

AGO prize-winning organist Aaron Tan to present recital at St. John's Cathedral

by Daniel Hathaway



Toronto-born organist Aaron Tan, who will play a recital at St. John's Cathedral on Friday, February 8, is among the young concert artists that can make you distinctly feel like an underachiever.

After earning a PhD in Materials Science at the University of Michigan, and a five-year stint in postdoctoral research, last fall he embarked on a Master of Music degree at Yale. Along the way, he won first prize *and* audience prize in the American Guild of Organists' National Young Artists Competition in Organ Performance

last July in Prairie Village, Kansas.

That win came with a cash award, as well as professional representation by Karen McFarlane Artists, Inc., and guaranteed recital dates. "The prize has led to a busy but fulfilling fall," Tan said in a phone call from Yale. "I probably did something like two concerts a month on top of starting a new school program and a new church job."

Tan now divides his time between New Haven and New York, where he serves as organ scholar at the Church of the Resurrection, working with David Enlow and playing a relocated and enlarged Casavant organ. "It's not the largest instrument, but it's super versatile, very warm, with lots of rich, colorful sounds that are pretty unique," he said.

The organist will seek to replicate that palette of colors in his recital at St. John's Cathedral in downtown Cleveland at 7:30 pm on February 8, an event co-sponsored

by the Cleveland Chapter of the AGO and the Cathedral. His program includes J.S. Bach's *Prelude & Fugue in A*, BWV 536, Joseph Jongen's *Toccata*, Op. 104 and *Prière* (4 Pièces, Op. 37), Jeanne Demessieux's *Étude No. 5* ("Notes répétées"), Joseph-Ermend Bonnal's *Cloches dans le ciel*, Sigfrid Karg-Elert's *Wie schön leuchtet uns der Morgenstern*, Op. 65, Nos. 44 and 64, William Bolcom's *Jesus Loves Me* (Gospel Preludes), and Louis Vierne's Final from *Symphonie No. 6*, Op. 59.

"It's a French-leaning program," Tan said. "The core is quite Romantic. One of the unusual pieces is from a set of three tone poems by Joseph-Ermend Bonnal, who succeeded Charles Tournemire at Ste-Clotilde in Paris. It's inspired by scenery from the Basque region and sounds like Debussy. I'm playing the last movement, 'Bells in the heavens,' a nice toccata-like closer for the first half. I'm always in search of obscure but good pieces."

Tan noted that Romantic organ music is dearest to his heart. "I just like exploring colors on the organ and trying to find smoothness of transitions. I'm ending with the last movement of Vierne's Sixth Symphony. I've played it for some years, but I'll let it rest for a while, and every time I come back to it I find something new in it. There are just so many notes, new ways to phrase things and make it more exciting. And so many sharps — even in the pedals. At the very end, Vierne writes a couple of pages of B-major scales running up and down the pedalboard."

Tan's full-time plunge into music is a new experience for him. "It's my first music degree. I feel like I'm a little old to be in college again, but it's a good environment. Yale's Institute of Sacred Music interfaces both with the Divinity School and the School of Music. It's like a choose-your-own-adventure curriculum. If you really wanted to, you could angle all your courses toward liturgy and church music, but if you're not into that, you can take all music classes like counterpoint, composition, and rhythm studies."

Before matriculating at Yale last fall, Tan did post-doctoral research at the University of Michigan while playing organ on the side. I asked him to explain his scientific activities in layperson's terms. "My PhD involved studying the thermal-electric properties of small organic molecules — that's the most basic way to put it. And during my post-doctoral research, I was studying the thermal properties of polymer thin films — polymers are basically plastics. I haven't yet been able to find a way to combine science and music," he said, laughing, "but although the two are discrete, they seem to be complementary. Right now music is taking up all my time. I might switch back to a more balanced career, but who knows."

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