FREDERICK SWANN, *organist*

Friends of the Kotzschmar Organ
Tuesday, August 2, 2016 • 7:30 pm • Merrill Auditorium • Portland, Maine

Notes on the Program by Nathan A. Randall

Bingham: *Bells of Riverside*

The bells in question are those of the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Carillon at Riverside Church, the largest carillon in the world, housed in a 392-foot tower on Manhattan's Morningside Heights. On the quarter hour, an automated mechanism plays a theme derived from Wagner's opera *Parsifal* (rather than the more usual "Westminster Chimes").

While living nearby, American organist and composer Seth Bingham often heard the bells and used their tune as the basis for this musical picture. Introduced on the pedals, then in massive chords for full organ, the *Parsifal* theme pervades the entire composition (presented in many different garbs). *Bells of Riverside* is the last of Bingham's *Five Pieces,* Opus 36, published in 1939 and is dedicated to Harold V. Milligan, who preceded Virgil Fox and Frederick Swann as Riverside's organist.

Though Seth Bingham grew up on a Connecticut farm, his musical abilities were early evident and his education impeccable: he studied composition at Yale with Horatio Parker and organ with Harry Benjamin Jepson and later travelled to Paris to study with Guilmant, D'Indy, and Widor. Bingham served as organist / choirmaster at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church from 1913 to 1951, and taught at Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary.

La Montaine: *Even Song*

Composed in 1962, *Even Song* casts an evocative nocturnal spell by the simplest of musical means. In A-B-A form, the music begins with a lyrical melody for solo flute wending its way over an accompaniment of gently undulating strings. In the mid-section, the mood grows darker as the texture grows more complex and chromatic. But, with the reappearance of the opening flute melody, the music ends quietly and lyrically, as it began.

John La Montaine is one of American music's best-kept secrets (alas!). Born in Oak Park, Illinois, he studied composition with Howard Hanson and Bernard Rogers at the Eastman School, as well as Nadia Boulanger in Paris. Unlike most of his contemporaries, he did not to follow an academic career, choosing instead the life of a full-time composer. La Montaine's First Piano Concerto, *In Time of War,* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1959.

Stanley: *Toccata for Flute Stops*

John Stanley was born in London. Though a childhood accident had left him nearly blind, his musical gifts and prodigious memory enabled him to become one of the capital's leading musicians. At the age of 17, he was the youngest person ever to obtain the B.Mus. from Oxford; at 22, he was appointed organist of the prestigious Temple Church, a position he retained until his death in 1786.

Between 1748 and 1754, Stanley published three sets of "Ten Voluntaries for the Organ or Harpsichord." The *Toccata for Flute Stops* began life as a "cornet voluntary" from the third set (Opus 7). Typical of Baroque compositions, the original consisted of only two voices: a florid treble accompanied by a slower bass line. (Stanley would have expected the performer to "fill out" this skeletal structure as his ability and taste allowed.) The original was for manuals only since English organs of the period were much less sophisticated than their German cousins and few had even a rudimentary pedalboard.

In 1933, the English organist Harry Wall published an "arrangement for the Modern Organ" assigning the bass line to the pedals, and filling in the harmonies. In the spirit of the original, Frederick Swann has further "filled out" Wall's version, exemplary of both his own prodigious ability and refined taste!

Bach: Prelude and Fugue in G Major, BWV 541

Here is Bach in one of his most ebullient moods. The G-Major Prelude and Fugue is thought to have been composed during his years at Weimar (1708-1717) and "re-polished" around 1733, when Bach wrote out a new copy of the music for his eldest son Wilhelm Friedemann, the version scholars consider definitive.

The Prelude opens with a joyful solo line that skyrockets up the G-major triad, then tumbles ever-downward to the very bottom of the keyboard. As it climbs back to the original pinnacle, the music accumulates energy that bursts forth in a full-blown movement in the Italian style. Bach maintains the forward drive not only with artfully chosen modulations, but also by the increasing prominence of a persistent motive in the pedal: "three shorts and a long" (also a favorite motive of Beethoven's).

Though Bach rarely links the material of the organ fugues with their preludes, this motive has gained such momentum that he here makes an exception: the "three shorts and a long" is transformed into the germ of the fugue subject. The Fugue builds energetically towards the dramatic climax of an unexpected diminished-seventh chord under a fermata (by Baroque convention an invitation for the performer to improvise a cadenza). The fugue proceeds to its cheerful close with a series of *stretto* entries in which the subject appears in overlapping pairs.

