

Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
Overture Concert Organ Series No.1
October 19, 2021
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Welcome to the opening program of the 2021-22 Overture Concert Organ Series! In this concert, the Madison Symphony Orchestra's principal organist, Greg Zelek, performs four works, beginning with an arrangement of Elgar's beautiful *Nimrod*, from the "*Enigma*" *Variations*. Next is one of the most familiar works of Bach, the powerful *Toccata and Fugue in D minor*. Zelek then presents his own arrangement of a waltz by Satie. The closing work is one of the organ symphonies of the great French organist Widor: virtuoso music designed to use all of the sonic resources of a large concert organ.

Edward Elgar (1857-1934)

***Nimrod*, from *Variations on an Original Theme ("Enigma")*, Op. 36
arranged for organ by Jonathan Scott**

Writing to his friend August Jaeger in 1899, Elgar described a recently-completed composition: a set of variations that depicted thirteen of his musical and non-musical friends. Elgar incorporates several "enigmas" into this work. The first is the theme itself, which he labels "enigma." Each variation is titled according to the person represented, but their identities are hidden by his use of initials and nicknames. (Elgar himself soon gave away the secret identities, however.) He also states that there is another larger theme, which is never actually played, that nevertheless runs "through and over" the entire work. Elgar's biographers have expended reams of paper in pursuit of this mystery. Possible candidates proposed for the "larger theme" include: *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*, *God Save the Queen*, *Rule Britannia*, *Auld Lang Syne*, a theme from Mozart's *Cosi fan tutte*, and the major scale. It has also been suggested that this unplayed theme might be a non-musical concept such as friendship. The usually articulate Elgar was notably vague on this point. There is even the possibility that Elgar, whose sense of humor was well known to his friends and associates, was being deliberately obscure as a joke! The *Enigma Variations* was the first of Elgar's works to be widely heard, and it remains his most popular orchestral work today. It consists of a brief theme and fourteen variations: with the final variation a self-portrait.

The longest and most famous section of the piece is Variation 9, which Elgar titled *Nimrod*. The title is a labored pun on the name of August Jaeger, one of Elgar's closest friends: "Jaeger" in German means "hunter," and Nimrod was the "mighty

hunter” of the Book of Genesis. This movement is not a portrait of Jaeger’s forceful character, but instead depicts a fondly-remembered conversation between Elgar and Jaeger on the grandeur of Beethoven’s music. Elgar provides some reminiscences of the slow movement of Beethoven’s “Pathetique” sonata in the opening bars. There is a long tradition of excerpting this gorgeous, slowly-developing variation as a separate piece, and of arranging it for different media. Here, it is played in a lush arrangement for organ.

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)
Toccata and Fugue in D minor, BWV 565

Johann Sebastian Bach was known in his day primarily as one of Germany’s great organists—as a keyboard composer and a powerful improviser. It is ironic then, that there is some doubt that *the* organ work by Bach that nearly everyone knows today—the famous *Toccata and Fugue in D minor* heard here—is in fact by Bach. A little background... There is no original copy of the work in Bach’s handwriting, and the earliest surviving version was copied by another organist, probably after Bach’s death. This in itself is hardly unusual—most of Bach’s keyboard music survives only in copies by his sons or other musicians. Most biographers have assumed that this *bravura* work was one of the showy pieces a very young Bach wrote for his first important professional position, as church organist in Arnstadt, 1703-06. However, since the 1980s others have challenged the attribution of the work to Bach, noting that there are some technical crudities and other details that are inconsistent with Bach’s undisputedly authentic works—even suggesting that this later copy was an organ arrangement of a violin work. Biographers such as Christoph Wolff have countered that some of the unusual features in the work may in fact have been ingenious adaptations to the limitations of the organ Bach used at Arnstadt. All musicology aside, however, this work is now inextricably tied to Bach! There is a long tradition of adapting it for soloists and ensembles, beginning with Leopold Stokowski’s famous orchestral transcription of 1927. It is heard it here in the original organ version. The work begins with a free-form toccata—an improvisatory-style piece used as prelude. After a grand conclusion, the fugue begins with a complex and spiky subject. This is developed in intense counterpoint until the end, where there is a dramatic return to the texture of the toccata.

