The Graduate Organ Recital of

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Saturday, November 21st, 2020, 2:00 p.m.
The Abbey and University Church of Saint John the Baptist
Collegeville, Minnesota
Program

15’  A Solis Ortus  (text on page 5)  Nicolas de Grigny
     [Allegro moderato]
     Fugue à 5
     Trio
     Point d’Orgue sur les Grands jeux

      Br. David Paul Lange, O.S.B., cantor

10’  Prelude and Fugue in C Major, BWV 547  J. S. Bach
     (1685-1750)

INTERMISSION

40’  Symphonie Romane, Op. 73  Charles-Marie Widor
     [Moderato]
     Choral
     Cantilène
     Final

(1844-1937)
The binding force in this recital program is the liturgical year. Each of these compositions was based upon church music to be used at certain times and on certain feastdays celebrating the life of Jesus Christ. The first half of the program is based upon the Christmas mysteries and the second half on Christ’s Resurrection.

The stained-glass window in the Abbey Church also depicts liturgical time, with the events surrounding Christmas and the early years of Jesus’s ministry on the left; the right represents the Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension. The image is visually held together in the center by God, sanctifying all creation and time.

Every composer featured today made his livelihood in church music. Each was devoutly religious, and these compositions give us a glimpse of how their piety pervaded their lives. They might have discovered, as I have begun to, how music can give voice to God’s love for us in ways that words alone cannot. Music and other art forms attempt to describe the sublime and the transcendent, but they also ground us in our bodily experience and bind us in community. It is my hope that today’s program can contribute to this spirit of community during these difficult times.

Nicolas de Grigny (1672-1703) might have been the most musically advanced composer in Baroque France, as seen by comparing his work to such celebrated contemporaries as François Couperin (1668-1733) and Louis-Nicolas Clérambault (1676-1749). His melodic development and intricate counterpoint—including even in the pedal parts—are unparalleled in his era.
De Grigny grew up in a family of church organists. His father, grandfather, and uncles played in churches near his hometown of Rheims. At twenty-four years old, he began work as the organist for the Notre Dame Cathedral in Rheims, a position which he held until his death seven years later.¹

The hymn *A Solis Ortus* originally spanning Jesus’s birth to Resurrection in 23 stanzas.² By de Grigny’s day, it was only seven Nativity stanzas and a doxology, as it is to today. His variations on this hymn are the conclusion of his sole published work, *Premier livre d’orgue* (“First organ book” – 1699).³ This and the other hymns he set were well-known Gregorian chants, and many retain notoriety to this day. (Many Catholics are still familiar with *Pange lingua gloriosi* for Holy Thursday, for example.) His settings show well the practice of *alternatim* which flourished in French Catholic churches even to the nineteenth century. De Grigny’s *alternatim* compositions provided highly dignified settings for festive occasions, soon to become the norm for an “Organ Mass.”⁴

The first movement of *A Solis Ortus*, with the unequal rhythms of a French Overture, exposes the hymn melody in the pedals. Its balanced upward and downward motifs echo the paradox of the Creator taking human form. The second movement is a fugue of five voices. The subject of the fugue is based on the hymn melody, and the entry of each successive voice appears as a musical building block in the Lord’s earthly temple, the womb of his mother Mary. The third movement is a trio, two treble flutes against a weighty *cromorne* in the bass. The playfulness captures the feel of the infant Jesus at Bethlehem, content with a manger for a bed and farm animals for companions. The fourth movement is a grand procession over a pedal-point, giving appropriate weight to the doxology.

