

AGO winner Aaron Tan in recital at St. John's Cathedral (Feb. 8)

by Daniel Hathaway



As part of his prize for winning the 2018 American Guild of Organists' National Young Artist Competition in Organ Performance, Aaron Tan won a period of professional representation by Karen MacFarlane Artists, Inc. That brought him to Cleveland's Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist on Friday evening, February 8, for a cleverly conceived and finely wrought recital on its 1947 Holtkamp organ, an event co-sponsored by the Cathedral and the Cleveland Chapter of the AGO.

Tan, a Toronto native with a PhD in materials science in his pocket and several years of post-doctoral research to his credit, is currently pursuing a Master of Music degree at Yale. His approach to the organ nicely combines the analytical and expressive sides of his personality — he's equally impressive in technique and aesthetics.

He began with charmingly witty remarks delivered side-saddle on the gallery organ bench, projected on a large screen in the crossing, then began his recital with a searching, introspective performance of J.S. Bach's *Prelude and Fugue in A*, BWV 536, not on a *plenum*, but using only unison and 4-foot stops.

Tan calmly paced Joseph Jongen's *Toccata*, Op. 4 while preserving its virtuosic character, and followed that with Jongen's meditative *Prière* from Op. 37.

The organist's superb pedal technique came into play in Jeanne Demessieux' *Étude No. 5*, nicknamed "Notes répétées" for quite obvious reasons.

He ended the first half with a quasi-Debussian toccata, Joseph-Emend Bonnai's *Cloches dans le ciel* from his suite of Basque impressions.

Perfectly describing 20th-century German composer Sigfrid Karg-Elert as "Bonsai Reger," and noting that with the next three pieces he was making a nod toward the season of Epiphany, Tan began part two with two settings of *Wie schön leucht' uns der Morgenstern* from the chorale preludes of Op. 65. Then he launched into a festive transcription by Joel Hastings of the "Farandole" from Bizet's *L'Arlésienne Suite No. 2* (incorporating a Provençal carol, "The March of the Three Kings.")

William Bolcom's bluesy "Jesus loves me" from *Gospel Preludes* set up a blazing finale: the last movement of Vierne's Sixth Symphony (a piece that Tan noted was inspired by cabaret and burlesque). Tan's easy virtuosity even in the face of crazy textures and up-and-down B-major pedal scales was a marvel to behold.

Throughout his program, Aaron Tan made a deep exploration of the colors of the Cathedral organ and registered the music with fine attention to volume contrasts. This recital was easy on the ear but loud when it needed to be. Perhaps the recitalist might have gone out on a limb a bit more often and taken a few more risks, but it's terrific to hear especially French music played with such clarity and precision.

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