

Celebrating a Musical Legacy

50th Anniversary of Marcel Dupré's Death
1971 : 2021



Program

Organist: Christopher Jacobson
February 21, 2021

March on a Theme of Handel, Op. 15

Alexandre Guilmant
(1837–1911)

Cortège et Litanie, Op. 19, No. 2

Marcel Dupré
(1886–1971)

Andante Sostenuto, from *Symphonie Gothique*, Op. 70

Charles Marie Widor
(1844–1937)

Trois Préludes et Fugues, Op. 7

Marcel Dupré

B major

F minor

G minor

Adagio, from *Symphonie No. 3*, Op. 28

Louis Vierne
(1870–1937)

Variations sur un Noël, Op. 20

Marcel Dupré

Performed on the Kathleen Upton Byrns McClendon Organ

Program Notes

It would be impossible to tell the story of the organ in the twentieth century without mentioning Marcel Dupré (1886–1971) whose fiftieth anniversary we celebrate this year. In considering the complex intertwined web of the great nineteenth and twentieth century French organists and composers, Dupré holds a unique place at the center. A prodigy on the level of Mozart, Mendelssohn, and Saint-Saëns, he enrolled in the Paris Conservatoire when he was only sixteen. There he studied, learned, and absorbed everything he could from the greatest musical minds in Paris, one of the great epicenters of the musical world. Alexandre Guilmant and Louis Vierne instilled organ technique and the creativity of improvisation, and Charles Marie Widor instructed the rigors of composition and performance. The story of how these three brilliant men influenced Dupré is a fascinating one, and I hope the music of this recital opens a glimpse of the enduring effect their teaching had on the young Dupré and his own early compositions. Dupré's compositional output for the organ was vast, similar to that of J. S. Bach, and this afternoon's program focuses on three of his earliest works which remain cornerstones of the organ repertoire today.

Dupré was an only child and grew up in a home that easily could be described as a “temple of music.” His mother was a cellist and pianist, his father a notable organist and choral conductor, and his grandfather and aunt who also lived with the family were both professional musicians. The Dupré house boasted a large music room which was a regular site for chamber music concerts, rehearsals, and organ recitals amongst the musical elite of southern France. Organist at the parish church of Saint-Vivien in Rouen at age eleven, composing his first cantata for his fifteenth birthday celebration, one of the youngest students at the Paris Conservatoire at sixteen, and having barely reached twenty when Widor appointed him his assistant at Saint-Sulpice in Paris, Dupré's musical prowess indisputably took firm root catapulting him on a path to international renown and stardom.

Following his performance from memory of the complete organ works of J. S. Bach in a sequence of ten recitals at the Paris Conservatoire he rapidly established international success in England and America spending nearly six months of every year between 1921–1924 performing across these two countries. His appointment as Professor of Organ at the Paris Conservatoire in 1926 at age forty solidified his life-long dedication to the organ as teacher, composer, and performer. Beyond his organ teaching at the Conservatoire, he assisted Widor at St. Sulpice and later succeeded him as titular organist; he authored numerous textbooks on musical theory and improvisation, and created teaching editions of the organ works of previous great composers in over twenty scrupulously annotated volumes. Most remembered today for his organ works, his prolific output for the organ not only reflects his extensive experience as a teacher, church musician, and virtuosic performer, but ranges from monumental concert works, to plainsong-based sacred music, to the simplest and most transcendent musical miniatures. His performing career encompassed nearly 3,000 recitals the world over and his liturgical improvisations drew crowds of Parisian elite to the organ loft of Saint-Sulpice nearly every Sunday.

All this would not have been possible without the guidance and mentorship of his dedicated teachers and mentors. A long-time friend of the Dupré family, Alexandre Guilmant visited the home when Dupré was just a few days old. Upon seeing Marcel's tiny hands, he exclaimed, “We shall have an organist here.” Arguably the most famous French organist of the nineteenth century, Guilmant paved the way of the concert organist having toured several times to America for recitals, playing no fewer than forty concerts on the largest organ in the world at the World's Fair in St. Louis in 1904. Dupré began formal organ studies with Guilmant at age eleven and from that time onward Guilmant relentlessly championed the young virtuoso doing much to set the stage for his prosperous career.

Guilmant's *March on a Theme of Handel* dates from 1861 and remains one of his most popular works having played it at the dedication recital of the new Cavaillé-Coll organ at St. Sulpice in 1862. A stately march-like section based on the opening bars of "Lift up your heads" from Handel's *Messiah* introduces a lively fugue in the style of Bach, reminiscent of the fugal sections in Bach's great Prelude in E-flat major, BWV 552 which Guilmant played to open his forty recitals at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. To close the work, Guilmant brilliantly combines the march and fugue themes before one last grand statement of the march.

