

KAY JOHNSON GUILLES at ST. PETER CATHOLIC CATHEDRAL, FEBRUARY 20, 2020

Kay Guiles opened with Pachelbel's familiar Toccata in e minor, most often heard in this country on instruments designed for much later music and in relatively dry acoustics. This night, however, the instrument and acoustics were perfect and this piece was restored to its original glory. Jean-François Dandrieu's Tierce en Taille followed, with an even closer historical match to the Rieger instrument, which was inspired by the French organbuilding family Clicquot. The evening's blockbuster (for me, at least) was Buxtehude's Prelude, Fugue, and Chaconne (BuxWV#137), which almost literally blew me away - in particular when Guiles used the organ's reeds to create an overwhelming sound. Bach's beloved chorale prelude "O Mensch Bewein" (BWV #622), was an expressive contrast; then his Prelude and Fugue in e minor (BWV#533) - another big work - closed the baroque part of the program. Robert Schumann's Fugue on B-A-C-H in g minor (Opus 60 No. 3) followed, with a milder sound. Then César Franck's Prelude, Fugue, and Variation was played with colorful registration throughout. Guiles closed the program with a brilliant performance of Widor's Toccata (Symphony pour Orgue No. 5, Op. 42, No. 1). The gradual build up of the familiar pedal phrase (do-ti-la-ti-do-ti-la-ti-sol--etc) - by the last big entrance (now in octaves) was cataclysmic!

We thank St. Peter's Cathedral for supporting this musical gift to the people of our community, and we thank Kay Guiles (organist at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Hattiesburg) for a truly remarkable and refreshing program.

Glenn A. Gentry

On Friday evening of November 15, AGO brought a treat to the music lovers of the Jackson area in the the incredibly masterful playing of Nathan Laube, world famous organ virtuoso whose performance was informed by his international education, his creativity, his technical ability, his control of the intricacies of the instrument, and his depth of understanding for the meaning and emotion of the music. Over and beyond, he melded all into memorized performance. The concert was at the First Presbyterian Church of Jackson on their 65 rank, four manual Casavant pipe organ.

The program was book-ended by organ transcriptions of two monumental orchestral works. Opening with the Overture to Richard Wagner's *Tannhäuser*, (transcribed by Warren, Lemare as well as himself), Laube used well the beautiful tonal resource of this organ, with its beautiful and majestic reed work, to simulate the structure of this instrumentally conceived work. Not just to imitate the orchestra, rather he merged the structure of the instrument with Wagner's concept of the colors of the composition. Reproducing Wagner's distinct motifs and

texture required much dexterity—such as his left hand “thumbing” down to a lower manual the strong, noble “pilgrim chorus” melody while the outside part of his hand was playing chords or tremolos on the higher manual; the right hand also engaged in this type of exchange. Furthermore, the transcription was replete with accompanying running passages performed at lightning speeds. The hero Tannhäuser’s martial and triumphant theme was a high point of the overture and Laube performed it with joyfully precise rhythms.

Laube closed the first half of the program with J. S. Bach’s Passacaglia. playing this work with the authentic slightly detached touch characteristic of the Baroque period. Again, Laube applied his strong sense of structural understanding to the development in this work; as the variations became increasingly complex, so did the registration become stronger and reinforced with the complex harmonics development of which the pipe organ is so capable. The passacaglia theme, which recurred twenty-one times, usually in the pedals, was always registered to be heard balanced and clearly, eventually to be reinforced with pedal reeds. The fugue with which Bach uniquely followed continued to develop the passacaglia theme in a very driving contrapuntal treatment. To this reviewer’s ears, one could hear an echo of the sighing motif of *Tannhäuser* in the sighing counter melody of the fugue, a tribute to the unity with which Laube planned this program.

With the high emotion from the Wagner Overture settled by the solid Passacaglia and Fugue, the second half began with the first movement of Charles-Marie Widor’s Fifth (organ) Symphonie Op. 42, No. 5. (This is the same symphony in which is found the beloved last movement Toccata, so often played on Easter and for wedding recessionals.) While the transcriptions played were masterful simulations of actual orchestral compositions, this Symphonie was composed to treat the organ as an orchestra. While the preceding selection, the Passacaglia, was easily heard as a Theme and Variation form, this selection also used the Theme and Variation form, but the composer has more freedom to treat the theme in myriad ways: different registrations, different tempi, different textures—often weaving the theme through inner parts, even changing the notes somewhat and perhaps giving only a hint of it by featuring its suggestive intervals, and certainly by setting the theme with different accompaniment figures. Laube carried through this continuing transformation with creativity, variety, and mastery.

The closing work was *Les Préludes, Poème Symphonique No. 3* by Franz Liszt, and was Nathan Laube’s own transcription. The orchestral work was scored for strings, woodwind, brass (including tuba and bass trombone), harp and percussion; this suggested to Laube a broad and colorful palette of sound qualities with which to paint the poignant melodies in their transformations as the piece rose to its thrilling climax.

The Jackson Chapter of the American Guild of Organists is grateful to First Presbyterian Church for the use of their magnificent pipe organ and facilities, and for the support Mississippi Arts Commission and the National Endowment for the Arts and our generous patrons provide, which made the program possible. We especially thank Mr. Nathan Laube for coming to our city and presenting this magnificent and moving music for us.

Glenn A. Gentry