

Program Notes

Composed in just one sleepless night in York during the Zeppelin raids of 1918, **Rhapsody No. 3 in C-sharp minor** (Op. 17, i) is the last in a set composed by Herbert Howells during World War 1. Howells dedicated this work to the then Organist at York Minster, Edward Bairstow. Best known for his choral output, especially for the Anglican liturgies, Howells' compositions include several sets of Canticles, Mass settings, sacred anthems, and organ works based on biblical texts. This Rhapsody is full of angst and fear, making heavy use of chromaticism. A turbulent opening at the extremities of the keyboard & pedals eventually calms to a serene middle section, before a resurgence of the opening material on full organ. Another calm sigh of relief is heard before a climactic ending, rising from dark and brooding chords, to the bright finish of C-sharp major.

A native of Little Rock, Arkansas, William Grant Still has over 200 works to his name, including five symphonies, four ballets, nine operas, to name but some of his vast and varied output. Notably, he was the first American to have an opera produced by the New York City Opera and the first African-American to conduct a major American symphony orchestra. **Reverie**, or daydream, is a quiet and reflective piece showing Still's distinctive use of harmony, and a simplicity of writing that allows such expressive freedom and interpretation, both in timing and choice of registration. The piece begins softly, quietly, and slowly builds before relaxing back to almost nothing.

Church bells beyond the stars takes its inspiration from the prolific seventeenth century poet, George Herbert. Cecilia McDowall's work is part of a triptych taking texts from Herbert's *Prayer (1)*. McDowall has won a reputation as one of the most prominent contemporary British composers of our time, with her own attractive and distinct style of writing. This work was Commissioned by the Edinburgh Society of Organists, and performed in 2013 by John Kitchen. We first hear distant church bells, all ringing at different times that leads us to an ethereal plane, before a mesmerizing rhapsodic section takes us to a bold and earth grounding statement of the opening material.

César Franck proudly sits as a truly pivotal figure in the French organ tradition. Through his association with the prominent French organ builder, Aristide Cavallé-Coll, they together developed the French Symphonic Organ, allowing a more Romantic aesthetic of composition. Aside from his position of *organiste titulaire* at newly completed church of St Clotilde (1858), and a professor of the Paris Conservatoire (1872), Franck's output as a composer is vast, including works for orchestra, chamber ensemble, and of course, the organ. **Chorale No. 1 in E major** is among the last works he wrote, in the year of his untimely death. The first in a set of three chorales inspired by the Chorales of J. S. Bach, although these are on a much larger scale, in E major opens with a beautiful and lyrical chorale in five voices. Three large scale variations soon follow, leading to a hurried and energized triplet section before the final, and loudest statement of the chorale theme.

The **Fantasia & Fugue in C minor** (BWV 537) by Johann Sebastian Bach, was composed during the composer's second period of residence in Weimar. Bach had two tenures in Weimar, a small town with a great cultural tradition. It was during this time that the *Orgelbüchlein*, concerto transcriptions, and other major works were written. The Fantasia begins very sparingly, with each voice slowly entering and taking flight. A repetitive 'sigh' motif pervades the entire movement with some imitative, and some free sections. Unlike many other works from this time, there is no cadenza-like passage to show off virtuosity. Moreover, this work is solemn and stately, surprisingly ending on a half cadence, allowing the faster moving fugue subject to take over.

Canadian organist and composer Rachel Laurin is known for her virtuosic and characterful pieces, with organ works representing the majority of her compositional output. **Humoresque** (Op. 77) is an etude dedicated to Marcel Dupré, a famed twentieth-century French organist and composer. This work, written for, and dedicated to Isabelle Demers takes its inspiration from the second movement of Dupré's *Suite Bretonne; Fileuse*. Laurin's perpetual motion work opens almost identically to the *Fileuse*, interspersed with quotes from Dupré's *B major Prelude & Fugue*, Op. 7.

We can likely say that the music of Louis Vierne was inspired by the great Cavallé-Coll organs that César Franck had helped envisage and design, in the 19th century, and the subsequent developments of the instrument. Indeed, it was Franck that recommended Vierne study the

organ at just aged 11. Vierne is most well known for his position at Notre-Dame de Paris, where he held the title of Organist, presiding over that great gothic space for almost four decades. Vierne's compositional output is predominantly for solo organ, comprising of six symphonies, and many character pieces. We see whimsical and fantasy, dark and mysterious, and everything in between in his writing. His music is perhaps indicative of his life, which was full of struggle & turmoil. The **Adagio** from *Symphonie No. 3 in F-sharp minor* (Op. 28, 1911) is a calm before the storm. Its use of the strings and foundation stops on the organ, brooding chromatic harmonies, and intense melody make this movement sound sonorous and incredibly grounded. The dark gives way to light as b minor is, over time, morphed into B major. The **Finale** of *Symphonie VI* (Op. 59, 1930) is virtuosic, full of life, jubilant, and exciting. It competes the last and darkest symphony of the six symphonies, and presents an unusual outburst of joy from its bright key of B major, syncopated melodies, driving bass line, and fast moving pedal scales for the last few pages.