Charles Marie Widor was appointed organist at St. Sulpice in 1870 shortly after the dedication of Cavaillé-Coll's famous 1862 organ (where Guilmant played his *March on a Theme of Handel*) holding the position for sixty-four years until his retirement in 1933. In 1896 he was appointed Professor of Composition at the Paris Conservatoire and when Dupré began his organ studies there with Guilmant, Widor simultaneously steeped the young prodigy in composition lessons. Instantly recognizing Dupré's unique talent Widor quickly took him under his wing, inviting him to be his assistant at the great Cavaillé-Coll organ at St. Sulpice, and over the next three decades the men remained fast friends both in and out of the organ loft. For seven years, twice a week, Widor invited Dupré to lunch at the small Parisian café, Foyot's, near the Palais du Luxembourg. It was here with the comings and goings of Paris's artistic elite that Widor gradually introduced Dupré to the greatest writers, painters, performers, and artisans of the day. Upon Widor's retirement from St. Sulpice and public playing, the two men remained close when Dupré succeeded him in 1933. Toward the end of Widor's life, Dupré visited him daily as he sensed the end drawing near. Widor died on the evening of March 12, 1937, the very same evening Dupré (with Widor's help) had arranged a concert at La Trinité, Paris commemorating the hundredth anniversary of Guilmant's birth. Widor passed away while the concert was taking place, thus placing these two great masters of the organ, and the two greatest musical influences on Dupré's life, day for day, within a century: 1837–1937.

As the premier organist of the nineteenth century in France, Widor will forever be linked to Aristide Cavaillé-Coll, the nineteenth century's most influential French organ builder. Widor enumerated and praised Cavaillé-Coll's innovations on organ design in his preface to his Organ Symphonies:

"It is he [Cavaillé-Coll] who conceived the diverse wind pressures, the divided windchests, the pedal systems and the combination registers; he who applied for the first time Barker's pneumatic motors, created the family of harmonic stops, reformed and perfected the mechanics to such a point that each pipe—low or high, loud or soft—instantly obeys the touch of the finger.... From this result: the possibility of confining an entire division in a sonorous prison—opened or closed at will—the freedom of mixing timbres, the means of intensifying them or gradually tempering them, the freedom of tempos, the sureness of attacks, the balance of contrasts, and, finally, a whole blossoming of wonderful colors—a rich palette of the most diverse shades: harmonic flutes, gambas, bassoons, English horns, trumpets, celestes, flue stops and reed stops of a quality and variety unknown before."

This new wealth of color and dynamic palette made possible Widor's Organ Symphonies – multimovement solo organ works of grand symphonic scale. He composed ten, though with his last two symphonies Widor departed from the secular nature of Symphonies 1–8, creating two works based on Gregorian Chant and inspired by cathedral architecture: *Symphonie Gothique* (1899) and *Symphonie Romane* (1900). The *Symphonie Gothique* was heavily influenced by the church of Saint Ouen in Rouen, which contained Cavaillé-Coll's acknowledged masterpiece of organ-building. The second movement, *Andante Sostenuto*, heard this afternoon, is meant to evoke the calm, peaceful interior of this tremendous gothic edifice.

During Dupré's last years as a student at the Paris Conservatoire, Widor, as his composition teacher, encouraged him to enter the famous composition competition, the *Prix de Rome* (which he finally won on the third attempt in 1914). After his first failed attempt in the summer of 1912 Dupré rebelled against

the cantata world of the competition and decided to refresh his spirits at his summer home writing a new organ work, the Three Preludes and Fugues, Op. 7. A traditionalist of musical form and structure Dupré worked tirelessly in his compositions to perfect the structures of Bach, Buxtehude, and Handel, while simultaneously eliciting grand virtuosity and freedom in his improvisations. In this way Dupré's Three Preludes and Fugues transcend in perfect synthesis their neo-Baroque origins and offer a window into the future of modern organ playing technique. Today these works are standard repertoire, but one cannot overestimate their originality just before World War I. While even Widor declared them 'unplayable' upon seeing the score for the first time, Dupré's limitless technique allowed him to express clear and uncompromising visions of tone and timbre through each piece.

