

MY SOUL DOTH MAGNIFY THE LORD

A Recital to Celebrate Women in Church Music

Susan Powell, organ
streaming live from Auer Hall
in fulfillment of the Performer Diploma program
Indiana University Jacobs School of Music
Tuesday, February 23, 2021, 5:00 p.m.

please reserve applause for the conclusion of each section

I. EQUANIMITY

Prelude and Fugue in B Minor (BWV 544)

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

II. JOY

Gloria from Messe Propre pour les Convents

François Couperin (1668-1733)

I. Plein jeu (*Gloria in excelsis Deo*)

II. Petite fugue sur le Cromhorne (*Laudamus te*)

III. Duo sur les Tierces (*Adoramus te*)

IV. Basse de Trompette (*Gratias agimus tibi propter magnam gloriam tuam*)

V. Cromhorne sur la Taille (*Domine fili unigenite Jesu Christe*)

VI. Dialogue sur la voix humaine (*Qui tollis peccata mundi miserere nobis*)

VII. Trio Les Dessus sur la Tierce et la basse sur la trompette (*Qui sedes ad dexteram patris*)

VIII. Recit de Tierce (*Tu solus Dominus*)

IX. Dialogue sur les grands jeux (*Cum Sancto Spiritu*)

III. DEVOTION

Incarnation with Shepherds Dancing (2002)

Judith Bingham (1952-)

Twelve Chorale Preludes on Gregorian Chant Themes (1950)

Jeanne Demessieux (1921-1968)

Rorate Caeli (Chorale orné)

In Manus Tuas (Litanie)

Domine Jesu (Berceuse)

Veni Creator Spiritus (Toccata)

IV. SPIRIT

Prelude on Veni Creator Spiritus (1990)

Libby Larsen (1950-)

Prelude and Fugue in G Minor, Op. 7, No. 3

Marcel Dupré (1886-1971)

NOTES

There's something transcendent about art and the spirit of an artist. Not in the grand, spiritual sense of the word, but transcendent of the sheer noise of life. This program begins and ends with music evocative of this spirit of stubborn equanimity. Like a practitioner of mindfulness meditation returning to the anchor of breath, Bach's fugue subject--built of the most basic building blocks--unspools itself over and over amidst a distracting variety show of textures. Likewise, Dupré's prelude is a study in equanimity; an exquisitely simple melody levitates above a complex ostinato, creating a deceptive sense of calm, and almost humorously so. "Look, Ma! No hands!"--when in reality the hands are carrying on nothing short of a frenzy.

These two works in particular have been my muse as I've prepared to give a recital in the middle of a global pandemic. Neither that, nor homeschooling my kids, nor pregnancy was on my agenda when I embarked on this graduate program in 2019. But facing struggle has been familiar to me, and with many layers of struggle comes a degree of clarity about your ambitions. I'm a performing artist and a church musician, despite having been told in my adolescence that girls shouldn't go to college and only men could direct a church choir. Many years later, my response to those absurdities is this program, crafted to celebrate the contributions of women to the music of the church.

Sacred texts were my first language, and have always been my refuge. This is what drew me to Couperin's *Messe pour les Convents*, a

decorative presentation of the entire Ordinary of the mass. The Gloria in particular is one of my favorite texts and has worked its way deep into my own faith over the years. If it's true that I understand life in terms of struggle, it's even more true that I understand it in terms of joy. Here the more common definition of "transcendence" comes into play. The transcendence of Christianity's theology is perhaps my easiest on-ramp to joy (second only to compound time signatures), a joy captured by Couperin's nine dance-like and song-like keyboard elaborations on the Gloria. I chose to include this music not only for its thematic relevance to a program celebrating women and church music, but for the simple reason that it makes me smile.

During my first year in college my choir sang a setting of the Magnificat. Fragments of the text consumed my thoughts as I walked campus that winter: "Brought down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. Filled the hungry with good things. Scattered the proud. Sent the rich away empty." I began to hear Mary's song as a shocking credo of courage and tenacity--a credo that has become intensely personal for me. A decade later I heard Judith Bingham's *Incarnation with Shepherds Dancing*. I was amazed to find a voice for my experience of the Magnificat: more than a text for our quaint holiday reflections, more than a song of faith, it is a cry of frightful power. The central melody of Bingham's short piece is marked in the score with the opening words of the Magnificat. Its first statement is a polymetric juxtaposition with the left hand and pedal, suggesting a

belligerent expression of a faith that goes against the grain. Rising through a fevered crescendo, it culminates in nothing short of a tantrum, and I find this--as we say--relatable.

