

Programme Notes: Sarah Svendsen - Pro Organo April 21, 2023

This programme explores a different tonal interest which I have held for a long time – the influence of jazz on 20th and 21st century French music. Hence, the programme explores early 20th century music with specific relationships to French composition and/or jazz. Canadian composers Rachel Laurin and Neil Weisensel have also been included; Laurin's composition representing the continued line of French composition in a modern setting, and Weisensel's demonstrating some of the intersections available in organ composition between the classical, pop, and jazz idioms.

A Note: A composition student of Nadia Boulanger, Quincy Jones stated in his 2018 Documentary 'Quincy,' that Ellington told him to continue to meld various classical, jazz, and popular styles into one in order to "de-categorize American music". In support of the 'de-categorization' and to encourage access to better representation in organ transcriptions, I hope that my small action of including the Ellington transcription demonstrates that jazz orchestra music can be successfully played on the organ, and it will encourage others to take on the task of arranging these important musical works for the organ.

Preamble for A Solemn Occasion – Aaron Copland (1900-1990)

Copland wrote his Preamble for a Solemn Occasion for orchestra and Narrator in 1949 for the first anniversary of the United Nations' "Universal Declaration of Human Rights." Originally conceptualized as a hymn, it features a fanfare-like introduction, followed by alternating melody and block chord sections based around a melody using disjunct triad shapes. Copland's later language style of simplicity in harmony and interesting use of rhythms is clearly evident. The Narrator part, though not included with today's performance, is an excerpt from the Declaration's text:

We the peoples of the United Nations, determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women of all nations large and small, and ... to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom, ... have resolved to combine our efforts to accomplish these aims. – Preamble to the 1945 UN Charter

Passacaglia – Aaron Copland (1900-1990), Transcribed by John Fesperman

Copland studied in France from 1921-1924, during which time he became a student of Nadia Boulanger, who he later attributed as being one of his greatest influences due to her vast knowledge of all classical music. Originally written for piano in 1922, the Passacaglia was written to meet Boulanger's requirement that her composition students write in traditional forms. The eight-bar theme with variations is dedicated to Boulanger and features many different textures which are well suited to varying registrations available to an organist. The musical language used here by Copland pre-dates his more well-known, simple sound, and instead reflects his influencers of the time: Ravel, Satie, Bartok, as well as Milhaud and Poulenc (the latter two were members of the French *Les Six*).

Trois Improvisations – Nadia Boulanger (1887-1979)

Nadia Boulanger enrolled in the Paris Conservatoire at the age of nine, where she studied composition with Gabriel Fauré. Her pedigree connects her directly to the masters of romantic French organ composition, having studied with both Louis Vierne and Alexandre Guilmant. In 1904, at the age of 17, she received first prize in her classes for organ, piano accompaniment, and fugue/composition. Boulanger has been credited as one of the most prolific teachers of the 20th century, with a student roster that included Burt Bacarach, Aaron Copland, Phillip Glass, and Quincy Jones. In addition to her teaching, Boulanger was also one of the barrier-breaking females who was employed as a conductor.

Boulanger's early years had compositional output, including a second prize from the Prix de Rome in 1908 at the age of 21. Her only organ composition, *Trois Improvisations*, was composed in 1911 and features the highly chromaticized language she is known for in her other compositions. The "Prélude" introduces the main melody in the opening measure, from which Boulanger derives various motivic material to develop throughout the movement. Of note is her gentle presentation of the melody with no chromaticism to close the movement. In the second movement, "Petit Canon," Boulanger presents relatively strict four-part harmony (excluding three measures in the middle of the piece) which could comfortably fit into the vocal range of a standard choir. The final movement, "Improvisation" presents a floating ostinato accompaniment in the right hand followed quickly by the main melody entrance in measure two by the left hand. Similar to "Prélude," "improvisation" also ends with a quiet, simple restatement of the main melody, although certainly with more chromaticism involved.

"Toccata" from Symphonie No. 1, Op. 36 – Rachel Laurin (1961)

Rachel Laurin is an internationally-renown and respected Canadian organist and composer. Her first symphony strongly demonstrates the early 20th century French influence of composers Vierne and Dupré, particularly in its virtuosic style in both homophonic and polyphonic textures. The final movement of the symphony, "Toccata" is a strong example of these virtuosic figures, opening with large moving triadic figures and featuring a pedal solo for most of the piece. The toccata features an often-thick, harmonic texture with dense chording. While loud and aggressive, the toccata also has many soaring melodic lines based on themes introduced and developed in earlier movements.

