

Organist Monica Berney to play solo recital at Trinity Cathedral November 6

by Daniel Hathaway



“I try to design programs for non-organists,” Monica Berney said in a telephone interview from Washington, D.C. earlier this week. “The idea that everyone wants to hear the old warhorses they learned in college is just not that interesting to me. I want to play programs for people.”

At Trinity Cathedral on Monday, November 6 at 7 pm, Berney will make use of both the Cathedral’s 1977 Flentrop organ and its 2022 Skinner / Aeolian-Skinner / Mueller instrument in a program largely devoted to transcriptions of works originally written for other musical media.

I caught up with the Curtis Institute and Rice University graduate on her cell phone during a busy week at her job at St. Paul’s, K Street that included a music gala and extra services for All Saints and All Souls Days. I led off with some questions about her Cleveland program.

Daniel Hathaway: You’ve put together a very entertaining program for Cleveland. It includes three of Brahms’ Opus 118 Sechs Stücke für Klavier, which are originally piano works. Organists who lament that the composer didn’t leave us more works for their instrument should be very interested to hear these pieces.

Monica Berney: The Brahms pieces actually work brilliantly on the organ. The *Ballade* is a typical march which could have been conceived for the organ. The first intermezzo is maybe the trickiest to make work, but on the organ you can crescendo from almost nothing to quite a lot and then back down again. I think it adds a whole new dimension.

DH: Tell me about the Rondo from Nikolai Kapustin’s Sinfonietta, Op. 49.

MB: Kapustin was born in Ukraine. I had a friend in college who went through a big Kapustin phase. He practiced in the hallway where all the organs were located. So the strains of this jazzy, classical something-or-other would always be wafting from that hallway. I'm sure you've looked him up — he didn't think of himself as a jazz composer or a jazz pianist in the slightest.

During COVID, I had the idea to arrange some of his compositions and went looking for the right thing, because he primarily wrote for the piano, and there's just a lot of textures he uses that don't quite translate so well to the organ. But this piece was originally scored for a chamber orchestra, and it's more a layering of melodic and then rhythmic components. So I said, oh, this is kind of perfect. So I started with what I think is the most interesting movement, the final one, and intended to arrange the whole thing.

Sitting in my pajamas in front of Sibelius a couple days later, I hit print. Then I brought it to the organ and thought, holy jeez, this is really hard. So that's where my grand plans ended. I've enjoyed playing the Rondo. There's a lot of octave doubling, which works really well on the organ. I think it's super compelling. It's kind of like a sorbet flavored with tahini that I think every program needs.

You know, I wish I had powered through and arranged the whole thing, because now I just don't have the time. But then again, I probably wouldn't have time to be practicing it, either.

DH: Let's talk about the Jean Guillou arrangement of the Tchaikovsky Symphony No. 6 Scherzo.

MB: There's something exciting about it that makes you want to stand up and scream. Tchaikovsky is an unbelievable composer whose music you don't usually get to play as an organist. I love this symphony, so I went to see who had made an arrangement of it. Guillou had made this one in such a way that I think he didn't want anyone to actually play it. Every other measure is in tenor or alto clef, there are lots of thirds across the hands in a bad way, and if you compare this organ arrangement with any other, there's something like 40% more notes.

The Scherzo scurries along for a while, and then turns into a march that shows the power of the organ, and that just works really well. So it too is really hard, but I just want to play music I love, so that's how we've arrived at the whole program.

DH: Speaking of music you love, I love Karg-Elert.

MB: Oh good. Me too!

DH: He sometimes sails kind of close to the wind in his harmonies, but he's got such a strong sense of structure.

MB: I started off loving Reger in college, and I kind of found my way via Reger to Karg-Elert. I think he uses more color in a way that Reger was too stodgy to let himself do. The *Sinfonische Kanzone*, Op. 85, No. 2 is not well known at all and it's really kind of hard to make heads or tails of much of it, which I also find really attractive.

It begins with these dramatic outbursts, much like Reger, then goes on to more contemplative yearnings. There's an angular song in the Canzona, which passes between hands and feet. Then a passacaglia builds and builds and plays with color in really creative ways. And then a fugue, which is quite deliberate.

I think when Karg-Elert writes fugues, he tends to have a bit of a twinkle in the eye. This one is a little more probing and drives forward in a way that is really seeking an answer as opposed to playing with a few thoughts. But it's a really big work that shows the whole range of the organ in addition to all its coloristic possibilities.

DH: I love number three from that set with the violin solo, and I'm amused by Karg-Elert's suggestion that the female chorus might be positioned inside the swell box!

The piece we haven't talked about is Bach's arrangement of Vivaldi's Double Violin Concerto that begins the program. I assume you're playing that on the Flentrop.

MB: I don't think of Bach as an arranger, but I think it shows his mastery in all things. And it's an obvious choice for the Flentrop.

DH: What got you started on the organ?

MB: One summer when I was in high school in a small town in Western Massachusetts, I had become friends with a music teacher at my Catholic school. She had heard about a plea to round up some young people and send them off to a Pipe Organ Encounter because enrollment was really poor and they might have to cancel.

There was a digital instrument at our church, but I had never heard a pipe organ. But when she told me about this program, in the big city of Worcester, I said, what the heck. There was a swimming pool, it was a sleepaway camp, and I had nothing better to do. So I borrowed her organ shoes, which were a size and a half too small, and off I went. I sat there, listening to kids my age doing amazing things on the organ. I remember nodding my head, thinking to myself, I could be good at this.

DH: Well, Monica, I won't keep you any longer — you've got a very busy week.

MB: We're doing the Alfred Desenclos *Requiem* this Thursday, which I'm very excited about. It's been a marathon this week. St. Paul's is a busy place. I feel very lucky.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mwxLTEIhvRY&t=113s>

Monica Berney (maiden name: Monica Czausz) plays Tchaikovsky's Scherzo from Symphony No. 6 ("Pathétique"), transcribed by Jean Guillou, at Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas. Holding the distinction as the largest organ in Texas, the 191-rank Casavant Frères Ltée pipe organ is named after the late Van Cliburn's mother, Rildia Bee O'Bryan Cliburn. To learn more about the instrument, visit: <https://pipeorgandatabase.org/organ/4...> <https://broadwaybc.org/music-worship/>

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