

Organist Bruce Neswick at Holy Trinity Akron (May 15)

by Timothy Robson



The distinguished American church musician and organist Bruce Neswick appeared in recital in Akron on Friday, May 15 as part of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church's Arts @ Holy Trinity concert series. Neswick is Interim Canon for Music at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Portland, Oregon. He was previously on the faculty at the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University and served as director of music for the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City.

Neswick's program included familiar and less-frequently played works, as well as an

improvisation on a submitted theme to close. There was even an element of audience participation: the concert began with organ and congregation/audience in alternation, with the audience singing stanzas of Gerre Hancock's hymn tune *Palm Beach* to the text "Come, Thou Holy Spirit Bright." Between the stanzas, Neswick performed Hancock's own variations on his tune. It was an interesting way to involve the audience in the music.

The organ variations showed the colors of the church's four-manual Berghaus pipe organ. One was jazzy, on the flute stops; another was lush, on the organ's string sounds, with the hymn tune in the pedal. The final variation was a toccata with the tune again in the pedals, but this time in long notes balanced against the full organ.

Johann Sebastian Bach's organ transcription of Antonio Vivaldi's *Concerto in A Minor* (*L'Estro Armonico*, op. 3, no. 8, originally for two violins and orchestra) is remarkably

faithful to Vivaldi's original. (Bach transcribed several orchestral concertos by Vivaldi and others in order to learn the new Italian style.) The transcriptions require clarity of texture and precision of playing. Neswick seemed to have trouble with the organ; some pedal notes did not sound quickly enough for the tempo the organist had chosen, leading to some out-of-sync passages and more smudged notes than you would expect from a player of Neswick's repute. Likewise, the stops chosen for the melody in the lyrical second movement strongly overpowered the accompaniment. Indeed, the balance of organ sounds was a recurring issue throughout the concert.

The first half of the program closed with Italian composer/organist Ugo Sforza's *Theme and Variations* (2003). It is completely tonal, and endearingly retro (late-Romantic) in style. The chromaticism resembles that of Max Reger's or Sigfried Karg-Elert's organ works, with densely voiced polyphony, rich foundation stops, and other times luscious string sounds. There is a pastorale, with a bass drone and variations on buzzy reed stops. The theme is recapitulated at the end, in more chromatic harmonies and on full organ.

Herbert Howells's *Psalm-Prelude*, Op. 32, No. 3, opened the second half. Each of Howells's six Preludes is inspired by an accompanying inscription from the Psalms. In this case, it is Psalm 23, verse 4: "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for you are with me: your rod and your staff, they comfort me."

The piece features a plodding, repetitive bass line, representing the passage through the dark shadows. Neswick used the rich, dark colors of the organ, building to a full-organ climax before retreating to a quiet, calm ending, with the very low 32-foot pedal stop rumbling at the bottom of the texture. Howells's preludes are bread and butter for an organist experienced in the Episcopal/Anglican tradition, and Neswick's performance showed that expertise.

The announced portion of the recital ended with a complete performance of Louis Vierne's *Organ Symphony No. 1*, op. 14. Neswick gave an assured performance, doling out Vierne's complex chromaticism with ease. As Vierne's first attempt at a multi-movement organ symphony at age 29, while he was still under the tutelage of Charles-Marie Widor, the *Symphony No. 1* does not boast the kind of cohesion that his later works do, but there are some beautiful moments, especially in the third movement "Pastorale" and the scherzo-like "Allegro vivace" of the fourth movement. The last movement "Final" has long been an audience favorite; it is the flagship "French organ toccata," in which repeated manual figurations decorate a noble pedal melody, all at full volume of the organ. It never fails to thrill.

Jazz musicians and organists are the two groups of musicians who persist in the skills of improvisation as part of their stock in trade. Bruce Neswick is a noted improviser, and he ended this concert with an improvisation on a submitted theme, which, following tradition,

was presented to him in a sealed envelope. The theme was the hymn tune *Michael*, by Herbert Howells, which is sung to the text “All My Hope on God is Founded.” Neswick checked all the boxes of a standard improvisation in his set of variations on the theme: use of a variety of organ colors, elaboration on the melody to the point that it was sometimes almost unrecognizable, varied key structures, and a short fugue that finally morphed into a brilliant toccata, in which the tune was played in duet between the manual and pedal.

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