

SIX SATURDAYS WITH
LOUIS VIERNE JOHN SCOTT · ORGAN



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JANUARY 9, 2010 SYMPHONY N° 1
JANUARY 16, 2010 SYMPHONY N° 2
JANUARY 23, 2010 SYMPHONY N° 3
JANUARY 30, 2010 SYMPHONY N° 4
FEBRUARY 6, 2010 SYMPHONY N° 5
FEBRUARY 13, 2010 SYMPHONY N° 6

AT 4 PM

KINDLY REMEMBER
TO TURN OFF ALL CELL PHONES AND PAGERS

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE

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John Scott, LVO, DMus

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The Reverend Charles F. Wallace

Headmaster, Saint Thomas Choir School

*With sincere thanks to Larry Trupiano,
for his work in tuning and maintaining all the organs at Saint Thomas*

LOUIS VIERNE

(1870-1937)

Organist of the Cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris for almost 40 years, Louis Vierne was the great romantic among the French composers of his time. At birth Vierne was officially classified as blind, but an operation during childhood enabled him to retain a limited amount of vision for most of his life. His naturally sensitive and introspective character was intensified by his near-blindness: he described his own personality as 'hypersensitive, the source of intense joy and inexpressible pain', and summed up his artistic creed in this revealing declaration:

I do not believe that a musician who, as a man, is incapable of love or suffering, will ever create anything of real beauty.

Vierne came from a well-connected musical family, and when he was nine years old the frail youngster was taken to Sainte-Clotilde in Paris to hear César Franck play the organ. The emotional intensity of Franck's music overwhelmed him; he nearly fainted, and had to be carried out of the church. But this experience confirmed his vocation, and he vowed to devote his life to music: 'The good Lord, who has taken my eyes, will surely help me'. At the Institut des Jeunes Aveugles (The School for the Blind) his exceptional musical talent was nurtured and developed throughout nine years of intensive study, and then he moved on to the Paris Conservatoire, where he studied with Franck and then with Widor. As his studies neared completion, Vierne was promoted from pupil to assistant, first at Widor's church, Saint-Sulpice (from 1892 until 1900), and then at the Conservatoire itself, where he acted as deputy to the Organ Professors from 1894 until 1911. In the autumn of 1898 he became engaged to an 18-year-old singer, Arlette Taskin. The marriage took place at Saint-Sulpice the following spring, and in May 1900 Vierne won the prestigious post of Organist of Notre-Dame. As he approached his 30th birthday, his dreams of professional success and domestic happiness all seemed to have been realised.

But things soon began to go wrong. The Viernes had three children, but after only five years their marriage began to show signs of strain, and there were dark clouds on the horizon: in his memoirs Vierne describes 1906 as '*le début des catastrophes*'. The next twelve years were marked by a traumatic

procession of personal and professional problems, disappointments and tragedies – the collapse of his marriage and subsequent divorce, the failure of his lifetime ambition to become Organ Professor at the Conservatoire, the death of his younger son, and a grim sequence of accidents and illnesses, including a broken leg that almost resulted in amputation, typhoid fever, double pneumonia, and terrible problems with his eyes. In 1916 Vierne left Paris for Switzerland, where he had four years of treatment and operations for glaucoma and a secondary cataract, which at one stage entailed his spending six months in a darkened room; it was here that he received news of the death on the battlefield of his elder son Jacques (aged just 17), and his beloved brother René, another talented musician who had been a constant source of support and encouragement. When Vierne returned to Paris in 1920, he was almost penniless, frail and prematurely aged. But he survived his ‘years of torment’; during the 1920s his playing career began to flourish again, and concert tours took him all over Europe and even to the USA. In the 1930s he fell victim to increasing loneliness and depression, and losing the desire to compose, he transferred his creative energies into writing his memoirs. He died suddenly of heart failure on 2nd June 1937 at the console of Notre-Dame, in the middle of a recital.

