

# THE VIERNE PROJECT

Church of St. Ann, Washington, DC

September 25, 2020, 7:30 p.m.

**Eric Plutz**, Organist

~ Program ~

## **Symphony No. 5** of Louis Victor Jules Vierne

(Born in Poitiers, October 8, 1870 – Died in Paris, June 2, 1937)

### VIERNE'S LIFE

From the beginning, Louis Vierne's life seemed to be marked by misfortune. He began study with a beloved uncle, who died when Vierne was just eleven years old. Then, at fifteen, his father's health declined, and within the year, he also died. Vierne had begun private study with César Franck, whom he revered, before being accepted into his studio at the Paris Conservatoire in 1890. Once there, however, he enjoyed just a few classes with him before Franck died. Deeply shaken once again, Vierne persevered and studied with Charles-Marie Widor, who replaced Franck as Organ Professor. Despite his near-total blindness Vierne often navigated Paris unassisted. One night in 1906, he stepped into a hole in the street that had become filled with water, severely injuring his leg, which, in turn, required him to relearn how to play the pedals of the organ. The discovery of his wife's adultery with a supposed friend (Charles Mutin, the dedicatee of his Second Symphony) led to a divorce in 1909, the same year his youngest son contracted tuberculosis (from which he died four years later at the age of ten). The year 1911 brought many deaths to those in Vierne's inner circle: both his mother and his mentor, colleague and friend, composer/organist Alexandre Guilmant succumbed to kidney failure and during the early years of World War I, both his brother René and his seventeen year-old son Jacques died in combat. Louis had reluctantly allowed Jacques to enlist and therefore his grief was even deeper, as he felt responsible for his son's death.

His professional life was one of triumphs, mostly, rather than tragedies: Widor chose Vierne as his assistant at both St. Sulpice (1892-1900) and at the Conservatoire. In 1900 Widor recommended him to fill in for the ailing organist at Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris. Soon after Vierne's first Sunday there, Eugène Michel Sergent (1829-1900) died after serving the Cathedral for 53 years. There were ninety-eight applicants for the position, and it was awarded to Vierne. During his tenure there, however, Vierne took a four-year leave of absence to save what little sight remained by traveling to a specialist in Switzerland, during which time his student Marcel Dupré subbed for him. Upon his return, their relationship was destroyed as Vierne objected to Dupré having used what he regarded as his exclusive title: *L'Organiste du Notre-Dame*: "The Organist of Notre-Dame" rather than *L'Organist à Notre-Dame*: "The Organist at Notre-Dame."

The last great late Romantic French organ composer, Vierne died while giving a recital at Notre-Dame Cathedral, on Wednesday, June 2, 1937. He performed his *Triptyque*, Op. 58, and an improvisation was to follow. Vierne pressed a pedal key, suffered a heart attack, lost consciousness, and died. At his funeral (held three days later at the Cathedral) the grand organ that he had played for 37 years remained silent.