Franck: Choral in B Minor

In August and September of 1890, César Franck wrote three large-scale works that he entitled, simply, *Choral.* Although they are not based on Lutheran chorales (but rather themes of Franck's own devising), and although their structures and harmonies are clearly Romantic, Franck's awareness of (and homage to) the music of Johann Sebastian Bach lies just below the surface.

This is perhaps most evident in the Second Choral in B Minor. The music begins as a *passacaglia* whose lugubrious theme is introduced in the pedals, followed by several variations. Next, we hear the "chorale" itself, presented softly, cloaked in highly Romantic harmonies, and closing in B-*major*.

A dramatic *fantasie* follows, introducing a lengthy fugal exposition that builds to a powerful restatement of the "chorale"; the *passacaglia* theme in the pedals reveals that they were related all along. As the intensity grows, the musical material fragments until the *passacaglia* theme returns in the manuals, *fortissimo,* in triple-octaves. Unexpectedly, the power subsides, and the work ends wistfully, *pianissimo,* with reminiscences of the "chorale" (again in B-*major*).

The *Three Chorals* were Franck's last compositions, written as he was dying of injuries he received when his cab was struck by a horsecar: he died in November. Considered by many to be the most important organ works written after the death of Bach, they are clearly Franck's musical "last will and testament."

Weaver: Introduction and Fugue on *St. Denio*

John Weaver's *Introduction and Fugue* artfully embodies not only the melody of the old Welsh hymn-tune, but the sense of Walter Chalmer Smith's 1867 text as well.

> Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
> In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
> Most blessèd, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
> Almighty, victorious, Thy great Name we praise.

The *Introduction* begins cryptically: though the hymn-tune hovers in the background, it is "hid from our ears" by roulades for solo stops and flashes of fanfares suggesting Divine majesty. These alternate with mystical clouds of chords on the string stops that gradually grow more prominent and reveal more and more fragments of the hymn-tune, though the tune as a whole remains "inaccessible."

The vigorous *Fugue* reflects the sentiments of the 3rd and 4th lines of the text: "glorious … almighty … victorious …" (Perhaps use of the archaic fugal form even refers to the "Ancient of Days"?) Weaver avoids the obvious strategy of using the hymn-tune as his fugue subject; rather, it forms the counter-subject. Following the fugal exposition, phrases of the hymn-tune appear in chordal flourishes recalling

the fanfares of the Introduction. More and more of the tune comes into focus, until we hear its concluding cadence associated with the words "Thy great name we praise." A *fortissimo* coda brings the entire work to a brilliant conclusion.

The Introduction and Fugue on *St. Denio* was commissioned by the Crystal Cathedral Choir as a retirement gift to Mr. Swann in 1998.

John Weaver is no stranger to the Kotzschmar Organ, having played in our summer recital series for fifty consecutive years. Highlights of his distinguished career include serving (simultaneously) on the faculties of both Philadelphia's Curtis Institute and The Juilliard School in Manhattan, where he also served as Director of Music at the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church for 35 years.

Russell: ***The Bells of Ste. Anne de Beaupré***

The Bells of St. Anne de Beaupré is the second of the Russell's *St. Lawrence Sketches,* published in 1921. A composer's note printed in the score indicates that the music was composed "on site" in 1916, and outlines the musical content:

> *"The Chimes of St. Anne Church, Beaupré, Canada (actual notes) – gathering of the faithful – chanting of the Choir "Bonne St. Anne, prier pour nous" – the procession – the Miracle – benediction – bells in distance."*

Alexander Russell was a major figure in the American organ world of the 1920s and '30s. Born in Franklin, Tennessee in 1880, he graduated *summa cum laude* from Syracuse University in 1901, and was immediately appointed professor of piano and organ there. Between 1906 and 1908, he studied in Berlin and Paris with Leopold Godowsky and Harold Bauer (piano), and Charles-Marie Widor (organ and composition). Returning to America, he became organist at Wanamaker's New York branch, and eventually the director of the musical programs at both the New York and Philadelphia stores, becoming a close collaborator with Charles M. Courboin. He organized and ran Wanamaker's artists management enterprise, responsible for bringing Marcel Dupré to America for the first time. Russell was the first instructor in music at Princeton University (where he also directed the glee club).

