryan said. “They were all Latin hymns, four of them plainsong. Dupré said he was instantly inspired to outline the life of Christ and that he played in a state of exultation he had rarely experienced. Its use of texture is extraordinary, and because it was conceived on an American organ, the symphony will work very well at Stambaugh.”

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