

PRO ORGANO OTTAWA

Aaron James

Monday, June 15, 2026. 7:30pm
St. Clement Parish at St. Anne Church

Aaron James, based in Toronto, gave a wonderfully varied and deeply satisfying recital as the last in the 2025-2026 Pro Organo season. Each of the works presented reflected the overall theme of music for the liturgical seasons of: Pentecost, Trinity, and Corpus Christi. Opening with the 'Kyrie' section from the *Clavierübung*, Part 3 by Bach, James found pleasing colours for each of the movements: a trompette solo sang out with intensity in the first, and showed the player's keen grasp of baroque performance style; lovely flutes accompanied a "tierce en taille" solo in the second, with some lovely rhythmic stretching for harmonic tension; and the third was registered with an arresting organo pleno, played with strong emotional purpose, the pedal cantus firmus strode forth into the church's ample acoustics, while the complex polyphony was presented with clarity and understanding, James found just the right amount of drama in the amazing chromatic writing at the conclusion of the piece.

After this sojourn in baroque style, James swung deftly into the modern with *Cinq versets sur le "Veni Creator"* (2012) by Jean-Baptiste Robin. The various rhapsodic and improvisational elements were well-handled by the player, and this suite of character pieces came alive, proving to be a favourite with the audience. Number I: *Ciel éternel* presents a musical poem to the vastness of the sky; registered with a 4' flute plus tremulant against ethereal strings, James performed the ostinato with sensitive rubato, the musical fabric literally hanging in the air, the plainsong melody woven deftly into the texture. Number II: *Flamboient* lives up to its title, the notes of the plainsong are contained in an opening pedal ostinato, the texture eventually breaks up into striking passagework, and the player projected the musical flourishes later on with admirable ease. Number III: *Le temps qui danse* is cast as a slightly "tipsy" dance, this rather madcap, energetic piece put smiles on the faces of the audience. Number IV: *Au-Déla*, by contrast, is a slow and gentle prayer; the tune was registered with a ravishing hautbois cum clarinette sonority, the drooping lines of the accompaniment a soothing balm to the soul. The last, number V: *Veni Creator Spiritus* recapitulates and combines musical material from the previous movements into a satisfying finale; opening with similar material to number I, it builds in tone and movement, until it breaks forth into a Toccata-like ending, with the plainsong tune presented majestically in the pedal. One was left with the overall impression that the player greatly enjoyed presenting these pieces, which he did with strong musical understanding and technical security.

After the tuning of some wayward reeds during the short intermission, Aaron James launched into the second-half of the programme, presenting two works which pay homage to the great French playing and composing traditions of the 19th and 20th centuries. *Communion sur "Ecce panis angelorum"* by Alexandre Guilmant is an extended meditation on the Sequence for the Feast of Corpus Christi. The effect of this piece was fresh, tuneful, lively and amiable, the Bach-inspired middle section in a contrasting minor key including a lovely melody on the hautbois.

The last work on the programme was the monumental *Prélude, Adagio, et Choral Varié sur "Veni Creator"* by Maurice Duruflé, and it seemed the audience was looking forward to this piece with particular relish; James' performance did not disappoint, it was noteworthy for its technical command (the manual changes being particularly well-handled) and musical character. The opening *Prélude* was played with vivacious enthusiasm, bubbling along with effortless playfulness, yet serene in its overall effect; the player exploited the wonderful reed colours on the instrument to enhance the various solos in the musical texture. The *Adagio* opened with seriousness of purpose, the middle section noted for its use of lush string sonorities and a particularly beautiful section on the *Voix humaine*, built up to a huge climax with a startling *attacca* to the splendid *Choral*. Each of the ensuing variations was treated with simplicity of purpose and attention to detail, the last variation was appropriately virtuosic and brought the audience to its feet.

Aaron James provided a rich model of programming for this concert: the balance of pieces and styles, the contrast of colours and sonorities, all woven with musical understanding to wonderful effect. One was left with wanting more from this gifted musician and performer; perhaps he will be featured in the future on one of the chamber music festivals during the summer season, and Ottawa audiences will have another opportunity to partake of his considerable musical talents.

Wesley R. Warren