

Organist Isabelle Demers talks about her program at Stambaugh Auditorium on September 20

by Daniel Hathaway



Once described as a “diminutive dynamo,” French-Canadian organist Isabelle Demers will bring her impressive technical skill and musicianship to bear on a wide-ranging program next Sunday afternoon, September 20 at 4:00 pm, when she performs on the beautifully-restored E.M. Skinner organ in Stambaugh Auditorium in Youngstown.

Her recital will include Louis Vierne’s “Allegro Maestoso” (*Symphonie No. 2*, Op. 20); excerpts from Sergei Prokofiev’s

Cinderella (“Introduction,” “Gavotte — the Dancing Lesson,” “Three Oranges,” and “Cinderella gets ready for the ball,” all in Demers’ own arrangements); Frank Bridge’s *Adagio in E*, Max Reger’s *Fantasy on the chorale “Hallelujah! Gott zu loben,”* Op. 52, No. 3; J.S. Bach’s *Trio-Sonata in G*, BWV 530; Rachel Laurin’s *Three Short Studies*, Op. 68 (“Monologue,” “Flight of the Hummingbird,” and “Dialogue of the Mockingbirds”); and Sir George Thalben-Ball’s *Variations on a Theme by Paganini*.

Demers began her organ study at the Montréal Conservatory before going on to work with Paul Jacobs at the Juilliard School, where she earned her master’s and doctoral degrees. Demers spoke to us by telephone from Baylor University in Waco, Texas, where she is beginning her fourth year as assistant professor of organ. Over that time, she has revived the organ department, building it from a single organ major to a studio of six majors and seven secondary students.

Daniel Hathaway: You've planned a very interesting program for the Stambaugh Skinner — which is a beautiful restoration of a distinguished instrument.

Isabelle Demers: Yes — I talked to Paul Jacobs after he played there. He said how beautiful it was and how much he was enjoying the instrument. I've been looking forward to this concert.

DH: Tell me how you put your program together.

ID: My main concern has been that the Skinner is a pretty large, symphonic-style instrument, but it has only five general pistons [*pistons are mechanisms for pre-setting combinations of stops that affect the entire organ, so an organist can instantaneously call up a selection of sounds during a piece*]. I wanted to have a good variety of music, but I had to think of what I could do with only five basic stop combinations. I didn't want to have to set new stops after every piece. I've been to a few concerts like that, and I think it's really boring both for the audience and the performer when you have to spend so much time resetting everything. So I tried to go for a little bit of everything, but pieces that I knew wouldn't involve too many pistons. I wanted to have some Bach, but also some transcriptions and romantic music that would sound the best on that instrument.

DH: Tell me about the Prokofiev work that you've arranged.

ID: *Romeo and Juliet* was the first piece by Prokofiev that I transcribed for organ, and people quite liked it. It's not that they even really knew the music, but Prokofiev uses a colorful language that people enjoy. I looked for another one of his ballets to find some pieces I could play without many stop changes — how could I use different doublings and voicings of chords to achieve color without changing stops all the time? Or could I find pieces that have enough time between the various sections so I could actually change stops by hand? What I like about *Cinderella* is that everybody knows the story, and the way Prokofiev musically captured the essence of each character, you can really see them on the stage.

DH: Is the Reger going to give you a few registrational nightmares?

ID: I'm not expecting that it will be that hard because it's just a set of variations. By setting up a crescendo in the general pistons and using the divisional pistons [*combinations that affect stops on individual manuals and the pedal*], I think it will be doable. Because there's a little gap between each variation, it should be pretty easy. The fugue might be more difficult, but it makes a general crescendo, so I can just add a stop or two whenever I have a free hand. That doesn't happen often in Reger, but still... .

DH: Just use your third hand!

ID: Or my fourth foot!

DH: Let's talk about the Rachel Laurin pieces.

ID: Laurin had been writing very challenging music, but then she realized that nobody was going to buy her pieces if what she wrote was unplayable. So she started writing collections called *Short Pieces* — she's up to volume five now. The first one is for pedal solo. The second and third pieces are about birds. The hummingbird, as you can imagine, is cute and impressionistic, with a few chords that make you think of Debussy. And the mockingbird — people really love that one. I guess mockingbirds have the ability to listen to a tune and replicate it, learning new songs throughout their lives. This is a dialogue between two birds. One is well-behaved, and the other wants to show off every tune he's ever heard. He must have gone to a lot of organ concerts, because he knows a lot of organ music. As the piece unfolds, you hear quotes from famous organ works. There's one that I never discovered until Laurin told me about it! It's the theme of the finale of Vierne's first symphony, but the rhythms and chords are all changed, and I never recognized it. It's pretty clever.

DH: Tell me about Rachel Laurin.

ID: She's French-Canadian, like I am. For many, many years she was assistant organist of the St. Joseph Oratory in Montréal, the big church on the mountain with the green dome. She moved to Ottawa and eventually decided she really wanted to compose, so now she does about 75% composing, 15% performing, and a bit of teaching. People always enjoy her music and I've been playing a lot of her pieces. She's really fun to work with because she's always willing to try out new things. Last year she wrote me a whole set of pedal variations, and she's writing me another piece for next summer. I'm not a composer myself, so whenever I have an idea I think somebody should try out, I use her as my guinea pig.

DH: You're ending your concert with George Thalben-Ball's Variations on a Theme by Paganini — a virtuoso piece entirely played on the pedals until the final variation.

ID: It's great fun. It's one of those pieces where everybody knows the original — Paganini's 24th Caprice. Unlike some of the famous variations like the Brahms, Thalben-Ball goes very far from the tune and explores things you never even thought about. And it's a great piece to play when you don't have very many pistons, because your hands are free until the last variation. Of course, there are a couple of variations

where you're just hanging onto the bench for dear life, which makes it more complicated to pull stops at the same time.

DH: Where else will you be playing in the next year or so?

ID: After I return from Ohio, I'm playing in Texas two weeks in a row and then going to California, Wisconsin, and Florida. Then back to Ohio — Cincinnati — then Hartford. Although it's not quite official yet, I'm probably going to go to China at the end of November for the dedication of the new cathedral in Beijing.

DH: Would that be your first trip to China?

ID: Yes — I've never been there. My dad was a hydraulic engineer and he was part of the team that built the dam on the Great Yellow River. I think he went twenty times or so, but I've never been, so I'm pretty excited about it. It will be nice to go to a country where organs are developing.

DH: Do you get back to Montréal very often these days?

ID: I spend a good month and a half to two months there every year. The academic schedule gives us a good amount of time at Christmas and in the summer. You need some snow and maple syrup.

DH: And maple syrup on snow is pretty good, too.

ID: That's the best! But I'm never there at the right time of year.

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For a taste of Isabelle Demers' organ playing, watch this [video](#) of her performance of Rachel Laurin's *Étude héroïque* at the Church of Saint Anges, Lachine, Montréal.

And for a preview of the Thalben-Ball *Variations*, watch this [video](#) of Demers' fellow Canadian Ken Cowan (who also teaches in Texas at Rice University in Houston), performing that work at a church in Brooklyn, NY.

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