Jeanne Demessieux's *Twelve Chorale Preludes on Gregorian Chant Themes* first caught my attention because of their compositional brilliance, but they soon became a voice to articulate my experience of Christian devotion and spirituality. *Rorate Caeli*, *In Manus Tuas*, and *Domine Jesu* all feature exquisite melodies and luscious harmonies. They also earned their place on tonight's program because of the chants from which they are derived. *Rorate Caeli* ("Come down, heavens") is a text associated with Advent and the Incarnation of Christ. Its pairing beside the fanciful ending of Bingham's *Incarnation* is irresistible. Its subject matter is one of the doctrines of Christianity I treasure most, because of its implications for the practice of spirituality.

In Manus Tuas ("Into your hands I commit my spirit") is a text chanted during Compline, the daily office of night prayer, and roughly equivalent to "Now I lay me down to sleep." The longer I spend as a disciple of the Christian faith the more convinced I become that the entire project can be summarized in terms of submission. Nowhere is this made more poignant than Christ's original utterance of those famous words as he struggled to accept the mission he was facing.

Second only to Christ's submission is the submission of his mother, and this is what I find suggested in Demessieux's twelfth prelude, *Domine Deus*. The chant, part of the Requiem Mass, is set by Demessieux as a lullaby. The open fifth repeated in the pedals

throughout lends a rocking motion, as the music travels through some of the most beautiful harmonies I've ever encountered to a rather tortured climax, putting me in mind of the Virgin Mary's devotion to her Son despite the agony she knew to expect.

Beyond my private appreciation of the devotional depth of this collection, I love these short pieces because they are compositional gems. Their construction is dense and careful, each one threaded through at every point with its foundational chant melody, evidence of Demessieux's formidable intellect and skill. *Veni Creator Spiritus* is no exception, augmenting a quintessentially French harmonic vocabulary with a constant layering of the chant melody, sometimes easy to hear, sometimes disguised by rests and octave displacement as in the opening figuration. The conclusion of this dense little toccata restates the opening while the left hand presents the melody twice simultaneously and at half-tempo, in a canon one beat apart, the two voices distinguishable from each other by both articulation and tonality. The resulting three layers of melody is undoubtedly an allusion to the third person of the Trinity.

I aspire to write music even half as compelling as these chant preludes. Demessieux's mastery of her craft intrigues me. So does the musical language of Libby Larsen, an American composer from Minnesota, who I met during my composition study at St. Olaf College. I love Larsen not only for her contagious enthusiasm and downright sparkle, but for her speech-like conception of rhythm and meter and her vibrant harmonic and timbral soundscapes.

The challenge of varied timbres was one thing that drew me to the organ, and this is why I return repeatedly to performing Larsen's *Prelude on Veni Creator Spiritus*. Entirely opposite in character from Demessieux's toccata, Larsen's ethereal composition captures a different sense of the divine, setting a mood of utter calm. It moves gently amongst various polyrhythms in an asymmetrical meter, giving a sense of ease that disguises the sheer amount of work this piece demands. The organ is a problematic instrument for any composer who is not herself an organist. Larsen's score, almost devoid of registrational indications, calls for dynamic markings that present mechanical difficulties to the performer. The textures she creates are evocative of the colorful instrumentations of her orchestral scores, but to elevate this piece to that level of detailed expression on the organ requires carefully choreographed registration changes and a continual movement across keyboards. Every time I wrestle this piece back to life on a new instrument I question my judgment in returning to it, but it's become a personal treasure and a point of artistic pride, no matter how many hours of work it requires.

Dupré's prelude is every bit as deceptive and a good deal more difficult. Its public face of equanimity and calm is a lie. Page after page of unremitting quiet energy culminates in cascades of scalar runs and arpeggios in the left hand, while the dense texture of the stayed right hand is doubled by four-note chords in the feet. And as if this weren't enough of a show of Dupré's technical prowess, he paired the prelude with a gigue-like fugue in four maniacal voices. While Bach opted for an uncomplicated natural minor scalar subject in his *Prelude and Fugue in B Minor*, Dupré

spins his material out of the harmonic minor scale. The two fugues are equally spirited, but Bach's conjures a spirit of equanimity and Dupré's is all passion and fervor.

I have framed my program with this pair of giant mainstays from the organ repertoire entirely because they were the top two works I promised myself I'd play someday. Admittedly their only relevance to the theme of my program is the affinity I've felt to them since I first heard them. From the gravity and anguish of Bach's opening gestures to the passion of Dupré, they've become my statement this year: This is who I am, and I belong here.

My favorite thing about Dupré's *Prelude and Fugue in G Minor* may also be my favorite thing about this entire program. A study in latent energy, it is evocative of my own experience—and suggestive of the historic record on the whole—of being a woman in the arts. Dupré keeps the entire production under wraps by means of the closed swell shades until, at the last possible moment, the fugue erupts, bursting onto the scene, with full reeds and boxes open, for an extended stretto passage, a roaring amplification of the prelude's initial melody, and a concluding crash of chords: a mic-drop moment if ever there was one.