

**Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes**  
**Overture Concert Organ Series No.3**  
**March 15, 2022**  
**J. Michael Allsen**

Our third Organ Series concert features the dynamic Isabelle Demers in a program of six works. She begins with a transcription of Mendelssohn's grand fugal overture to the oratorio *St. Paul*, and a well-known work by British composer Henry Walford Davies. The first half concludes with a new (2019) organ work by French-Canadian composer Rachel Laurin. After intermission, Demers plays a transcription of the fiery *Sinfonia* to Bach's *Cantata 146*, and a set of showpieces for pedals by Charles-Valentin Alkan. The finale is a set of excerpts from Stravinsky's ballet *Petrushka*, transcribed by Demers.

**Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)**  
***Overture to "St. Paul" (arr. W. T. Best)***

In 1829, Mendelssohn conducted Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* at a concert of the Berlin Singakademie. The old cliché about Bach being "forgotten" in 1829 is not really true, but he was certainly not as famous as his contemporary, Handel, and his sacred vocal works were rarely performed. The *St. Matthew Passion* had not in fact been performed since Bach's death in 1750. It is clear, however, that Mendelssohn's revival of the *Passion* and of Bach's sacred cantatas helped to spark a renewed interest in Bach's music that continues today. His interest in Bach, and in the oratorios of Handel, also had a profound impact on Mendelssohn the composer. When he completed his own first oratorio, *St. Paul*, in 1836, it was full of homages to Bach, including his use of Lutheran chorales to mark major divisions in the story. Though it was commissioned in 1832, Mendelssohn did not begin work on *St. Paul* until 1834, finally completing it a year and a half later. The oratorio had a successful German premiere in Düsseldorf on May 22, 1836, and it was heard in English translation in London in 1837. It remained popular in Germany, England, and America throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Its libretto, largely by Lutheran pastor and Mendelssohn family friend Julius Schubring, begins with the martyrdom of St. Stephen. It then dramatizes the major events of the saint's life: the conversion of Saul (thereafter known as Paul), his missions, and his martyrdom in Rome.

Though it is overshadowed today by his second oratorio, *Elijah* (1846), *St. Paul* is a fine dramatic work. It begins with a striking overture, heard here in a transcription by the 19th-century English organist William Thomas Best. The main

theme of the overture is one of the most familiar Lutheran hymn-tunes, *Wachet auf (Sleepers Wake)*, written by Philipp Nicolai in about 1599. This chorale reappears later in the oratorio, most notably at one of the great moments of the drama: Saul's sudden blindness and the miraculous restoration of his sight. In the overture, the melody appears as a kind of prelude, before Mendelssohn launches into a stern, minor-key fugue. (Best was a master of pedal technique, and his arrangement of the fugue includes some flashy writing for the feet.) Fragments of the chorale are worked into the texture, emerging more clearly near the end, after a triumphant shift to A Major.

**Henry Walford Davies (1869-1941)**  
***Solemn Melody* (arr. John T. West)**

British organist and composer Henry Walford Davies studied at the Royal College of Music, before embarking on a long and successful career. In 1898 he began a 25-year tenure as organist and choir director at London's Temple Church, where he gained a national reputation as a soloist and teacher. After a few years of university teaching, Davies took up a position in 1927 at St. George's Chapel, Windsor—the home church of the British royal family. (Davies had been knighted in 1922.) At the same time, he also became well-known for his musical radio broadcasts on the BBC. In 1936, Davies succeeded Edward Elgar as Master of the King's Music, the highest musical appointment granted by British royalty: roughly equivalent in status to the Poet Laureate. His most famous work, *Solemn Melody*, was composed in 1908 as a work for organ and string orchestra, but it is heard most frequently in arrangements for solo organ. The version heard here was published in 2004 by the American organist John West. Its main theme is a broad, dignified, and distinctly “English-sounding” melody, heard once unadorned, and then in a grand, fully-harmonized variation.

**Rachel Laurin (b. 1960)**  
***Sonata No.1 for Organ, Op.91***

Like Isabelle Demers, Rachel Laurin was born in Québec. After studies at the Conservatoire de musique du Québec à Montréal, she took a position as organist at the Oratoire Saint-Joseph du Mont-Royal, Montréal—the famous basilica that stands at the highest point in the city—and later became an improvisation instructor at the Conservatoire. Laurin maintains a busy, international career as a soloist, and is a prolific composer: she has written hundreds of works for organ and other solo instruments, voice, choir, and orchestra. Her *Sonata No.1* was commissioned by Robert Holmes from Vancouver, British Columbia in memory of

his wife Maureen who died in 2017. It was completed in 2019, and Laurin played its premiere in Halifax, Nova Scotia, on July 11, 2019, at a festival of the Royal Canadian College of Organists.