With most composers biographical details of this kind might be considered of little relevance to their music. But not with Vierne: as the great British organist Ralph Downes once wrote, ‘Being a real Romantic, Vierne’s compositional activity was essentially related to his own emotional life – in a sense rather like our own Edward Elgar in that a period of dark depression was liable to be the herald of great creative resurgence...’ It was Vierne’s favourite poet, Verlaine, who said that ‘*L’Art est d’être absolument soi-même*’, and Vierne was always absolutely true to himself. Whether he was composing for organ, piano, voice, chamber groups, or orchestra, he poured his heart into his work, and the joys and sorrows of his turbulent life are faithfully reflected in his music: ‘*Je n’ai eu qu’un seul but,*’ he once said, ‘– *émouvoir.*’ ‘I have only ever had one aim – to communicate emotion and touch the heart...’

If Vierne’s love of music as a means of expression was inspired by César Franck, it was from Widor that he learnt the mechanics of his craft as composer and organist – mastery of musical forms, clarity of structure, and understanding of the specialised style of playing demanded

by a large organ in a resonant building, a style characterised by grand rhetorical gestures, massed registrations, and spacious polyphonic textures. And it was Widor who first encouraged Vierne to compose organ Symphonies. Spanning a period of some thirty years, these six Symphonies form the creative heart of Vierne's varied output of all kinds of music. They stand like mighty pillars marking the various stages of his life and his compositional career, from the youthful optimism of his early years, and onwards through the trials and tribulations of middle age. Finally attaining a hard-won sense of serenity, and ending in a joyful affirmation of the ultimate value of human life, they form a rare and moving testament to the resilience of the human spirit, in the repertoire of what can often be a rather impersonal instrument.

SYMPHONY N^o 1 IN D MINOR, Op. 14

Prélude – Fugue – Pastorale – Allegro vivace – Andante – Final

Published in 1899, the First Symphony predates Vierne's appointment to Notre-Dame; it was conceived for the great organ of Saint-Sulpice, where he played as assistant to Widor throughout the 1890s. Like most of Widor's own 'Symphonies', this six-movement work is a suite of contrasting individual pieces in conventional genres. The shadow of both Vierne's teachers can clearly be detected behind much of the music, but there is also genuine originality here, and a sheer mastery of the instrument that announced the arrival of an outstanding new talent. This was indeed 'a milestone in the history of organ music' (Jean Langlais).

The solemn *Prélude* exhibits a masterly control of tone and texture, starting slowly and quietly, and building up to a thrilling climax; the *Fugue* that follows is more conventional, but cleverly constructed with a wealth of contrapuntal devices, ending with a grand flourish. Next comes a delicately registered *Pastorale*, in which the solo oboe and flute of the opening are contrasted with chords for the vox humana in the central trio. If this movement contains more than an echo of Widor, the featherlight *Allegro vivace* is pure Vierne, a balletic *moto perpetuo*, with an expressive canon for solo trumpet in the trio section. The fifth movement is a serene and gently passionate *Andante* for soft string and foundation stops. The main pedal theme of the toccata-style *Final* is reminiscent of the

Marseillaise. With its canonic second subject and persistent timpani-motif in the bass, this exhilarating piece maintains an unflagging rhythmic momentum, even in the quieter central section. Its infectious energy and melodic appeal ensured that it became a popular favourite as soon as it was published, and so it has remained ever since.

SYMPHONY N^o 2 IN E MINOR, Op. 20

Allegro – Choral – Scherzo – Cantabile – Final

Monsieur Vierne's symphony is a most remarkable work; the most generous musicality is combined with ingenious discoveries in the special sonorities of the organ. Old J.S. Bach, the father of us all, would have been well pleased with M. Vierne.

The critic who was so impressed when he heard two movements of Vierne's Second Organ Symphony in 1903 was Claude Debussy, who clearly recognised the value of this monumental work, even if its musical aesthetic was very different from his own.