## A Solis Ortus

| 1. Cantor | 1. From lands that see the sun arise,  
To earth’s remotest boundaries,  
The Virgin-born today we sing,  
The Son of Mary, Christ the King. |
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| 2. Organ | 2. Blest Author of this earthly frame,  
To take a servant’s form He came,  
That liberating flesh by flesh,  
Whom He had made might live afresh. |
| 3. Cantor | 3. In that chaste parent’s holy womb,  
Celestial grace hath found its home:  
And she, as earthly bride unknown,  
Yet call that Offspring blest her own. |
| 4. Organ | 4. The mansion of her modest breast  
Becomes a shrine where God shall rest:  
The pure and undefiled one  
Conceivèd in her womb the Son. |
| 5. Cantor | 5. That Son, that royal Son she bore,  
Whom Gabriel’s voice had told afore:  
Whom, in his Mother yet concealed,  
The infant Baptist had revealed. |
| 6. Organ | 6. The manger and the straw He bore,  
The cradle did He not abhor:  
A little milk His infant fare  
Who feedeth e’en each fowl of air. |
| 7. Cantor | 7. The heavenly chorus filled the sky,  
The angels sang to God on high,  
What time to shepherds watching lone  
They made creation’s Shepherd known. |
| 8. Organ | 8. All honor, laud, and glory be,  
O Jesu, virgin born, to Thee;  
All glory, as is ever meet,  
To the Father and to Paraclete. Amen. |

-Coeли Sedulius, ca. 5th c.; poetic translation by John Mason Neale (1818-1866) in *Hymnal Noted*, 1862
Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) certainly knew the work of de Grigny, for the former made a copy of the latter’s Livre to bring back to Germany. What de Grigny’s compositions contributed to the Catholic Church, Bach’s far surpassed for the Lutheran. His compositions based upon chorales easily number over one hundred.

During his tenure at Leipzig, which spanned three decades until his death there, Bach worked for the Thomaskirche (Church of St. Thomas) and some smaller nearby churches. It is during this time that he composed this Prelude and Fugue in C. The exact date of composition is uncertain. However, he seems to have drawn much of the material for this prelude from a cantata written in 1724: “Sie werden aus Saba alle kommen” (They shall all come forth from Sheba) for Epiphany Sunday. The text alludes to the three kings coming from afar to honor the newborn Christ. The prelude retains the pastoral feel of the cantata. Its motifs of rising eighth and descending sixteenth notes paint a picture of nighttime travel: the guiding star and the excited caravan.

The gentle lilt of a camel’s gait in the prelude gives way to awe, wonder, and majesty in the five-voice fugue. Unlike Bach’s other fugues, the subject here is only one measure long, and Bach aptly maneuvers it in every measure of the composition. The subject is the main melody of a fugue. It is presented solo to open the piece, and each successive voice enters with the same melody in a different key. Bach is a master at manipulating his fugue subjects, using these and other methods:

- Inversion – the subject is played upside-down (i.e. an inversion descends where the subject would ascend)
- Augmentation – the subject is presented at a slower tempo
- Stretto – multiple subjects and inversions sound at once, overlapping their melodies

The chorale began as a 16th-cent. Lutheran equivalent of Gregorian chant. Like chant, it was a single line of sung text (later to be harmonized by Bach and others). Unlike chant, the music had a steady meter or pulse.

5 Grigny. Primier livre, Introduction.
subject resembles the opening notes of the chorale “Allein Gott in der Höhe sei Ehr” (To God in highest alone be the glory), which serves as the Lutheran liturgical Gloria.\(^7\) For three-fourths of the movement, the hands carry all of the music. Then, it opens up with a great sense of expansiveness as the pedals begin to carry the melody at half-speed. In this, Bach’s vision of the unsurpassable glory of God is readily apparent. It comes to a great climax with four abrupt chords before cascading in a series of falling scales to the final cadence. Both movements end with only an eighth note, as though Bach is telling us he has nothing more to say. At the bottom of every composition, Bach placed his signature phrase – *Soli Deo Gloria* – To God alone be the glory.\(^8\)

Charles-Marie Widor’s (1844-1937) self-proclaimed lineage tracing back to J.S. Bach’s tutelage might be tenable at best,\(^9\) but his dedication as a church organist cannot be denied. He maintained a provisional contract at the Church of St. Sulpice in Paris for 68 years. When he took the job in 1870, he accepted responsibility for the largest organ in France.\(^10\)

