

Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
2022-23 Overture Concert Organ Series No. 1
October 3, 2024
J. Michael Allsen

We welcome the internationally-renowned soloist Paul Jacobs to open this season Overure Concert Organ Series. (Mr. Jacobs, I must add, was also was also the teacher of our own Greg Zelek at Juilliard!) We open with an organ sonata by Felix Mendelssohn. He was largely responsible for the revival of interest in J.S. Bach's music in the early 19th century, and this organ work contains deliberate references to the great Leipzig master. Next is a grand French work by Franck, his *Prelude, Fugue, and Variation*. Charles Ives improvised much the Variations on "America" he was when he was working as a church organist at age 16. This is a witty and sometimes uproarious take on this patriotic classic. Then, following a brief work by Bash himself, Mr. Jacobs tackles of of the largest and most challenging works in the solo organ repertoire, Franz Liszt's titanic *Fantasy and Fugue on "Ad nos, ad salutarem undam."*

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)
Organ Sonata No.1 in F minor, Op. 65, No.1

Felix Mendelssohn had such a busy (and lamentably short) career as a composer and conductor, that we tend to forget that he was also one of 19th-century Germany's great organists. He certainly had a pedigree: as a child, he studied with the studied with the eminent organist and composer August Wilhelm Bach, at that time organist of the Marienkirche in Berlin, and later Director of the Royal Institute of Church Music in Berlin. [Note: A.W. Bach was not directly related to J.S. Bach.] Mendelssohn played organs everywhere he went, most famously in England, where he is credited with popularizing the construction of larger pedalboards that could accommodate the pedal parts of J.S. Bach's music. In 1832, when Mendelssohn first visited London, Charles Edward Horsley, who would later study with Mendelssohn in Leipzig, noted that:

"I have heard most of the greatest organist of my time... English, German, and French, but no respect have I ever known Mendelssohn excelled, either in in creative or executive ability. And it's hard to say which is the most extraordinary, his manipulation or his pedipulation; for his feet were quite as active as his hands, and the independence of the former, being totally

distinct from the latter, produced a result which of the time was quite unknown in England, and undoubtedly laid the foundation of a school of organ playing in Great Britain which has placed English organists on the highest point attainable in their profession.”

On his second visit to England in 1837, he played Bach fugues and his own improvisations on the large instrument in St. Paul’s cathedral after an evensong service—apparently going overtime to the immense annoyance of the cathedral vergers, who expected the crowd—who were rapt by Mendelssohn’s playing—to disperse promptly at the end of the service. They finally cut the performance short: by forbidding the bellows-blower to pump the air needed for the organ to sound!

In 1844, a London publisher asked Mendelssohn for a set of organ voluntaries (“voluntaries” being short improvisatory-style piece used at the opening of Anglican services.) This seems to have been the spur for the composer to write his Opus 65: a set of six much more substantial multi-movement organ sonatas, published in 1845. They were advertised as *Mendelssohn’s School of Organ-Playing*, with the benefit of preparing organists for the study of Bach, and in fact all six contain masterful fugal writing. The *Sonata No. 1* opens (*Allegro moderato e serioso*) by building into a chromatic fugato. He then introduces the chorale *Gott will, dass g’scheh allzeit* (*What my God Wills is Always done*) quietly, on one manual, with thundering reponses, and then he proceeds to create a prelude on the chorale very much in the form of Bach’s preludes from the *Orgelbuchlein*...hardly surprising, as Mendelssohn was at the very same time preparing the *Orgelbuchlein* for publication. And, true to his penchant for pedipulation, this movement has is a very active part of the pedalboard! If the opening movement is all about Bach, the *Adagio* is all about Mendelssohn: it is a limpid and quiet piece that recalls the sound of his *Songs Without Words*. The *Andante recitativo* combines quiet recitatives and angry responses, eventually serving as a prelude to the final movement. He returns to Bach as the inspiration for the finale (*Allegro assai vivace*): this is a grand toccata, albeit one with some wildly romantic harmonies! Near the end he makes a reference to the fugato theme from the opening movement before a final keyboard-spanning flourish.

