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Seraphic Concert with Two Organs

by **Geoffrey Wieting**

The Seraphim Singers under Jennifer Lester have made a name for themselves by presenting less familiar but wonderful choral repertoire, and they upheld this tradition in their most recent concert, February 19 at the Basilica of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Boston (generally known as the Mission Church). The Singers celebrated their fifteenth anniversary with a program titled *La variété française* which sampled the rich diversity of French sacred music of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries and especially highlighted works conceived for choir and two organs. The set-up of *grand orgue* and a smaller *orgue de chœur* (choir organ) occurred fairly frequently in large French churches until 1905 when a new law designed to separate church and state resulted in the de-funding of many Roman Catholic music programs. For this program an *orgue de chœur*, set up in the Mission Church's chancel and played by Heinrich Christensen, was provided by a digital instrument whose core was digital recordings of the pipes of the famous 1897 Hutchings organ in the back gallery (the *grand orgue*), played by the basilica's Music Director, Glenn Goda. Thus, Sunday's audience had the rare privilege — in this country — of hearing this repertoire performed in the type of physical configuration for which it was conceived.

Likely the most famous piece written for choir and two organs is Louis Vierne's *Messe Solennelle*, completed in 1899 when he

was assistant to his teacher Charles-Marie Widor at Saint-Sulpice, but not premiered until 1901, after Vierne had gone on to become *titulaire* at the *grand orgue* of Notre Dame de Paris. The Mission Church's acoustics closely replicate those of Saint-Sulpice or Notre Dame, and it was fascinating to hear the first *Kyrie's* alternation of the thundering rear-gallery organ with the smaller choir organ plus choir in the front. Also, there was a vivid contrast between the beguiling, major-mode *Christe eleison* and the vehement second *Kyrie*, so dramatically punctuated at its climax by crashing, full-organ chords from the gallery. Some minor rhythmic disconnects (mostly the gallery organ being slightly behind the front organ and choir) occasionally pointed up the considerable challenge of maintaining cohesion between two instruments so far apart and in a highly reverberant setting. (Even in France there are probably not many organists nowadays who have grappled with this challenge. I heard a performance of the *Messe* in Quimper, Bretagne in which the rhythmic discrepancies were so great they very nearly derailed the performance.) At softer dynamics, however, it seemed easier to coordinate. The *Benedictus* cast a spell with tender, affecting singing and the mystical atmosphere Christensen and Goda created on the organs with lush string celestes and a softly rumbling 32-foot Bourdon. Vierne's liberal use of the whole-tone scale here is wonderfully mysterious. En route to the great climax of "Hosanna", the written organ "off-beats" unfortunately *did* synchronize to become "on-beats", but both organs and choir came together for a thrilling final phrase. The quietly compelling *Agnus Dei* was notable for its lovely melodies caressed by the choir, unanimity of rhythm and dynamics among all the performers, and the radiant organ postlude. My only small quibble was that occasionally Vierne's savory harmonies were less than fully transparent because of some overly generous choral vibrato.

Olivier Messiaen left us only one *a cappella* sacred choral work, but it is a jewel. *O Sacrum Convivium* (O Sacred Banquet) is indeed a feast of rich harmony and, consequently, a test of a choir's intonation, met here fully successfully. With ascending tessitura and dynamic level, vibrato also increased and prevented some harmonies from coming across with crystal clarity, but it was a warm, full-hearted performance that let the listeners bask in the unique radiance of F sharp major (a favorite key of the composer).

The *Messe en style ancien* of Jean Langlais, with optional organ accompaniment, but here sung *a cappella*, has a Boston connection: it is dedicated to Theodore Marier, former Music Director at St. Paul's, Harvard Square, and Director of the Boston Archdiocesan Choir School, who recorded the piece with the St. Cecilia Society in the 1950s. As its title indicates, this mass setting emulates those of the Renaissance, utilizing quotations of plainchant, modal harmonies, and polyphony, but also giving us an occasional flash of the twentieth century through more modern harmony. The *Gloria*, for instance, has a passage when all four voice-parts move in parallel, quite reminiscent of the composer's better-known *Messe Solennelle* which is very much a product of the twentieth century. The chorus seemed to take this piece to their hearts, maintaining excellent intonation and blend and giving it an emotional dimension not often encountered in a work written in this much older style. The *Sanctus* was particularly memorable for the singers' long-breathed, legato lines and its lovely tunes. In the *Agnus Dei's* tripartite structure the performers brought out the contrasts between the mystical outer sections and the more impassioned central part. I hope this sympathetic performance started Langlais's fine work on the road to wider exposure.

The concert concluded with the *Quatre Motets*, Op. 9 of Marcel Dupré. Written during World War I, these works show the

composer's style in transition. *O Salutaris Hostia* is couched in a conservative harmonic language, beginning and ending quietly but getting more turbulent where the text mentions warfare ("bella premunt hostilia"). Lester and her singers were attuned to this word painting. *Tantum Ergo*, however, seemed almost by a different composer and a galaxy away from Gabriel Fauré's sweet setting of this text. The dissonance of the organ introduction yielded to a rather more diatonic music at the entry of the choir, but the foreboding restlessness of the harmony persisted throughout. *Ave Maria* is a real find. Set for sopranos only with subdued organ colors, it is notable for its reverence, beauty, and femininity. Many settings of this text, of course, have all these traits as well, but Dupré's is especially inspired. With the repetitions of "ora pro nobis" ("pray for us"), the fervor increased, taking us from the ethereal realm to the human, but the small increase in vibrato did not interfere with the exquisite harmonies. The celebratory text of *Laudate Dominum* (Praise the Lord, All Ye Nations) justified ratcheting up the testosterone and supplying a display piece for organists (this also utilized both organs) and choir alike. The tenor part is particularly heroic. The Seraphim tenors, though small in number, delivered the goods, as did all the musicians.

Having brought down the house, the performers offered one short encore, Pierre Villette's *Hymne à la Vierge*. Taking Francis Poulenc's choral style a step further, this *a cappella* work is at least half jazz, the last several tangy chords seeming lifted straight out of Manhattan Transfer. This performance, regrettably, was only partially successful. Below mezzo piano it was luscious, but its exposed texture and complex chords suffered from the increasing vibrato whenever the tessitura and dynamic level rose, and the highly reverberant room tended to complicate matters.

Thus concluded a fascinating expedition by Jennifer Lester, the

Seraphim Singers, Heinrich Christensen, and Glenn Goda into undeservedly neglected choral and organ repertoire. Anyone who cares about these genres owes it to him/herself to hear this gifted ensemble whenever possible.

Geoffrey Wieting holds Bachelor's degrees in organ and Latin from Oberlin College and a Master's degree in collaborative piano from New England Conservatory. He is a freelance organist, collaborative pianist and vocal coach, and choir member at Trinity Church, Copley Square and in the Back Bay Chorale.