Laurin provides the following description of the *Sonata No.1*: “The three movements describe the states of mind that one lives through after having been informed of a grave illness. The first movement, *Allegro agitato*, expresses fear, revulsion, hope and confusion. The second [*Berceuse mariale (Marian Lullaby)*], offers some respite which leads to the sense of serenity, acceptance, and abandon of a child in its mother’s arms. Finally, the *Carillon-Toccata* is a celebration of life, both as lived here and to come, including an expression of the exuberance felt by one’s soul, liberated from a suffering body.

“Robert Holmes had suggested that the *Ave Maria* associated with the village of Lourdes (France) be included in the *Berceuse*, hence the *Mariale (Marian)* in the title of the movement. He had also requested that the Gregorian hymn *Salve Regina* appear in a brilliant toccata to close the *Sonata*. This was indeed done but, in addition and as a surprise for Mr. Holmes, the composer also introduced the principal motive from Louis Vierne’s *Carillon de Longpont* when she found out that this work had been played as the recessional piece at the couple’s wedding.”

### **Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)**

#### ***Sinfonia from Cantata No.146 (arr. Marcel Dupré)***

Bach did not invent the Lutheran church cantata, a multi-movement setting of sacred texts, but his cantatas are the finest examples of the form. Though he composed cantatas throughout his career, the great bulk of them were written during his first few years in Leipzig, where he arrived in 1723 to take the position of Kantor at the Thomaskirche—the head church musician in the city. Among many other duties, Bach was expected to produce a cantata every week. The cantata was viewed as an important addition to both the selected Bible verse and the hymn of the day, and Bach’s texts are often drawn from these sources, as well as sacred librettos assembled by Lutheran pastors and Bach himself. In his first years at the Thomaskirche, Bach composed no less than *five* annual cycles of cantatas, mostly newly-composed: each cycle including some 60 works, one appropriate to each Sunday of the Church Year, and special cantatas for Christmas, and the main feasts of Advent and Lent. Of these 300 works, nearly 200 survive.

This vast body of music is represented here by the *Sinfonia* from the cantata *Wir müssen durch viel Trübsal*, BWV 146 (*We must pass through great sadness*). Bach

composed this work in either 1726 or 1728, for the third Sunday after Easter. It begins with a sizeable *Sinfonia* scored for flute, two oboes d'amore, tenor oboe, organ, strings, and basso continuo. Bach frequently recycled his own music, and this *Sinfonia* shares most of its music with the first movement of his slightly later harpsichord concerto in D minor, BWV 1052. (Both of these works were turned based upon a now-lost violin concerto by Bach.) The *Sinfonia* is heard here in an arrangement for solo organ published in 1941 by the eminent French organist Marcel Dupré (1886-1971). Dupré was particularly devoted to Bach, and published a complete edition of Bach's solo organ works that is still widely used today. He also published several arrangements like this one. The *Sinfonia* begins with a fierce *ritornello*: a phrase that reoccurs throughout the piece as a kind of musical touchstone interspersed with virtuoso passages for the organ. The ferocious forward movement of this piece relaxes only once near the middle for a brief cadenza. It ends with a final statement of the *ritornello*.

**Charles-Valentin Alkan (1813-1888)**  
**Excerpts from *Twelve Etudes for the Feet***

The son of a music teacher in the Jewish quarter of Paris, Charles-Valentin Alkan was certainly among Paris's most phenomenally talented—and enigmatic—musicians in the 19th century. An amazing prodigy as a child, Alkan made his public debut on violin at age 7, and, after enrolling at the Paris Conservatoire, won its prestigious first prize in piano at age 10. He also won the Conservatoire's first prize in organ at age 21. As a young man, Alkan was widely known as a piano virtuoso, and recognized as the peer of Liszt and Chopin. When he was about 35, however, Alkan became a recluse, emerging from his apartment in Paris occasionally—sometimes at intervals of several years—to perform at small private recitals. He continued to compose, and became fascinated with the pedal piano: a now largely-forgotten instrument that added a pedalboard and additional bass strings to a standard piano. He wrote many works for this instrument, including the etudes heard here. Though Alkan did perform more regularly in the 1870s, he otherwise remained a kind of hermit, devoting increasing amounts of his time to studying and translating the Hebrew Talmud.