The First Symphony had been very much in the Widor mould, but in the Second, Vierne began to flex his compositional muscles. 'Romantic' he may have been, but he preferred to express himself in the traditional classic forms, and now he began to aim at a more satisfying and cohesive formal structure. From the Second onwards, his Symphonies contain all the elements of the classic sonata/symphony – a big sonata-form allegro, a scherzo, a slow movement and a finale – but always with the addition of an extra movement, either an introductory prelude or a second slow movement. And four of the last five Symphonies (all except the Third) adopt the 'cyclic form' favored by César Franck, in which the whole work is based on transformations of one or two essential motifs.

The Symphony's opening sonata-form *Allegro* introduces the two themes; the dramatic rhetorical gestures of the first (which we might call 'A') form a striking contrast to the smooth, flowing contours of the second ('B'), and these two ideas are developed and combined with some ingenuity, before a brilliant cadenza of scales and trills leads back to the recapitulation of the opening material. The introspective melody

of the *Choral* is a new version of theme 'B'. It is presented quietly on the pedals at the start, but its gentle reverie is disturbed by the appearance of a more agitated chromatic motif; the alternation of these two contrasting moods leads to increasing tension, finally culminating in the triumph of the chorale in the heroic final pages.

For his effervescent *Scherzo* Vierne took a popular scherzo by Eugène Gigout as a model, using the same key of E major, the same metre, and very similar textures. But the lighter tone-colours and the subtle impressionist tint of Vierne's harmonies produce a rather different effect; this is music of enchanting delicacy and individuality. The melody played by a cello stop on the pedals in the 'trio' sections is a new version of theme 'A'. The lyrical *Cantabile* foreshadows the richly expressive slow movements that are a feature of all Vierne's later symphonies – a real song without words. The soaring clarinet melody is again derived from theme 'A'.

In the *Final* Vierne draws together the threads of the preceding movements in another substantial sonata-form allegro. After an arresting opening flourish, it begins with the cello theme from the *Scherzo*, transformed into a brisk, rhythmic march. Later on, theme 'A' reappears, and a lengthy development plunges the music into a maze of dark and remote tonalities, but it gradually fights its way back to the home key of E minor. A short cadenza leads back to the return of the march, and the Symphony ends with a triumphant peroration in E major, with theme 'A' thundering out for the last time on the pedals beneath a joyous cascade of broken chords.

SYMPHONY N^o 3 IN F# MINOR, Op. 28

Allegro maestoso – Cantilène – Intermezzo – Adagio – Final

The Third Symphony dates from a turbulent period in the composer's life, the summer of 1911. Vierne was still suffering from the emotional fallout of his divorce. Then in March his beloved mother and his ever-supportive mentor Alexandre Guilmant both died in the same week. And in June his professional life appeared to collapse in ruins when, as the natural successor to Guilmant as Organ Professor at the Conservatoire, he was passed over in favor of the elderly Eugène

Gigout. Confessing that he was 'stricken by a crisis of profound despair', Vierne took refuge in composition, and the result was what many still consider to be his finest work.

The opening sonata-form *Allegro maestoso* begins with an angry gesture of defiance, in unison on the full organ. This jagged rhythmic motif is followed by a smoother, more melodic idea, and the two themes are developed and recapitulated in concise and masterly fashion. The atmosphere of this opening movement remains tense throughout, and the harmonic language is richly coloured by passages of dense, tortuous chromaticism; this marks a notable advance on the more conventional language of Vierne's earlier Symphonies, and was to become an increasingly significant element in the music of his later years.

If the opening of the song-like *Cantilène*, with its angular melody for a soft orchestral reed, distantly recalls the similarly-titled slow movement of Widor's *Symphonie Romane*, the heartfelt central section is pure Vierne, and the *Intermezzo* that follows is a little masterpiece of captivating charm and originality. The glorious *Adagio* for massed foundation stops is the true heart of the Symphony; it has often been described as Wagnerian in inspiration, and there is certainly a yearning, Tristanesque feel to these soaring melodic lines. But the hothouse atmosphere is soon dispelled by the stormy *Final*, which returns to and intensifies the mood of the first movement. This fiery toccata is propelled by a will of steel; goaded along from start to finish by spinning patterns of sixteenth-notes, it ends the Symphony in a rampaging blaze of sound.

