

Organist Stephen Tharp at Immaculate Conception (Sept. 27)

by Timothy Robson



Stephen Tharp is a brilliant performer! His recital at Immaculate Conception Church on Tuesday evening, September 27, was a pleasure from beginning to end. His imaginative program showed his virtuosity as a performer and could be enjoyed by both trained organists and the general public alike. Moreover, he has the talent to make an organ like the church's 1953 Casavant — an instrument of modest resources — sound its best.

Tharp is noted for his arrangements for the organ. He has performed and recorded works as diverse as Liszt's *Sonata in b* (originally for piano), Ravel's orchestral version of *La Valse*, and Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* — his arrangement of which has taken on something of legendary status. The program began and ended with transcriptions.

The Overture to Handel's *Music for the Royal Fireworks* opened the program with sharply dotted rhythms, impressive dialogues of trumpet stops, and lavish but stylish ornamentation. Tharp made the piece — originally for wind band — sound completely natural on the organ.

From Bach's collection of 18 chorale preludes, written between 1740 and 1750, Tharp chose the elaborate, serene setting of *Allein Gott, in der Höh' sei Ehr*, BWV 662. The melody — from the German Lutheran "Gloria in excelsis Deo" section of the Mass — is heard in highly embellished form above a two-part contrapuntal accompaniment and a "walking bass line" in the pedal. Tharp's performance was refined, with phrasing that ebbed and flowed, using a simple registration with a soft principal stop for the chorale melody.

Mendelssohn's *Organ Sonata No. 2 in c*, Op. 65, No. 2, received a straightforward performance. The somber, chorale-like introduction of the first movement is followed by a "song without words" played on a soft reed stop. An allegro ensues, and Tharp concluded the ending's majestic fugue on full organ, filling the generous acoustics of Immaculate Conception Church.

The major new "find" of the program was organist-physician-composer George Baker's *Variations on "The Lone Wild Bird"* (2015), a southern American folk tune. Its musical style borrows from the expanded tonality of the great French improviser-organists such as Pierre Cochereau.

After the hymn-like introduction of the theme with chromatically altered harmonies, the pedal takes the melody below a stream of notes floating high above. Later variations use dense chords on heavy foundation stops, and a high flute obbligato decorates the tune in chords on the string stops. A coda in simple harmony on flute stops ends the piece. Although not without their technical challenges, Baker's variations are an attractive addition to the organ repertoire and would be well within reach of many organists, both for recitals and for service playing. Stephen Tharp gave them a definitive performance.

Most of the works of Marco Enrico Bossi, a late Romantic Italian composer and organ virtuoso, are now forgotten, so Stephen Tharp's revival of the *Scherzo in g*, Op. 49, No. 2, was something of a guilty pleasure. Light and almost Mendelssohn-like in character, with alternating quiet and louder sections, it was a bit repetitive and not a timeless masterpiece. But it was fun, and Tharp has the panache to carry it off.

The concert ended with two Tharp transcriptions. The organist gave Brahms's *Intermezzo in A*, Op. 118, No. 2, a simple performance on shimmering, soft flute and string stops without any attempt to solo out melodic segments along the way. It was intimate and sensitive to the piano original.

Paul Dukas's *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* was another matter entirely. Tharp used the full resources of the organ and all of his own formidable technique to bring Dukas's symphonic poem to life. Based on a poem by Goethe, the story is well-known from Walt Disney's animated film *Fantasia*. Many smiles of amusement appeared on the faces of audience members as the piece progressed, and at least some listeners carried the apprentice's main theme home as an earworm.

The recital was sparsely attended, but those who were there will attest to the enjoyment it brought. It was an object lesson in successful recital planning: programs can include both serious and lighter music and, most importantly, can be fun!

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