INTERMISSION

Deuxièmes Prélude et Fugue pour orgue – Elsa Barraine (1910-1999)

Elsa Barraine was raised in the Jewish faith and was enrolled at the Paris Conservatoire as her primary means of education at the age of 9 years. There she won several class first-prizes (harmony at age 15, counterpoint and fugue and piano accompaniment at age 17) and in 1929 she won the Prix de Rome at the age of 19. She was a firm friend of Messaien, and her composition style has been compared to that of the Jeune France, which sought to encourage the chromaticism and romanticism of Claude Debussy. This contrasted with the earlier established composers in the group Les Six, who opposed Wagnerian chromaticism and Debussy, opting for a neo-classical style.

Copyrighted in 1929 to Durand, Barraine's second prelude and fugue demonstrates influences of her Judaic faith. At the beginning of the prelude, Barraine inscribes the first line of Psalm 116, "I wished that the Lord would hear my voice [in] my supplications." The Fugue presents in two main sections. In the first section of the Fugue, the main subject, a melodic statement of the chant of the Jewish blessing "Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu, Melech Ha'Olam" ("Blessed are you, Lord our God, the ruler of the universe"), is introduced and developed. In the second and final section of the Fugue many new features are introduced, including a new texture, key signature, and tempo. Also introduced is another line from Psalm 116: "[18] I shall pay my vows to the Lord now in the presence of all His people, [19] ...O Jerusalem..." In this final section, a texture more similar to a trio is assumed, during which we hear dancing flutes in the hands with fragments of the fugue subject stated in the pedal line.

Tableaux for Organ – Neil Weisensel (1965)

Neil Weisensel's Tableaux for Organ (2022) was commissioned by Dr. Sarah Svendsen for debut on the Roy Thompson Hall organ as part of the inaugural Future Stops Organ Festival (September 2022). The premise of the commission was to create smaller pieces which could be played in any order the player wished. These pieces ("Dream," "Strange," and "Snark") are individual in character, but share a capacity for story-telling, quickly pulling the listener into the unique worlds of Weisensel's invention. "Dream" is a beautiful dance of meter changes, "Strange" is a grandiose, bombastic modern toccata, and "Snark" is a fun jest using ostinato, imitation, and syncopation to create "groove" for modern organ. Key influences for the development of these pieces included the jazz composer Vince Guaraldi and the jazz fusion band "Snarky Puppy."

Tribute to Duke Ellington – Edward "Duke" Ellington (1899-1974) (and Billy Strayhorn), Arranged by George Faxon, Edited by Sarah Svendsen

A protégé of Parisian nightclub owner, Ada "Bricktop" Smith when the two were both in Harlem, New York, Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington is considered one of the most prolific composers for Jazz orchestra of the 20th century. He formed the Duke Ellington Orchestra in 1923 which continues to perform to this day. Ellington's voice as a composer and arranger established him as a top American composer, known for impressive orchestral arrangements that served both the group and the soloists. His influential compositions were usually written and recorded without lyrics, after which lyricists would be asked to add lyrics to the tunes. Of note, although not overshadowing the jazz roots which clearly influenced Ellington, is his appreciation of classical music, specifically Debussy.

The arranger George Faxon (1913-1992) taught at Boston University and Brown University. He was a pipe organist, a jazz pianist and theatre organ player. In his 1992 obituary by the Boston American Guild of Organists, he was described as viewing "Bach and Ellington" with the same system of assessment, stating that quality of music is in the "use of style" rather than the "style" itself.

Songs featured in the arrangement are [in order of appearance]:

Take the “A” Train (1939) – Composed Billy Strayhorn, Lyrics by Joya Sherrill

Chorus:

*You must take the “A” Train
To go to Sugar Hill way up in Harlem
If you miss the “A” Train
You’ll find you missed the quickest way to Harlem*

Sophisticated Lady (1932) – Lyrics by Mitchell Parish and Irving Mills

Bridge:

*Smoking, drinking, never thinking of tomorrow, nonchalant
Diamonds, shinning, dancing, drinking with some man in a restaurant
Is that all you really want?*

I Let a Song Go Out of My Heart (1938) – Lyrics Irving Mills, John Redmond, Henry Nemo

Chorus:

*I let a song go out of my heart
Believe me, darlin’, when I say
I won’t know sweet music
Until you return someday*

Mood Indigo (1930) – co-composed by Ellington and Barney Bigard, Lyrics by Irving Mills

Chorus:

*You ain’t never been blue, no, no, no
You ain’t never been blue
Till you’ve had that mood indigo.
That feelin’ goes stealin’ down to my shoes
While I just sit here and sign, “Go ‘long blues”*

Don’t Get Around Much Anymore (1940) – Lyrics by Bob Russel

First Verse:

*Missed the Saturday dance
Heard they crowded the floor
Couldn’t bear it without you
Don’t get around much anymore*

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