Written in the blazing key of B major the first Prelude and Fugue explodes onto the keyboard with a fiery carillon of repeated fourths and fifths with the main theme thundering forth in the pedals. Dupré sets this theme in canon and throughout the Prelude and concludes with a brilliant pedal solo. The Fugue subject carries the motif of fourths and fifths from the Prelude but now in melodic guise. Dupré follows the four-voice exposition (one of the most fearsome in all organ repertoire!) with two episodes: the first comprised of leaping octaves, and the second of snappy and unexpected syncopations. Both propel the work to a thrillingly triumphant close, which, in Dupré's own words befits a "triumphal solemnity, like Easter."

Perhaps the most elegant and eloquent of Dupré's early works for organ, the *Prelude and Fugue in F minor* seamlessly blends the Prelude with the Fugue such that one scarcely detects when one has ended and the other begun. Dupré embroiders the Prelude with a tracery of fast staccato notes threading their way through the entire movement while gentle melodies soar above and below. From a three-note fragment of the Prelude Dupré fashions a fugue subject perfectly balanced in the rise and fall of its architecture. This dreamy music flows so effortlessly, carrying the listener away such that one is barely aware of listening to a fugue at all.

The most innovative of the three, the third Prelude and Fugue, features light dexterous sixteenth notes scurrying over and around the long-note melody throughout. The shifting three and four-note pedal chords puzzled many a Parisian organist (including Widor!) when Dupré gave the first public performance in 1917. The boisterous, jig-like character of the Fugue features the same melody as the Prelude culminating in full organ deployed in spectacular fashion.

Louis Vierne, the third great musical mentor to Marcel Dupré, holds a unique place in Dupré's musical and personal past. Vierne first encountered the Dupré family when Marcel was only ten years old, having heard him just perform Bach's Fugue in G minor effortlessly and flawlessly. Vierne was at that time Guilmant's assistant at the Paris Conservatoire and Widor's assistant at St. Sulpice; in 1900 he was named titular organist of Notre-Dame in Paris, the most esteemed and coveted organ position in all of France. Never before had there been such cohesion between organist and his instrument with Vierne in this prized post. He fulfilled his duties with dedication and fervor, eager to restore the prestige the position had once had. In a short time, the organ loft of Notre-Dame became a meeting place of the musical, literary, and political elite of Paris. This synthesis of musician, organ, and building resulted in many of Vierne's finest organ compositions inspired by that great edifice of Notre-Dame whose every secret he discovered as the years passed by.

Virtually blind from birth Vierne's life was plagued by much misfortune. After the death of his father he became head of his household at sixteen; he divorced his wife in 1904 following her infidelity; World War I claimed the lives of both his son Jacques, and his brother René; he was passed over as head of the organ class at the Paris Conservatoire in favor of Eugène Gigout in 1911; he suffered various physical injuries that threatened amputation and eventual rehabilitation. Perhaps most lasting and emotionally damaging of all was the tumult-

tuous, catastrophic rupture he had with Dupré, his once closest of friends. In 1916 Vierne traveled to Lausanne, Switzerland to undergo intensive eye surgery in the desperate hopes of restoring his rapidly failing vision. He asked his friend and prized student Dupré to deputize for him at Notre-Dame for the five months he was away. These five months turned into five years as the surgery did not go as planned, and when Vierne returned much disagreement transpired between him and Dupré as to who was the actual organist of Notre-Dame. The rift was so fierce and tumultuous the two men never spoke again.

In happier, earlier times Vierne and Dupré (like Widor and Dupré) were the fondest of friends. Vierne frequently vacationed with the Dupré family at their Villa Julia-Marie in Normandy. It was here in 1912 (the same year Dupré wrote his *Three Preludes and Fugues, Op. 7*) that Vierne wrote his *Third Organ Symphony, Op. 28* and dedicated the work to his friend and student, Dupré. The Adagio from the *Third Organ Symphony* heard this afternoon was a favorite of Dupré's and he championed it and the Finale, playing them hundreds of times on his recital tours to America between 1921–1924. Sadly, it wasn't until after Vierne died in 1937 (interestingly while playing an organ recital at Notre-Dame with Maurice Duruflé) that Dupré played Vierne's music again in public after the bitterness of their fissure had passed.

From 1921–1924 while Dupré extensively toured America he wrote some of his most beautiful, beloved, and enduring organ music. His *Cortège et Litanie* stems from this period but with a complex history. It originated as a chamber music score for eleven instruments for a friend who was having a play performed in Paris. At the same time Dupré also wrote a solo piano score, and when he played this version for his American concert agent, Alexander Russell, Russell was so awestruck by the beauty of the piece he convinced Dupré to write two more versions: one for organ solo and one for organ and symphony orchestra (undoubtedly the most beautiful). For practical reasons the organ solo version heard this afternoon is the most frequently performed having received its premier in New York City (alongside the *Variations sur un Noël*) in 1923. Richly harmonized, the melody of the Cortège is one of Dupré's most beloved melodies. The poignant repetitions of the Litanie begin quietly, building in intensity leading to a triumphant return of the Cortège theme before a brilliant, brief toccata.

