

## **Ars Organi at St. Paul's: Erik Suter (Oct. 18)**

by Timothy Robson



Ars Organi II, a multi-week series of organ recitals and lectures at St Paul's Episcopal Church in Cleveland Heights, came to an end last weekend. Audiences had been treated to new music for saxophone and organ with Noa Even and St. Paul's organ mastermind Karel Paukert, followed by a weekend tribute to the great Austrian organist and pedagogue Anton Heiller, including brilliant recitals by two of his former students, Jay Peterson and Christa Rakich.

On Friday evening, October 18, organist Erik Suter played a stunning program of 20th-century French music. Suter, the former organist at Washington Cathedral, abruptly changed his career path some years ago, and now is a pilot with Southwest Airlines. He continues to concertize frequently, and as this concert demonstrated, his playing continues to be at the highest level both technically and musically. With mostly familiar works by Dupré, Duruflé, Tournemire, Langlais, and Alain, Suter gave a representative survey of the Parisian school of performance and composition through the mid-20th century.

The towering achievements of Marcel Dupré, successor to Charles-Marie Widor at St-Sulpice, were represented here by his early *Prelude and Fugue in B*, Op. 7, No. 1. Suter played the typical French toccata figurations of the prelude and the jagged fugue subject with aplomb, at a staggeringly quick tempo with nary a slip. His registrations on the Holtkamp organ were stylistically appropriate throughout the program. He focused on the organ's clear principals and flutes, adding reed stops for color and solo passages, and brilliant mixtures judiciously at major climaxes. Altogether he convincingly replicated the sounds of 19th-century Cavallé-Coll organs that would have been known to all of these composers.

Maurice Duruflé's compositional output was small, but each work is a finely polished jewel. Suter played the early *Scherzo*, Op. 2, and closed his program with the monumental *Suite*, Op. 5. The composer studied with Charles Tournemire and absorbed his mentor's love of Gregorian chant. Chant is never far away in his compositions, but neither is the influence of Debussy. The *Scherzo*, dedicated to Tournemire, is at times lushly impressionistic, but with an underlying agitation. Erik Suter is one of today's leading exponents of Duruflé's organ music. His performance had the give and take required to make the music come alive.

Charles Tournemire succeeded César Franck at Ste-Clotilde in Paris. Tournemire espoused devout mystical Roman Catholicism, and Gregorian chant is omnipresent in his works, at least by influence if not by actual quotation. One of the greatest improvisers of his day, he recorded five of his extemporized works in the early days of commercial recording, and Duruflé transcribed and published all five.

On Friday, Suter played the improvisation on *Victimae Paschali*, and although Duruflé's compositional fingerprints are on the score, the piece still conveys Tournemire's rhapsodic style, its chant influence sometimes stretched to dramatic and dissonant lengths. Suter's performance was thrilling, perhaps the best I have ever heard of this virtuosic showpiece. From beginning to end, there was no letup in the tension.

Jean Langlais, another of Tournemire's protégées and his successor at Ste-Clotilde, was a highly prolific composer and skilled improviser. Suter played one of Langlais's most attractive works, the short "Cantilène" from *Suite brève*. Its modal melody resembles a melancholy folk song or lullaby, its tune developed and decorated. Suter displayed the organ's soft flutes and reeds during the various kaleidoscopic permutations of the melody.

The one relative rarity on the program was the "Scherzo" from Jehan Alain's *Suite*. After a slow introduction, the tempo turns fierce. During a momentary relaxed passage, a mysterious melody appears above a repeated passage on flute stops. Alain's music is highly original and colorful, and we can only speculate as to the musical roads he might have traveled had he not been killed in World War II. Suter's fluent playing was persuasive.

The organist gave Duruflé's three-movement *Suite*, Op. 5 an authoritative reading to end this recital. The opening "Prélude" was riveting, with its inexorable plodding momentum, huge crescendo, climactic chords, and retreat to silence. The "Sicilienne" rocked gently and harmoniously, while the devilishly difficult final "Toccata" packed its dissonant wallop. The "Toccata" often overstays its welcome, virtuosity trumping its

musical substance, but Erik Suter gave it his all, creating a brilliant ending to an outstanding recital.

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