

Organist Emmanuel Culcasi at Cleveland Museum of Art (Mar. 31)

by David Kulma



The young award-winning Frenchman Emmanuel Culcasi is the most recent organist to set ablaze the thousands of pipes of the Cleveland Museum of Art's McMyler Memorial Organ. His program on Sunday afternoon, March 31 in Gartner Auditorium focused on light and included works by the great French organist Louis Vierne, who gave

a recital on the instrument in March of 1927 when it was still located in the Museum's Armor Court.

Culcasi has all the features of a young organ virtuoso: dexterity of fingers and feet, rhythmic precision, intelligent juxtapositions of color, and forward-moving tempos that keep organ favorites brimming with life. After finishing school in 2017 and winning a major organ competition last May, this season marks his first musical trips across the Atlantic.

He opened with Bach's *Fantasia and Fugue in g*, BWV 542, playing with an imposing sense of drama, and aptly choosing stops to contrast the brighter and calmer moments. The Fugue was an astounding spectacle: his feet handled the elaborate theme with ease. He made the music clear and jovial as he drove through all its complex wanderings.

His closing work was Jean-Charles Gandrille's *Je suis la lumière du monde*, commissioned for the 2018 Jean-Louis Florentz International Organ Competition. Basing his piece on the well known verse from the Gospel of John — "I am the light of the world" — Gandrille crafted a dance-oriented celebration of happiness through Jesus. Similar in spirit to Olivier Messiaen's ecstatic religious music, Gandrille combines off-kilter rhythmic ostinatos with a minimalist-inspired sensibility, beginning with

towering staccato chords and ending with complex, celestial harmony. Culcasi brought a sure hand to this delightful work, managing its complicated rhythms fluidly.

Another living French organist-composer, Valéry Aubertin was represented by his astronomical *Sonatine pour les étoiles*. Its three short movements focused on the stars take great advantage of the color palette of the organ to create a creepy yet playful sci-fi atmosphere. Its high register clusters, pointillistic notes, and distant pedal tones show how close the organ can get to modernist electronic music.

The afternoon also included two preludes on the chorale “Schmücke dich, o liebe Seele” (“Deck thyself, my soul, with gladness”). Brahms’ setting from Op. 122 was lovingly chaste, while the more elaborate Bach — BWV 654 — featured Culcasi’s impressively fast trills and a tidy handling of the texture while keeping the chorale tune above the fray.

Culcasi also included two light-focused pieces from the Second Suite of Vierne’s *24 Fantasy Pieces*. “*Hymne au soleil*” and “*Clair de lune*” beautifully showed the contrasts available in Vierne’s late Romantic tonal world. Culcasi played the hymn with a fierce, forward-moving boisterousness, while “*Clair de lune*” was a calming, time-distilling force.

And like Vierne himself in 1927, Culcasi finished with a commanding performance of the eternal organ encore: Charles-Marie Widor’s “Toccata” from his Fifth Organ Symphony.

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