Cesár Franck (1822-1890)

Prelude, Fugue, and Variation, Op.18

The Belgian-born organist and composer Cesár Franck cast a long shadow over the organ music of 19th-century France. He began studies at the Paris Conservatory as

a teenager, but never completed his studies there. He eventually returned to Paris in 1845, securing a series of increasingly prestigious organ jobs that led eventually to his appointment as organist at the church of Sainte-Clothilde in 1858. In 1872, Franck secured the most influential organ position in France: he became organ professor at the Paris Conservatory, remaining there until his death in 1890. Though his career at the Conservatory was not without its controversies (Parisian musical politics of the day was a rough contact sport, particularly among his colleagues at the Conservatory.), Franck remained a popular teacher, and gathered a large and devoted group of students. Louis Vierne, Vincent D'Indy, and Ernest Chausson were among his more prominent students.

Like many of his organ works, the *Prelude, Fugue, and Variation* seems to have been inspired by the new style of large organ pioneered by the French builder Aristide Cavallé-Coll. This work was one of several he composed shortly after Sainte-Clothilde installed a new Cavallé-Coll instrument in 1859. It opens with a wistful *Prelude*, which develops a pair of melancholy ideas. A short and dark transitional passage leads to a *Fugue* that shows Franck's mastery of the form. The closing *Variation* brings together both references to Franck's gnarly chromatic fugue theme and the music of the *Prelude*.

Charles Ives (1874-1954) *Variations on "America"*

Charles Ives was the most original American composer of his generation—a man who created an intensely personal and thoroughly American musical soundscape in his works. Ives was born and raised in Danbury, Connecticut, the son of a bandmaster and musical experimenter who provided him with his earliest training. He attended Yale, where he studied with Horatio Parker., a staunch musical conservative of the Germanic school. Parker would have a strong influence on Ives, although the two had radically different musical perspectives. After leaving Yale, Ives moved to New York City to work as an organist, but by 1902 he had apparently given up on a musical career and began to work in the insurance business. (He was eventually one of the chief executives of the Mutual Insurance Company.) Most of Ives's music was completed by the time he was thirty, although he continued to tinker with his works for years afterwards. By the time he turned his back on a full-time musical career, Ives's music, which experimented with quotation, polytonality, atonality, free dissonance, mixed meters, and unique formal structures, was already far in advance of the works of Schoenberg, Stravinsky, or any other composer of his generation. Unlike many other *avant*

garde composers, however, Ives was not so much scorned as ignored. Most of his music remained unperformed and unknown until the 1940s and 1950s, when a younger generation of musicians discovered the works of this uniquely American genius.

America (My County 'Tis of Thee) was widely known as a patriotic song in 1891, Ives's *Variations on "America"* had a typically long gestation: he improvised the piece at an organ recital in Brewster, New York in on July 4, 1891, when he was just age 16, and soon wrote it down. Then in 1909 or 1910, he returned to the work, adding the interludes, and finally, it was edited for publication in 1949 by the American organist E. Power Biggs. Ten years after Ives's death, composer William Schuman scored the now well-known version for orchestra.

After a bravura introduction, full of humorous touches, Ives presents the theme quite formally, before launching into the first variation, which lays an extravagantly chromatic line above the tune. Though Variation II is not quite polytonal, it certainly has trouble deciding which key it is actually in! Then comes a short interlude that is polytonal: the left hand and foot are in one key and the right hand is in another. Variation III transforms the tune into a rather silly 6/8 march, and Variation IV is a ludicrous polonaise. After a short dissonant interlude comes Variation V, which Ives marks *Allegro—as fast as the pedals can go*. (In 1892, he described playing this as “more fun than playing baseball.”—and for Ives, that meant *a lot* of fun!) The variation starts normally enough with a decorative obbligato for pedals, but the pedal part soon starts to wander through other keys. The ending is hilarious: As the music become ever more polytonal, it reaches a maximum dissonance level and suddenly pauses, or a before a return to the figure of the introduction. The feet briefly attempt to hijack the tune for themselves, before the hands regain control (barely) for a powerful closing.

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Arioso from Cantata No. 156 (arr. Paul Jacobs?)

J.S. Bach's church cantatas are sources of wonderful vocal and choral music. But they also supply wonderful instrumental works as well. His cantata *Ich steh mit einen Fuss im Grabe, BWV 156 (I Stand with one Foot in the Grave)*, was composed for the third Sunday after Epiphany, probably during for his fourth annual cycle of cantatas, which would put its first performance date as January 31, 1729. (A “cycle” includes cantatas appropriate to each Sunday in the Lutheran

Church Year, plus additional cantatas for the Christmas and Easter season—a total of about 60 works. (Bach completed *five* of these—some 300 cantatas—during his first years in Leipzig!) Given the need to crank out a multimovement cantata once a week, it is certainly understandable that Bach recycled older works in his Leipzig cantatas. For the opening *Sinfonia*, he reached back to the lovely slow movement (*Arioso*) from a now-lost oboe concerto written when Bach had had served as Kapellmeister at the court of Cöthen (1717-1723). It has become one of Bach's most beloved melodies. In 1738, Bach reused the outer movements of this same phantom oboe concerto for his *Harpsichord Concerto No. 5, BWV 1056*. Because of this, together with the lyrical *Arioso* that survived as the opening movement of *BWV 156*, modern editors have been able to reconstruct the complete oboe concerto.

