

Organist Erik Wm. Suter at St. Paul's Cleveland Hts. (September 20)

by Daniel Hathaway



During his tenure as organist of Washington National Cathedral, Erik Wm. Suter introduced the organ to thousands of tourists in weekly recitals, astutely planning his programs to immediately grab the attention of listeners who might never have attended an organ recital before, then moving on to show the palette of colors a large pipe organ could produce and the range of musical styles it could handle.

The good-sized audience at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Cleveland Heights last Saturday afternoon at 5 pm certainly weren't tourists and probably not first-timers, but Suter's sure sense of programming, canny registration and brilliant playing were all in evidence. His program covered a lot of musical territory in just over an hour and fully explored the resources of the church's 1952 Holtkamp organ.

The *Preludio* from Marcel Dupré's second symphony made for a gripping opening salvo, with dramatic flourishes separated by interludes of giggling flutes, tinkling upper registers, snarling reeds and calmer passages played on shimmering strings. Suter's playing was highly rhythmical but spacious and measured.

Jean Langlais's *Cantilène* from the *Suite Brève* began simply with an oboe solo, then increased in textural and contrapuntal complexity with decorative filigree featuring widely-spaced, high-pitched registers.

Maurice Duruflé's homage to Jehan Alain begins with restless, buoyant figures on flute stops, quotes a familiar passage from Alain's *Litanies*, and progresses to a fugue based on an unlikely, bouncing subject derived from Alain's name. Suter's playing was wonderfully cheerful and open-textured and he handled Duruflé's sometimes abrupt transitions with nimbleness and grace.

After a brief pause, Suter gave the audience a clear-textured and well-articulated reading of Johann Sebastian Bach's big e-minor prelude and fugue, then changed things up with two American hymn-tune settings.

In thee is gladness, by the late Dale Wood, long-time music director at San Francisco's Episcopal Church of St. Mary the Virgin, took the dance-like German tune through a set of simple but sparkling variations that moved in and out of bluesy harmonies.

What a Friend we have in Jesus was vintage William Bolcom — an extroverted, gospel-y setting with a characteristic, pulsating beat just under the surface. Before he played it, Suter promised that he would “turn this beautiful, classic organ into a Hammond B-3 for a few minutes.” If it turned out to sound more like a Wurlitzer instead (Leslie speakers are hard to simulate), Suter's playing was full of style and rhythmic subtlety. Not a few chuckles rose from the audience as the piece unfolded.

St. Pauls' organist, Karel Paukert, and composer Petr Eben share a Czech heritage, and that inspired Erik Suter to end his program with the finale from Eben's *Nedelni Hudba* (*Sunday Music*). Something of a mirror to the opening Dupré, the Eben is intensely rhythmical with angry *tuttis* alternating with chord clusters on foundation stops and toccata-like gestures. The piece ends in a blaze of positive energy with the *Salve Regina* theme in the pedals.

When he's not playing recitals, Erik Wm. Suter flies commercial aircraft for a regional carrier out of Washington, D.C. Not as strange a combination as it might seem, considering how closely the console of a large organ resembles the cockpit of a jetliner and the level of skill involved in managing both of them. But whether you're sitting in a pew or making sure your seatback has been returned to its original, upright position, you can be assured of a smooth but thrilling ride if Suter is at the controls.

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