Hebble: ***Heraldings***

Heraldings was commissioned in 1982 to celebrate the dedication of the mammoth new organ at Robert Schuller's Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California. As Mr. Swann observes, "It is a musical vehicle to feature several and varied trumpet stops in the organ."

Introductory fanfares conjure images of medieval herald trumpeters. These give way to a joyous central section in ragtime featuring the Tuba. Massive fanfares return (this time thoroughly modern ones) combined with reminiscences of the ragtime tune.

Robert Hebble is a graduate of Yale University and The Juilliard School, studied composition with Vittorio Gianinni and Roger Sessions, and spent a year of private study with Nadia Boulanger in Paris. Virgil Fox was one of the first to recognize Hebble's creative gifts, appointing him as his assistant at Riverside Church at the age of sixteen. His friendship with both Fox and Fred Swann goes back more than 60 years.

Barber: ***Adagio for Strings***

The *Adagio,* perhaps Samuel Barber's best-known and most beloved work, began life in 1936 as the second movement of his String Quartet, Opus 11. Almost immediately, Barber arranged the movement for string orchestra. In this version, the music became generally known following a broadcast in November, 1938 by Arturo Toscanini and the NBC Symphony Orchestra, who subsequently recorded it. Some years later, Schirmer's published a transcription for organ.

However, this evening Mr. Swann offers us the rare opportunity to hear a unique version (existing only in manuscript) given to him by Virgil Fox, and "made many years ago by a nameless friend in consultation with Barber."

Willan: *Introduction, Passacaglia, and Fugue* in E-flat Minor

Though born and trained in England, Healey Willan emigrated to Toronto, Canada in 1913. By the end of his life, he was generally considered "the Dean of Canadian composers." In 1914, he was appointed organist / choirmaster of St. Paul's Anglican Church, Bloor Street (Toronto's largest), the home of a magnificent new organ by Casavant Frères (though of decidedly English character). In 1921, he resigned to become Precentor at Toronto's Anglo-Catholic parish of Saint Mary Magdalene, where his cultivation of Gregorian chant and numerous compositions for choir made him world famous, influencing several generations of Anglican musicians.

In 1916, Willan composed the present work in response to a friend's jibe that "only a German philosophical mind could write a proper passacaglia," a remark thought to have been occasioned (in part) by Max Reger's *Introduction, Passacaglia, and Fugue* in E-minor (Opus 127) of 1913. Willan took up the gauntlet, and one detects a good-natured spirit of "one-upmanship" in the composition (for example, the six flats of Willan's key of E-flat minor make it much more difficult for the pedals than Reger's key of E-minor).

The *Introduction* begins *pianissimo* with a chromatically descending bass line in the pedals accompanied by mystical chords whose harmonic meaning is obscure. But (like Reger's example) these are soon overwhelmed with stormy chords and tumultuous chromatic flourishes. Unexpectedly, the *Introduction* ends *pianissimo,* as it began.

The *Passacaglia* itself begins in the traditional manner with the presentation of the 8-measure theme (*Andante moderato,* in 3/4 meter) on the pedals. However, the theme is unusual, ending not only on the dominant but also on a weak beat, features Willan exploits in the variations that follow. Of widely differing characters, they show off not only the composer's musical imagination and technical skill, but also the organ's full range of colors. (It's amusing to note that Willan claimed to have composed each variation on a trolley car as he commuted from downtown Toronto to the shore of Lake Simcoe, where his family was spending the summer.) The eighteenth variation is marked "quasi-Chorale" for the Echo organ: it is the calm before the storm!

The *Fugue* begins with the usual entry of four voices of a theme derived from the first half of the *Passacaglia.* During the episodes, the music grows more chromatic as Willan explores the theme's potential for development. An extended set of middle entries in *stretto* (where each voice enters twice as soon as before) reveals the composer's contrapuntal mastery. Another set of entries accompanied by running 16^{th}-notes leads to a powerful cadence in the major. Apparently the work's conclusion, this turns out to be tonal sleight-of-hand. In a surprising section in 3/4 meter over a long-held dominant pedal, Willan uses the *stretto* idea again, though this time the entries seem more like fanfares. The return of the *Passacaglia* theme in the pedals, *fortissimo* in octaves, signals the nineteenth (and final) variation, whose "crashing chords" in the manuals recall those of the *Introduction,* but now imbued with a clear harmonic goal: the final chord of E-flat major!