## THE ORGAN SYMPHONY

Prior to, and following the French Revolution, a period of extreme secularization afflicted French organ music and the Catholic Church in France. During this period organist-composers offered up simple, transparent, yet flamboyant works, fulfilling their audience's demands for spectacular, decadent music. Gone were the dignity and grandeur of French organ music, with its traditional grounding in plainchant. Lines were blurred between the opera house and Sunday Mass, as frivolous entertainment was the norm, and organs were accessorized with contraptions and devices to assist in this circus atmosphere: imitations of birds, cannon fire and thunder. It was with the music of César Franck (1822-1890) that nobility returned to French Organ Music, and it was Franck who wrote the first organ "symphony," his *Grand Pièce Symphonique* (1863). This continuous work is in multiple sections, and even contains a 'reminder' of the various themes just before the finale (as does Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* Finale (1822-1824)). In this way and many others, Franck's *Grand Pièce Symphonique* resembles a symphony. Charles-Marie Widor, Franck's successor at the Paris Conservatoire, would take up the mantle of developing the organ symphony further, while also breaking through barriers between the worlds of church and concert hall, with his ten organ symphonies. Even though the first eight are principally suites, he employed symphonic structures, thereby deserving his role in the advancement of the form. Additionally, these first eight symphonies are particularly successful in the concert hall, having few religious associations. It is with his last two symphonies, *Symphonie Gothique* and *Symphonie Romane*, that Widor steps completely into the realm of the church, using Gregorian chant as the themes upon which each symphony is based. A contemporary of Widor, Alexandre Guilmant (1837-1911) (to whom Vierne's First Symphony is dedicated) wrote eight sonatas (two of which Guilmant later arranged for organ and orchestra, titling them symphonies) the later ones of which took on symphonic characteristics. Louis Vierne, as a student of both Widor and Franck, seemed destined to bring the organ symphony to its pinnacle with his six symphonies. He continued the growth and advancement of the form including the rarity of (any) liturgical connections, and both Marcel Dupré (1886-1971) and Charles Tournemire (1870-1939) wrote organ symphonies as well.

Between 1895 and 1930, Vierne wrote a total of six organ symphonies, following the lead of his teacher, Widor. The key of each follows from the previous (all are in minor keys): No. 1 is in D, No. 2 is in E, No. 3 is in F-sharp, No. 4 in G, No. 5 in A and No. 6 is in B. Symphonies 2, 4, 5, & 6 are cyclic – each symphony contains two themes upon which its movements are based. The themes can be modified, but the thematic material of each movement can be traced to indigenous material in that symphony – pillars that support the entire work. In Vierne's music, one can hear the influence of Widor's clear command of counterpoint and classical forms, as well as Franck's attention to melodic development. A third influence heard, especially in Symphony No. 5, is that of Richard Wagner (1813-1883), as shown by the chromatic harmony and treatment of the themes almost as leit-motifs rather than symphonic themes.

### **Cinquième Symphonie pour Grand Orgue, Op. 47 (1924)** (dedicated "à mon élève et cher ami Joseph Bonnet")

- I. Grave
- II. Allegro molto marcato
- III. Tempo di Scherzo ma non troppo vivo
- IV. Larghetto
- V. Final: Allegro moderato

In 1916, Vierne left Paris for Lausanne, Switzerland, to go under the care of an oculist there, hoping to save what eyesight he had left. The procedures were long and painful, and due to complications (including a six-month stint in a dark room) he did not return until 1920. Upon returning to his beloved Notre-Dame organ, Vierne found it in poor condition, and began raising funds for its repair by performing concerts, and ultimately a tour of the USA. As the music he performed on tour was drawn mostly from recent compositions, it is important to note that Vierne completed his Fifth Symphony just three years before he sailed for the United States. Many of these works were inaccessible to, and consequently a failure with, the US audiences. Therefore, the Fifth Symphony stands as his most advanced composition prior to the period when he may have modified his style in response to the US audience.

Canadian organist Lynnwood Farnam premiered the Fifth Symphony on December 21, 1925 at the Church of the Holy Communion in New York, New York. The Fifth Symphony is Vierne's longest symphony and represents his style's zenith, and the peak of the cyclic form. Due to its complexity and heavy chromaticism, Mr. Farnam performed the work twice at the premiere, to help the audience grasp the work.

Both themes on which the entire symphony is based are presented at the beginning of the **Grave**. The first notes of the symphony are Theme A, followed by a precursor of Theme B. Theme B is not heard in its entirety until bar 17 of the opening movement.

The image shows two musical staves. The left staff, labeled 'Theme A', is in the bass clef and begins with a quarter rest, followed by a descending diatonic line: G2, F2, E2, D2, C2, B1, A1, G1. The right staff, labeled 'Theme B', is in the treble clef and begins with a half-note chord (F#3, A3, C#4) followed by a chromatic ascending line: G#3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4.