SYMPHONY N^o 4 IN G MINOR, Op. 32

Prélude – Allegro – Menuet – Romance – Final

Vierne composed his Fourth Organ Symphony during the fateful summer of 1914, when the peace of Europe was shattered by the outbreak of war. This remarkable work gives the impression of having been written at white heat; the five movements are all quite concise, and fierce emotion is restrained by a straitjacket of rigorous structure and clear, logical counterpoint. During one of his darkest periods (1907-8), Vierne wrote an orchestral symphony, and the nostalgic verse from Verlaine that stands at the head of that score could serve as a motto for

this work too: 'O can it be that there were once bright days and summer nights?' Vierne himself said that the Symphony was 'brightened for a moment by the fragments of a happy dream, but ends in a fever'. Contrasting the lost happiness of the past with the turbulence of the present, the dainty *Minuet* and tender *Romance* form an oasis in the midst of the storm; this almost Mahlerian conception is intensified by the distant tonality of these movements – E major and D flat major, the furthest possible key from the G minor of the outer movements.

A brooding *Prélude* introduces the two themes on which the whole Symphony is based; the sinuous first theme, creeping up from the depths, is subjected to three chromatic, contrapuntal developments, separated by the brief, enigmatic trumpet call of the second theme. In a perceptive review of the Symphony, published in America in March 1918, this movement was described as 'a sombre Prelude, heavy throughout with a sense of the inevitable, the irrevocable . . . It moves in a vague, wandering tonality, the syncopated bass giving always the sensation of haunting dread, of the terror that creeps along close behind one pursued. . .'

In the marching sonata-form *Allegro*, a strongly rhythmic version of the trumpet call supplies the main material, with a lyrical expansion of the other theme as second subject. The central development begins with a short fugue, and this soon leads to the emphatic reprise of the opening pages; the thundering tattoo of the drums can be heard in the hammered rhythm of the pedals at the end.

With the *Menuet*, the whole atmosphere suddenly changes; delicate textures and formal antiphonal phrases evoke a lost world of order, security and innocence. The central trio is in the style of a musette, with warm diatonic harmonies over a drone bass. If this movement might be interpreted as a dream of childhood, the exquisite *Romance* is a dream of love, the melodic line typical of Vierne in its poised but passionate intensity. In the middle, the brooding music of the *Prelude* attempts to cast ominous shadows, but it is miraculously transformed, soaring to a lyrical climax, and subsiding into a delicately-scored reprise of the opening melody. The reverie of the lingering final cadence is abruptly swept away by the onset of the tempestuous *Final* – a headlong gallop towards the abyss, with the melodic contours of the two motto themes absorbed into a relentless torrent of triplet eighth-notes. There is no hope or optimism in the final major chord – rather, a grim gesture of defiance.

SYMPHONY N^o 5 IN A MINOR, Op. 47
Grave – Allegro molto marcato – Tempo di scherzo ma non troppo vivo – Larghetto – Final

Reacting against the excesses of late romanticism, and looking to a bright new future after the horrors of the War, Parisian musical culture in the Twenties was dominated by jazz, neoclassicism, and the brittle wit of Jean Cocteau and *Les Six*. Vierne was totally out of sympathy with this new aesthetic, and the Fifth Symphony is his most monumental work – a triumphant affirmation of the traditional values in which he believed. As always with Vierne, the structure of each movement is clearly defined, but here the paragraphs are broader, the developments more leisurely, the melodic lines more expansive, and the harmonic language more advanced in its heady chromaticism.

The Symphony is constructed in cyclic form, from two basic motifs. They are introduced in an atmospheric prelude (*Grave*); the first is a fairly neutral musical building-block (a chain of descending thirds), while the second is more overtly emotional – a yearning, Wagnerian phrase, containing a distinctive leap of a seventh, with distinct echoes of *Tristan and Isolde*. In the powerful sonata-form *Allegro molto marcato* that follows, motif 1 is inverted and given a strong rhythmic profile, while motif 2 forms the lyrical second subject. Throughout the lengthy exposition, development and recapitulation, Vierne displays a masterly control of tension and relaxation, perfectly pacing his climaxes, and finally bringing all the musical threads together in a thunderous coda.