During this same period of performing and compositional productivity on his first transcontinental concert tour Dupré wrote his *Variations sur un Noël* in 1922. In his memoirs Dupré recalled writing each variation while traveling by train between cities ranging from New York to San Diego. In America he discovered the orchestral organs of Ernest Skinner which boasted electric stop action enabling the performer to rapidly change tone colors of the organ (so very different from the comparatively slow, cumbersome ventill pedals of the Cavaillé-Coll organs back home). The resulting variations embody a kaleidoscope of textures, colors, timbres, and moods that stunned audiences at the 1923 premier (similar to the *Three Preludes and Fugues, Op. 7* a few years earlier). From the stillness of the opening theme to the tempestuous final fugue and toccata, Dupré transforms the organ from the stodgy recesses of French Catholicism into a phantasmagoric portal of yet undiscovered musical poetry.

After briefly stating the theme at the outset Dupré follows with ten variations divided into two categories: those where the melody is clearly heard in unison or counterpoint; and those “orchestral” variations where tone, color, and texture absorb the contours of the theme. These include a rapturous movement for flutes in Var. 2, a mesmerizing flute solo in Var. 5, a circus-like demonic dance in Var. 7, and a stream of swelling chromatic thirds and sixths in Var. 9. To conclude, a spellbinding fugue and rousing toccata erupt off the last page into a festive peal of Noel Christmas bells.

–Christopher Jacobson

Biography

Duke University Chapel Organist and Organist at Duke Divinity School, Christopher Jacobson, FRCO, is active as a versatile concert organist, conductor, accompanist, guest clinician, and teacher. At Duke he founded and directs the Duke Evensong Singers in services and concerts, oversees the training of the Chapel's organ scholars, and plays the organ for over 150 services each year.

As a soloist, Mr. Jacobson has presented organ recitals across North America, Europe, and Australia. His recordings appear on the Dutch record label Pentatone Classics both as an organ soloist and accompanist. He has won top prizes in numerous organ competitions, including the National Young Artist Competition of the American Guild of Organists, the Miami International Organ Competition, and the John R. Rodland Competition in sacred music. In addition to maintaining an active recital schedule, he has presented performances of the complete organ works of Johann Sebastian Bach across the United States to critical acclaim.

An active ensemble performer Mr. Jacobson is in demand as an accompanist and continuo player. He is a 2017 Grammy-nominated organist for his work with conductor Brian A. Schmidt and the South Dakota Chorale in the world premiere recording of Marcel Tyberg's two Masses. His work as an accompanist has taken him all over the world working regularly with choirs and orchestras in the United States, United Kingdom, France, and Germany. Recent engagements have included performing and recording at Victoria Hall with the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande in Geneva, Switzerland, and with early music ensembles including Three Notch'd Road in Charlottesville, Virginia.

One of the few Americans to hold the Fellowship Diploma from the Royal College of Organists (FRCO), Mr. Jacobson is in demand as conductor, organist, and adjudicator, and has led choirs on cathedral residencies in North America and England. Most recently he conducted the Duke Evensong Singers in choral residencies at Gloucester Cathedral and Westminster Abbey in July 2018.

Before moving to Duke Mr. Jacobson was previously Associate Organist and Choirmaster at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, Columbia, South Carolina, and Assistant Organist and Assistant Director of Music at Washington National Cathedral where he assisted in the daily training of the choirs of Men and Boys and Men and Girls and playing the organ for numerous services including the State Funeral of President Gerald Ford.

Mr. Jacobson is a 2006 graduate of the Eastman School of Music where he earned the Master of Music degree in Organ Performance and the Sacred Music Diploma. He graduated with a Bachelor of Music degree with highest distinction in Organ Performance from St. Olaf College. His teachers and mentors have included David Higgs and William Porter at Eastman, and John Ferguson at St. Olaf. Mr. Jacobson is a graduate of Woodberry Forest and the American Boychoir School where he was a treble chorister under James Litton.

Acknowledgments

The Chapel thanks Dr. Zebulon Highben, Dr. Philip Cave, Mr. James Todd, and Mr. John Santoianni for helping to make today's recital possible.