Erik Satie (1866-1925)

Je te veux

arranged for organ by Greg Zelek

The innovative and enigmatic Erik Satie was one of the most unorthodox composers of France’s “Belle Époque”—the period between the end of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871 and the beginning of World War I in 1914 that saw radical changes in music and all of the arts. Satie would spend his entire career in Paris. He would eventually become a success when he was in his mid-40s, when his innovative works were championed by Ravel and other younger composers. But for much of his career, Satie worked in relative obscurity, producing music that was unconventional in style, and often satirical in tone: his works include *Flabby Preludes for a Dog*, *Three Pieces in the Form of a Pear*, and *Sketches and Provocations of a Portly Wooden Mannequin!* He cultivated an equally strange personal image: his quirks included eating only white food and dressing every day in one of several identical velvet suits.

In 1887, the 21-year old Satie, who had dropped out of the Paris Conservatory, moved to Montmartre, the grubby Paris suburb that was the home of many of the musicians, artists, and poets who were leading the *avant garde*. Montmartre was also one of the centers of Parisian nightlife, and over the next several years, Satie scratched out a living playing piano in nightclubs, particularly in the cabaret shows of the Chat Noir (Black Cat). He also published a few popular songs in this period as a way to pay the bills. One of the singers Satie accompanied at the Chat Noir was Paulette Darty, known at the time as “the queen of the slow waltz”—a reference to songs that often had seduction as their theme. In 1897 Satie wrote the song *Je te veux (I want you)* for her, setting a steamy poem by his friend Henry Pacory. (It begins: “I understand your distress, dear lover, and I give in to your wishes. Make me your mistress. Wisdom is far away from us; no more sadness. I look forward to the beautiful moment when we will be happy. I want you.”) The song was published in 1902, and Satie later published it in various versions, including one for solo piano. This piano version is the source of Greg Zelek’s arrangement for organ. *Je te veux* was a song written for popular consumption, and there is nothing remotely *avante garde* about its music, aside from a few unexpected twists of harmony. The outer sections are based upon a simple, limpid waltz theme, and the middle section begins with slightly more agitated music that hints at the turbulent feelings expressed in the text.

Charles-Marie Widor (1844-1937)
Symphony No. 6 in G minor, Op. 42, No. 2

Charles-Marie Widor had a long career as one of France's greatest organists, beginning with his appointment at age 25 as organist at the church of Saint-Sulpice in Paris, a position he would hold for some 64 years. In 1890, he also succeeded César Franck as organ professor at the Paris Conservatory, where he would be a powerful influence over the next generation of French organists and organ composers. As a composer, Widor wrote four operas and a host of works for orchestra, chorus, and chamber ensemble, but it is his organ works that are known today. Particularly popular are his ten symphonies for solo organ. These are large multimovement works designed to exploit the vast range of timbres available on a new generation of large organs, pioneered in the 19th century by organ builder Aristide Cavaillé-Coll. The organ Widor played at Saint-Sulpice, rebuilt by Cavaillé-Coll in 1862, is widely considered to be the builder's masterpiece.

Widor's *Symphony No.6* is one of four organ symphonies he published in 1879 as his Opus 42. The composer played its premiere on August 24, 1878, at the inauguration of a magnificent new Cavaillé-Coll instrument installed in the Palais de Trocadero, a Paris concert hall. Its opening *Allegro* is among his more frequently-played works today. It opens with a thundering chorale theme that serves as the basis for a free set of variations. Widor's dense, sometimes intensely chromatic counterpoint throughout testifies to his devoted study of J. S. Bach. After the stormy opening movement, the *Adagio*, played on the organ's string and flute stops, is a quiet moment of reflection. The *Intermezzo (Allegro)* serves as the symphony's scherzo movement, with a fierce theme decorated by a wild countermelody. The central section is more lyrical, spinning out over a long-held pedal note, before the movement ends with a return to the opening idea. The *Cantabile* is built upon a gentle melody played on the oboe stop and varied above a quiet, chromatic accompaniment. The rousing *Finale (Vivace)* is a rondo built upon a forceful theme heard at the beginning, which alternates with other more rhapsodic ideas. It ends with a grand echo of the first movement's closing chord.