MAA/AGO Tuesday Noon Organ Recitals

February 9, 2021

Andy Heller, organ

Program

Prelude and Fugue in C Minor, Op. 37, no 1 Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Sonata 3 in A Major, Op 65 Felix Mendelssohn

Choral 1 in E Major Cesar Frank (1822-1890)

Notes

Felix Mendelssohn was a star in England: he was known and loved throughout musical circles and in society as well. His influence on English musical style, especially in the realm of church music, was felt long after his death in 1847. We know him today primarily through his compositions, and perhaps as an early proponent of the music of Bach, but audiences of the day also admired him as a performer on the piano and organ, as well as his conducting.

These three preludes, dedicated to Thomas Attwood, organist at St. Paul’s Cathedral, London, were published in 1837, and represented the first organ music written by a major composer after the death of Bach. But they came with a problem: when Novello published them, they were unplayable in England, because English [and American] organs of the era contained small, one-octave pedalboards, or none at all [that’s why there exists a four-hand version of the Prelude and Fugue in C Minor that was played by Mendelssohn and Attwood]. This sent organists and organ builders scrambling to modernize their instruments to allow them to play the music of Mendelssohn and the newly-rediscovered Bach. After Mendelssohn, English and American organs adapted the German “C-Compass” keyboards, with at least two octaves of pedals, also starting at low C.

The Prelude and Fugue in C Minor encompasses Mendelssohn’s style: it is busy, energetic, compact and contrapuntal. It uses the forms of Bach while incorporating the musical language of early romanticism.

The Six Sonatas, op. 65, were written in 1844-45, and published originally by Coventry and Hollier. More often heard than the earlier preludes and fugues, they are a staple of the repertoire, and were immensely popular in 19th century programs. While some follow the typical Sonata style, [big opening and closing movements, lyric pieces in the middle], Sonata III does not: it is virtually a one-movement Sonata with a quiet epilogue attached. The impressive opening uses a triumphant theme in full organ, leading to a turbulent fugue in A minor, using the using a “questioning” theme featuring a prominent tritone, all over a pedal cantus firmus using the German Chorale *Aus Tiefer Not.*  Then a second 16th note countermelody is introduced, building a crescendo to the re-introduction of the opening theme. The second and last movement is a sweet *Andante Tranquillo*; an unexpectedly serene conclusion after the Sturm und Drang of the opening movement.

In 1890, the final year of his life, Cesar Franck suffered an accident where he was hit by a trolley car. Although he recovered from the accident, his health failed rapidly during the summer of that year, possibly, but not certainly as a result of his accident. During this time, he wrote his final compositions, the Three Chorales for Organ. Unlike the earlier Mendelssohn works, which are full of technical mastery of conventional forms, Franck chose cyclical form and chromatic, Wagnerian harmonies, not for technical display, but to create musical poetry. The first chorale is perhaps the most austere of the set, with its long chorale-like opening theme, which recurs in subtle variations throughout the piece, building with long, lyrical melodies ever-so-slowly to a triumphant climax.

I chose to play this piece when I realized that I had not yet performed it, even though I had worked on it exactly 50 years ago with my teacher, David Spicer, as a high school student. Better late than never, I dedicate it to his memory.

-Andrew Heller