Anyone who has ever taken a lesson on an instrument knows what an etude is: a piece that is used to work on a specific aspect of playing or a particular technical skill. These are usually fairly pedestrian pieces, never intended to be heard outside of the studio. But Alkan's piano etudes are fully-realized works of considerable virtuosity. His *Three Grand Etudes* (1838), *Twelve Etudes in Major Keys* (1848), and *Twelve Etudes in Major Keys* (1857), remained some of his best-known works,

and are regularly performed as concert pieces. His last set of etudes was published in about 1869. Its full title translates as *Twelve Etudes for Organ or Pedal Piano for the Feet Alone*. These are adventurous and experimental works composed at a time when most writing for pedals was fairly cautious. The *Etudes* are certainly useful in teaching: Marcel Dupré called them “the complete and indispensable foundation of pedal technique.” But they are also performed, as they are here, as concert works. *Etude No.7 (Allegro)* is a true virtuoso showpiece: aggressive chromatic lines, eventually played in thirds, alternating with three- and four-voice chords. There is a more gentle contrasting section in flowing triplets, a melody in the right foot supported by a countermelody in the left. The closing section combines the two ideas. *Etude No.6 (Adagio)* is more lyrical, with a melancholy and songlike main theme. There is a more passionate middle section before the main idea returns, now elaborately decorated. The etude ends with a short cadenza, and a final, haunting reference to the main theme. The capstone of the set, *Etude No.12 (Tempo giusto)*, is a *chaconne*, based upon a two-measure idea heard at the beginning. This pattern is played 40 times, as the basis for increasingly flashy variations that explore a host of textures and techniques, before ending in a grand upward flourish that covers the entire pedalboard.

### **Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)**

#### **Three Movements from *Petrushka* (arr. Isabelle Demers)**

In 1911, the Parisian public expected great things of young Igor Stravinsky. There was an ongoing craze for Russian music and ballet, fueled by the shrewd impresario Serge Diaghilev, who had brought Stravinsky to Paris two years earlier. Stravinsky’s *Firebird* (1909)—his first ballet score for Diaghilev’s dance company, the Ballets Russe—had been an enormous success, and by 1911, he was already well into work on the revolutionary score for *Rite of Spring*. According to his autobiography, his second work for the Ballet Russe, *Petrushka*, began as a sort of compositional “coffee break” between *Firebird* and *Rite of Spring*. *Petrushka* was a hit in Paris, when it premiered on June, 11, 1911, and again a year later in England. Diaghilev took the Ballets Russe on an extensive tour of the United States in 1916. This was the first exposure to Stravinsky’s music for audiences in New York City, Chicago, Milwaukee, Los Angeles, and many other American cities. Though some audience members (and many critics) were bewildered by this “ultramodern” score, *Petrushka* was generally well-received on this side of the Atlantic. (It’s a sad commentary on our country at this time to note that its music was actually much less controversial in America than the fact that a black character, the Moor, won out over the white *Petrushka*!)

Stravinsky's title character, Petrushka, is one of the stock characters of the puppet shows that were a feature of fairs in Russia, who takes on a tragic role. The scenario that Stravinsky and Diaghilev created is set at a Shrove-tide fair (Mardi Gras or Carnival in our part of the world) in St. Petersburg. The puppets—Petrushka, the Ballerina, and the Blackamoor—suddenly come to life. The ballet, which was partly done in pantomime, is a tragic love triangle between these three characters, in which Petrushka is killed by the Moor. At the close of the ballet, the Showman reassures everyone at the fair that Petrushka is merely a puppet, but when he is alone, Petrushka's ghost appears to make fun of him. The ballet ends as the Showman flees in terror.

Isabelle Demers plays three of her transcriptions from Stravinsky's score, beginning with the *Russian Dance*. This is the opening appearance of the three puppets, who dance a wild Russian *trepak* for the fairgoers. *Petrushka's Room* shows this miserable puppet in his miserable cell, cursing and mooning over the Ballerina, who eventually pays him a visit, and dances briefly with him, before leaving him alone. *The Shrove-tide Fair* is the ballet's opening scene. It shows the whirl of activity at the fair, as people gather around to see the Showman bring his puppets to life with a flute. Stravinsky's music for this scene is based upon at least one, and possibly several Russian folk tunes.

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