Theme A descends and is diatonic (no accidentals). Theme B ascends and is chromatic. Both themes highlight the interval of a seventh. Due to this atypical interval and the chromatic character of Theme B, some parts of the symphony achieve an almost atonal quality. The two themes are linked: a profound, repeating question, and its short, chromatic answer – a noticeable reference to the opening bars of the *Prelude to Tristan and Isolde* by Wagner. In fact, this opening movement acts as a prelude to the symphony, which essentially begins with the *Allegro molto marcato*.

The vast second movement, **Allegro molto marcato**, is in sonata-allegro form: the first theme is the inversion of theme A, and the second theme is theme B. After a tortured development, theme A returns with full pedal, but Vierne is not finished. We hear the second theme again, this time one half-step higher than before (F-sharp Major), and then finally the last, wild measures before the conclusion.

The image shows two musical staves. The left staff, labeled 'Theme A, inverted', is in the treble clef and begins with a quarter rest, followed by an ascending diatonic line: G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5. The right staff, labeled 'Theme B', is in the bass clef and begins with a half-note chord (F#3, A3, C#4) followed by a chromatic ascending line: G#3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4. A 'Pedal' marking is present below the staff.

The Fifth Symphony is the only symphony of Vierne to receive a French review, that of Jean Huré, who wrote of the **Tempo di Scherzo ma non troppo vivo**, “The Scherzo is almost entirely chromatic and is a fiercely ironical, pitiless, satanic, and fantastic caricature of earlier scherzos by the same composer.” (*L’Orgue et Les Organists*, March, 1925.) One can hear a similarity to Paul Dukas’ *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice* (1897), which is understandable, as Vierne most likely would have known Dukas who replaced Charles-Marie Widor as Composition Professor in 1927. This sardonic essay is built on Theme B, and Theme A is found in the pedal twice, played by the Clarinet stop (see below). A scherzo is a musical joke, and this is a bitter one. The prancing thirds and chromatic wobbling taunt and snicker at us as if we had happened upon a haunted house full of dancing skeletons on Halloween.

Theme B

Theme A

A one-measure introduction, for pedals alone, serves as a modulation from the d minor Scherzo to the F-Sharp Major **Larghetto**, perhaps Vierne's most lavish composition. The main melody of this movement resembles Theme B, but appears to be a new melody. The tortured, chromatic middle section is where we find both Themes A and B (see below), although Theme A is transformed into a whole tone version, and inverted (upside down).

Theme B

Theme A, whole tone version, inverted

Even when the themes are not present, the interval of a seventh (their hallmark) permeates the movement. The sumptuous melody heard at the beginning returns at the end, played in the pedals, and at the conclusion of the work we hear a somewhat buried, but nonetheless visible, inverted version of Theme A played on the rarely requested *Cor de nuit*, a flute stop. This movement, in F-sharp Major, contains 89 double-sharps in its 89 bars. The middle section (28 bars), in E-flat Major (supposedly), contains none. It is interesting to note that, at the conclusion of such a complex and opulent creation, Vierne chose one of the most rudimentary compositional devices: a simple, seemingly eternal, 4-3 suspension.

The **Final** is the longest movement of any Vierne symphony, and it shows the composer as a master of development and form. The outline of the movement is as follows:

- A (Theme A in Major)
- B (Theme B in inversion)
- A' (Theme A, unaltered (minor))
- B' (Theme B in inversion)
- A (Theme A in Major, plus Theme B in inversion)

Shattering the tension of the previous movements, the Final begins with a carillon-like ostinato, reminiscent of the composer's famous *Carillon de Westminster*. At the return of this opening material (the "A" section), the ostinato is converted into triplets, increasing the tintinnabulation, and on the final page, these triplets are transferred to the pedals. Themes A and B are omnipresent, and the mammoth symphony concludes amidst skyrocketing scales and marcato chords, evoking enormous bells pealing.