The impish *Scherzo* is a technical and imaginative tour-de-force, based on a fragmented version of motif 2; in the two trio sections, motif 1 appears on a growling clarinet deep in the bass. Composed on the banks of Lake Maggiore during a summer holiday in Italy in 1923, the *Larghetto* is bathed in the mood of romantic nostalgia that lay at the heart of Vierne's musical personality. The eloquent melody is again derived from 2, while a syncopated version of 1 inspires the more animated central section. In the evocative final pages, the return of the main theme is accompanied by a murmur of sixteenth-notes, which is finally stilled in a coda of exquisite and inimitable serenity.

The major-key *Final* begins like a conventional French toccata, but in fact this too is a substantial sonata-form allegro, and it encompasses a

wide range of moods and dynamics. The two familiar motifs again supply first and second subjects, and their extensive development continues the musical argument of the second movement of the Symphony, in the same highly chromatic style. But with the return of the toccata figuration, a fresh wind blows the shadows away, and the music explodes into a triumphant and unclouded A major, embracing both themes in a final climax of prolonged and breathtaking brilliance.

SYMPHONY N^o 6 IN B MINOR, Op. 59

Introduction et Allegro – Aria – Scherzo – Adagio – Final

The Sixth Symphony represents the peak of Vierne's achievement as composer and organist. The concentrated intensity of the Third and Fourth and the leisurely romanticism of the Fifth are here combined into a work of perfect proportions and unflagging inspiration – not to mention an experimental technical exuberance that one can scarcely credit from a frail, prematurely aged, almost blind, sixty-year-old man: in its time, this Symphony was one of the most technically demanding organ works ever published in France. Vierne wrote it during a long summer holiday at Menton on the French Riviera in the summer of 1930, and the whole work seems to be animated by the spirit of the sea – a kind of organist's *La Mer*. Vierne spent his days sitting on the beach, composing the music in his head, and then 'wrote it down' in braille. Finally, in spite of the severe limitations of his vision, he undertook the enormous task of writing out this long and complex score on large sheets of manuscript paper. This painstaking labor is immortalised in an evocative photo: Vierne is sitting on the terrace of the villa where he was staying, beside a white-shuttered French window, its lace curtains fluttering in the breeze. A high music-stand containing the manuscript paper is in front of him, about two inches from his nose, and he is writing on this with his right hand, while his left hand follows the original braille score, placed on another chair beside him.

The Sixth Symphony is again in cyclic form, with two fundamental thematic motifs. A short *Introduction* presents the two motifs in turn: theme 'A', a vigorous motif of aspiration, soaring upwards in leaps and bounds, and theme 'B', a motif of repose, drifting around a central

note, rising, and then falling again. A dramatic crescendo leads into the first movement proper, a beautifully proportioned sonata-form *Allegro* which retains both themes as first and second subjects; their surging ebb and flow seems to evoke a sparkling summer sea in full flood.

Tranquil gliding chords open the *Aria*, the first of the Symphony's two slow movements, introducing an angular, anguished *cantilena* for solo trumpet. As the solo becomes more and more intense, the melodic line gradually assumes the shape of theme 'A', and then sinks back into the return of the gliding chords; the *Aria* ends in a golden twilight haze, with theme 'A' rising mysteriously from the deep.

In the extraordinary *Scherzo* Vierne's highly chromatic harmonic language reaches its furthest extreme, almost approaching atonality at times, with bizarre clusters of notes flying in all directions. Theme 'A' appears in the two 'trio' sections, its elegant contour fragmented – almost caricatured – into a breathless dance. In the opaque depths of the *Adagio*, theme 'B' comes into its own, contrasting with a brighter central section of soaring lyricism, based on a syncopated version of theme 'A'. Finally the gloom descends again, and a thick sea-mist seems to envelop the soft, dense chords of the final page.