Organ compositions during his first 50 years display a grand scale capable of utilizing fully the greatest instruments being built at that time, though these works still largely followed classical form. The organs of Aristide Cavaillé-Coll (1811-1899) were monumental in character, having the power to fill cathedrals to capacity and the colors to resemble a symphonic orchestra. Cavaillé-Coll and Widor sustained a lasting friendship, and each reveled in the other’s art.\(^11\)


In Widor’s maturity, he experiments with a more ethereal approach. His style becomes improvisatory and unpredictable, more chromatic and dissonant. Three large organ works from this period (Symphonie Gothique in 1895, Symphonie Romane in 1900, and Suite Latine in 1927) rely on Gregorian chant for exploring this new musical expression. The two Symphonies are musical depictions of church architecture (with the Romane being dedicated to St. Sernin in Toulouse), and key to this image is the music of the Church.

**Symphonie Romane** is a grand setting of Easter chant. Its predominant theme is the *Haec dies* Gradual from the Mass for Easter Sunday. This theme permeates the work almost in its entirety. Widor’s presentation of Gregorian chant is not strict. He explains in the preface to this work that the best way to express a nonmetrical idea in a metered musical idiom is to constantly present it in different ways.12 Many of his expositions of the chant happen above a pedal-point, where the performer is free to interpret the melody with liberty.

The first movement begins with a leaping toccata figure before introducing us to the chant for the first time in a solemn recitative. The toccata figure alternates with phrases of the chant until the two merge and spin out in his first variation. This is his overall structure for the movement: alternating

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recitative settings of the chant with metrical sections. In this way, he almost calls to mind *The Creation* of Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1809), in which this Classical composer takes up the Creation narrative from the opening chapters of Genesis. One could posit that there are enough distinct sections in Widor’s opening movement to span the six days of God’s creative work. *Haec dies, quam fecit Dominus: This is the day the Lord has made.*

If the first movement is a brilliant exposition of God’s creative energy, then the second is a mystical expression of the sabbath rest. Calm and gentle, the chant turns into the melody of a chorale (note Widor’s indebtedness to Lutheran terminology here). This setting is characteristically the same as four-part hymn settings common throughout the Western religious world. This is his most straightforward exposition of the chant in this work, with the same melody returning time and again, now with soft flutes, now accompanied by plump strings.

In the third movement, Widor departs from his writing so far, for a time abandoning *Haec dies* in favor of another chant. In this slow and lyrical section, his spiritual exploration follows a solo reed melody. Characterized by large, almost disconnected leaps and accompanied by some of Widor’s most chromatic harmonies, the melody floats suspended between heaven and earth until it settles on a familiar tune: an excerpt from the *Victimae paschali laudes* Sequence hymn for Easter Sunday. Three times we hear the same quoted passage, perhaps from verses two, three, and eight of the hymn: *Agnus redemit oves, Mors et vita duello, and Scimus Christum surrexisse* (The lamb has redeemed the sheep, Life and death in combat, and We know Christ is risen). This movement is other-worldly, evoking as much the sights and smells of solemn liturgy as it does the sounds.

In the finale, Widor returns to his original theme, *Haec dies*. He opens the movement with a fiery adaptation of the chant that recurs time and again throughout this movement. In addition, he goes on to layer the chant melody above or below this figure, using the organ’s powerful reeds and mixtures to draw attention to the chant. Halfway through the movement, a major shift occurs. The tone becomes dramatically hushed with a chaotic accompaniment, poised with Resurrection excitement. He initiates a four-page-long *crescendo* until the full organ proclaims the risen Christ.
with a dramatic show of homophonic chords accompanying what is to be the penultimate exposition of the chant melody. From there, he begins a gradual *decrescendo* to the end of the piece. He gives us a quiet reminder of the toccata figure from the first movement, following this with the final singing of the chant on the organ’s quietest stop. Having taken us through wonder, power, and majesty, Widor leaves us in breathless mystery, aware of the very air around us. All of this, the music and the stillness, is God’s creation and a gift to us.
In Gratitude

I wish to extend my thanks to all who have made today possible through their support, encouragement, and advice. First and foremost, this is a big thank-you to all of you in attendance, whether in person or online. Furthermore, a few people merit particular recognition:

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