Theme A (Major)

Theme B, inverted

Jean Huré, the French reviewer, wrote in part, "I promise Vierne to curse him bitterly if, with such talent, he should again write so perfect a work, to express such pain and anguish in the course of

forty-seven pages of very beautiful music.” He aptly sums up the essence of the work: “the victory of joy over pain.”

notes by Eric Plutz

## Eric Plutz

**Eric Plutz** is University Organist at Princeton University, where his responsibilities include playing for weekly services at the Chapel, Academic Ceremonies, and solo concerts, as well as accompanying the Chapel Choir in services and concerts. He coordinates the weekly After Noon Concert Series at the University Chapel, is Lecturer in Music and Instructor of Organ at Princeton University, and maintains a private studio. Also in Princeton, Mr. Plutz is Adjunct Assistant Professor of Organ and rehearsal accompanist for the Westminster Symphonic Choir at Westminster Choir College, and rehearsal accompanist for Princeton Pro Musica. In 2016 Mr. Plutz received the Alumni Merit Award from Westminster Choir College of Rider University. More information is available at [www.ericplutz.com](http://www.ericplutz.com).

Performances in 2020 will be dedicated to the complete organ symphonies of Louis Vierne, to honor the composer’s Sesquicentennial. One of a handful of organists to embark on such a venture, Mr. Plutz has secured performances at multiple venues, and in a variety of formats.

As an organ concert soloist, Mr. Plutz, who “performs with gusto, flair, clarity, and strong yet pliant rhythmic control (James Hildreth for *The American Organist*),” has accepted engagements in distinguished locations across the United States and abroad including Germany, Austria, Philadelphia (Verizon Hall, the Wanamaker Organ, Longwood Gardens), New York City (Avery Fisher Hall, Church of St. Ignatius Loyola, Cathedral of St. John the Divine), Washington, DC (Washington National Cathedral), and San Francisco (Grace Cathedral). He has been a featured artist at three Regional Conventions of the American Guild of Organists (2007, 2011, and 2019), the Annual Convention of the Organ Historical Society (2016), and at the 2010 National AGO Convention in Washington, DC, Mr. Plutz performed twice, in collaboration with two local groups. His playing has been broadcast on “With Heart and Voice,” “Pipedreams,” and “the Wanamaker Organ Hour.”

Eric has made four solo recordings on the Pro Organo label, [www.proorgano.com](http://www.proorgano.com). *French Trilogy* (on the Æolian-Skinner Organ at Byrnes Auditorium, Winthrop University, Rock Hill, SC), about which James Reed (*The Diapason*) wrote, “Plutz is a master craftsman... his performances are sensitive, emotional, stunningly accurate, and spectacularly musical... truly a world-class performance by a world-class musician,” and *Denver Jubilee* (restored 1938 Kimball Organ of St. John’s Episcopal Cathedral, Denver, CO), about which David Schwartz (*American Record Guide*) wrote, “...he understands, as would a great orchestrator, how to register the more orchestral side of the instrument...”

Two previous recordings are of the Princeton University Chapel Organ: *Musique Héroïque* and *Carnival*, about which Mr. Hildreth (TAO) writes, “Plutz’s extraordinary musicianship and dexterous command allow him to perform the most challenging passages (of which there are many!) with apparent ease. He performs the quiet pieces with poetry and grace.”

As an accompanist, Mr. Plutz has worked with many organizations, including The Bach Choir of Bethlehem, National Symphony Orchestra, Choral Arts Society of Washington, and the Cathedral Choral Society (DC).

Originally from Rock Island, Illinois, Mr. Plutz earned a Bachelor of Music degree, *magna cum laude*, from Westminster Choir College of Rider University and a Master of Music degree from the Eastman School of Music. Additional study consists of two visits to Europe: in 2005, he studied the complete organ works of César Franck with Marie-Louise Langlais in Paris, and in 2019 he studied the complete organ symphonies of Louis Vierne with Ben van Oosten in The Hague, the Netherlands.

Eric Plutz is represented by Seven Eight Artists.