

Organist Jonathan Rudy, AGO winner, at St. John's Cathedral (November 14)

by Timothy Robson



Jonathan Rudy, winner of the most recent American Guild of Organists National Young Artists Competition, made his Cleveland debut on Friday evening, November 14, on the Holtkamp organs at the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist. The audience was enthusiastic but sparse, undoubtedly because of heavy snowfall and several major highway closures.

Currently a doctoral student at Indiana University, Rudy played a widely varied program that showcased his considerable musical ability. The recital had the overall theme “Worlds of Pipes, King of Instruments,” and was divided into several sections: “A World of Dancing,” “A World of Strife,” and “A World of Humor,” among others. The themes did little to elucidate the works on the program. For example, J.S. Bach’s prelude on the chorale

Schmücke dich, o liebe Seele bears a passing resemblance to the Baroque sarabande, but its connection to “A World of Dancing” seemed remote.

Rudy began his concert with music by J.S. Bach, first the *Prelude and Fugue in A minor*, BWV 543, then *Schmücke dich*. In the prelude and fugue he showed strong technique, beautiful shaping of phrases, and a sense of rhythmic flexibility. The chorale prelude was serene. Bach presents the chorale melody in very long, highly ornamented note values, and in the repeat of the first strophe, Rudy added to Bach’s own ornamentation. He kept the pulse moving but gave the music time to have an appropriate sense of repose.

Like many performance competitions, the 2014 Boston AGO contest commissioned a new work to serve as an equalizer among the competitors. All receive the music at the same time and have equal opportunity to learn it. Pamela Decker’s *Faneuil Hall* was named after the birthplace of the American Revolution in Boston. The work has two movements. “Elegy: Cradle of Liberty” presents a sinuous melody over a straightforward accompaniment. Tuneful and of moderate difficulty, it should win fans from organists

seeking appropriate music for patriotic occasions. The “Fugue: Liberty and Union Now and Forever” begins with an angular subject and goes through all the fugal motions on way to an increasingly difficult grand toccata, including a big pedal solo with sharp interjections on the manual. The piece certainly served its purpose of showing the technical skills of the performer, and Jonathan Rudy was fully up to its challenges.

To close the first half, Jonathan Rudy performed the “Scherzo” from Canadian Rachel Laurin’s *Symphony no. 1, op. 36*. The Vierne-like scherzo is in three parts: a quick, airy section; a slower, more lyric passage; and a return to the first material, developed further. Rudy made it all seem simple, which it certainly was not.

After a brief intermission, Rudy returned for Camille Saint-Saëns’s *Fantasie No. 2 in D-flat*, a multi-sectioned work that contains lush, flowing Romantic harmonies. Rudy took advantage of the cathedral’s spacious acoustics by using both the chancel organ and main gallery organ.

With their improvisatory nature, scalar passages, and striking dissonances with delicious resolutions, the organ works of Italian Baroque composer Girolamo Frescobaldi are of great beauty. Along with the Bach prelude and fugue, Frescobaldi’s *Toccata No. 5 in G* was a high point of the concert. Frescobaldi’s organs had rudimentary pedal keyboards, so the pedal parts are mostly long-held notes. Jonathan Rudy seemed as if he was extemporizing and exploring the straightforward sound of the organ, with great flexibility of rhythm.

Jean Guillou’s brilliant and dissonant *Saga VI* “Icarus” originated as part of a set of recorded improvisations with the atmospheric title, *Visions Cosmiques*. Several of these were later transcribed for publication by the composer. Guillou, who has been the titular organist at St. Eustache in Paris since 1963, has spent his career as a kind of outlaw virtuoso and provocateur, famous for idiosyncratic performances of standard works as well as a large oeuvre of compositions of great originality. The relatively short *Saga VI* is a good example of Guillou’s work. It tells the mythical story of Icarus, who attempted flight with his set of waxen wings. When he flew too close to the sun, the wax melted, and he drowned in the sea.

Saga VI is based on a descending, angular motif, extended and developed into an extraordinary *tour de force* for the performer. Jonathan Rudy’s performance was technically outstanding: every note and rhythm was exactly in place. Yet I wanted more. His performance was too polite, neither risky nor ferocious.

At this stage of his career, Jonathan Rudy is an emerging performer with strong potential and great talent. It will be interesting to follow his career.

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