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Fantasy and Fugue on “Ad nos, ad salutarem undam”

Franz Liszt was the preeminent piano virtuoso of the 19th century, and the model for many pianists to follow. He was also an imaginative and ground-breaking composer, but as a young man, he was so much in demand as a soloist that he was allowed little time to develop his composing skills. Liszt's concert tours in the 1830s and 1840s were nothing short of sensational—contemporaries used the term “Lisztomania” to describe the frenzy surrounding his playing. He performed hundreds of concerts to packed houses throughout Europe, and produced for the most part compositions that focused on his own technical showmanship, rather than musical content. It was not until he settled in Weimar in 1848, taking a secure and stable job as music director to the Weimar court, that Liszt's music takes a turn away from these showy pieces.

In 1848, Liszt attended the premiere of Giacomo Meyerbeer's huge, five-act grand opera *Le prophète* in Paris and was deeply impressed. *Le prophète*, set against the background of Dutch religious upheaval in the early 16th century, is based upon the life of the Anabaptist leader John of Leiden. John was able to establish a religious state in the city of Münster, proclaiming himself “King of New Jerusalem,” before his eventual downfall and death by torture. Liszt studied Meyerbeer's score closely, and in 1849-50 completed a set of three *Illustrations du Prophète* for solo piano. Virtuoso transcriptions of music from popular operas were nothing new at the time—Liszt himself had written dozens of them in previous years—but the *Illustrations du Prophète* were built on another scale. This set, lasting nearly 40 minutes in total, very freely adapts Meyerbeer's music,

sometimes reordering and fragmenting themes to make new musical connections. In the winter of 1850, he completed what was essentially a fourth *Illustration* from the opera, his *Fantasy and Fugue on “Ad nos, ad salutarem undam”*—this one written not for piano but rather for organ. Liszt actually became interested in the organ during his Weimar years, at least partly inspired by a deep reverence for Bach—who had of course held the same the same job as Liszt in Weimar 135 years earlier. The *Fantasy and Fugue* was the first of some 45 works for organ Liszt would compose over the next 20 years. However, though Liszt was a phenomenal pianist, he was less skilled as an organist; in particular, he never seems to have mastered the pedals. The work was premiered by one of his students, Alexander Winterperger, at the dedication of a new organ in Merseberg Cathedral, on September 26, 1855.

The *Fantasy and Fugue* is an enormous virtuoso work, sprawling over some 765 measures, and lasting nearly half an hour. In the opera, the chorale *Ad nos, ad salutarem undam* (*Come to us, to the waves of salvation*) is sung by a trio of sinister Anabaptist priests, who will eventually have a hand in John of Leiden’s destruction. It appears in the opera’s first act, as the priests recruit peasants to start a religious rebellion. Meyerbeer apparently found the melody in a 17th-century hymnal. Liszt’s *Fantasy and Fugue* is laid out in three large sections, opening with a brief and dissonant introduction, before he introduces the rather creepy chorale melody. After a mysterious, atmospheric transition, Liszt begins a long, free development of this theme. After the music reaches a roaring climax, there is another quiet transition into the second large section (*Adagio*). This opens with a simple, unadorned statement of the melody, and moves through six calm variations. This section closes with an agitated and highly dissonant passage—Liszt makes extensive use of the whole-tone scale here—that leads into the *Fugue*. In keeping with the dimensions of the *Fantasy*, the *Fugue* is massive, some eight minutes long. This was the first time Liszt used a fully-developed fugue in his works, though he uses a thoroughly unorthodox version of this traditional form. The piece ends with a colossal, fiercely triumphant statement of the chorale.

Program Page Info

[NOTE: Here is everything, with the same composer spellings and titles as in the program notes. Also - NO intermission, correct? - Mike]

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Allegro moderato e serio
Adagio
Andante recitativo
Allegro assai vivace

Cesár Franck (1822-1890)
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Charles Ives (1874-1954)
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Moderato — Allegro — Vivace
Adagio — Allegro deciso
Fuga: Allegretto con moto