The extrovert *Final* begins with an energetic theme in the style of a fanfare, supported by a repeated timpani-like motif in the pedals. Theme 'B' returns in a brief episode, but the music is soon hijacked by another new theme – a very melodic, diatonic tune that carries all before it. The reprise of the opening fanfares leads to a conclusion even more brilliant than the preceding Symphony. Below the big tune, theme 'A' thunders out for the last time in the pedals, and the whole work ends in cascading torrents of pedal scales. Just as he completed the Symphony, Vierne wrote a letter to his pupil Bernard Gavoty which perfectly sums up this final movement of his last major work:

Yes, the Mediterranean was made for eternal holidays!... All our regrets and misfortunes evaporate under this burning sky – nothing is left but the sheer joy of just being alive!

Program Notes © David Gammie 2009

JOHN SCOTT

ORGANIST AND DIRECTOR OF MUSIC

John Scott was born in 1956 in Wakefield, Yorkshire, where he became a Cathedral chorister. While still at school he gained the diplomas of the Royal College of Organists and won the major prizes. In 1974 he became Organ Scholar of St. John's College, Cambridge, where he acted as assistant to Dr. George Guest. His organ studies were with Jonathan Bielby, Ralph Downes, and Dame Gillian Weir. He made his debut in the 1977 Promenade Concerts in the Royal Albert Hall; he was the youngest organist to appear in the Proms.

On leaving Cambridge, he was appointed Assistant Organist at London's two Anglican Cathedrals, St. Paul's and Southwark. In 1985 he became Sub-Organist of St. Paul's Cathedral. In 1990 he succeeded Dr. Christopher Dearnley as Organist and Director of Music.

As an organist, John Scott has performed in five continents, premiered many new works written for him, and worked with various specialist ensembles. He is a first-prize winner from the Manchester International Organ Competition (1978) and the Leipzig J.S. Bach Competition (1984). In 1998 he was nominated International Performer of the Year by the New York Chapter of the American Guild of Organists. He is a Past President of the Incorporated Association of Organists. He has been a member of a number of international competition juries, including those in Manchester, Dublin, Chartres, Dallas, St. Albans and Erfurt. Recent highlights of his career have included recitals in Symphony Hall, Birmingham, Notre Dame in Paris, the Aarhus Organ Festival in Denmark, Cologne Cathedral, Disney Hall in Los Angeles and London's Royal Albert Hall. In addition to his work as a conductor and organist, John Scott has published a number of choral compositions and arrangements and he has jointly edited two compilations of liturgical music for the Church's year, published by Oxford University Press.

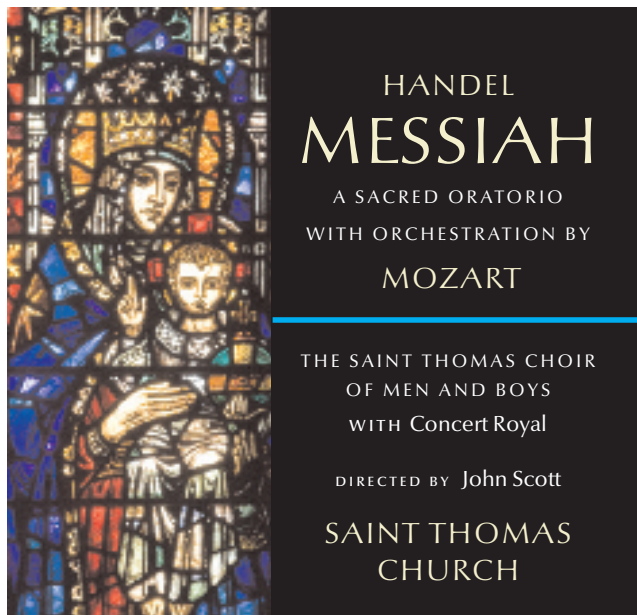
In 2004, after 26 years at St. Paul's Cathedral in London, John Scott moved to take up the post of Organist and Director of Music at Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue, New York, where he directs the

renowned Saint Thomas Choir of Men and Boys. In 2007, he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate from Nashotah House Seminary in Wisconsin.



Vierne's autograph of measures 5-10 of the Allegro risoluto of *Symphonie VI*

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