

THE COMPLETE
WORKS FOR ORGAN

Marcel Dupré
JEREMY FILSELL

Jeanne Demessieux
STEPHEN THARP



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH
FIFTH AVENUE

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Marcel Dupré

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✧c PROGRAM VII ✧

JEREMY FILSELL, ORGAN

SEPTEMBER 18, 2021 | SATURDAY AT 3PM



15 ANTIPHONS, OP. 18 (VÊPRES DU COMMUN DES FÊTES DE LA SAINTE VIERGE)

Though now largely obsolete, the practice of *alternatim* versets for choir and organ is centuries old, and it inspired all the great *Livres d'Orgue* of the golden age of French baroque organ music, from Titelouze to the time of the Revolution. The Roman rite of Vespers for Feasts of the Blessed Virgin was one of the most elaborate musical celebrations in the Catholic Church. In France the organ always played an important role, but in other countries there were different traditions, which manifested themselves in different ways – most notably in the towering masterpiece of 17th-century choral music, Monteverdi's Vespers of 1610.


For an artist with a strong creative imagination, the Vesper service opened up a whole universe of possibilities, and even in his early years as a teenage organist in Rouen in the 1890s, the young Marcel Dupré delighted in the prospect: 'As soon as my father started me on the study of harmony and two-part counterpart, my dream was to improvise the Versets at Vespers ...' For most of his life (from 1906 until his death in 1971), Dupré played at the Parisian church of Saint-Sulpice, first as Assistant to his teacher Widor, and then as Organist in his own right. However, there was an in-

terlude around the time of the First World War when he also deputized for Louis Vierne at the Cathedral of Notre-Dame, and it was here that he had an extraordinary piece of luck in 1919, when his imaginative improvisations at Vespers on the Feast of the Assumption were heard by a wealthy British businessman and music-lover who happened to be on holiday in Paris. He was Claude Johnson, Director of the firm of Rolls-Royce, and he was so impressed by Dupré's playing that he commissioned him to compose a set of organ pieces in the same style as his improvisations. Johnson paid for the pieces to be published, and then hired the Royal Albert Hall for a glittering premiere in London in 1920; this was the start of the international concert career that would soon bring Dupré to New York for the first time, and make him a wealthy man within the space of a few years.

Listeners who know Monteverdi's Vespers will recognize many of the texts in Dupré's organ Vespers, which follow the same pattern. The Vespers of our Lady consist of a sequence of sung chants and instrumental interludes, which fall into three groups. The service begins with an ordained sequence of five psalms, which are framed by antiphons to texts from the *Song of Songs*; before each Psalm the choir sings the appropriate antiphon, and the repetition of the same antiphon after the Psalm is played on the organ. After this comes the 9th century Hymn to the Virgin, *Ave Maris Stella*, with the verses taken alternately by choir and organ (four each) and finally the *Magnificat*, performed in the same way. In the five Psalm Antiphons Dupré takes just the opening intonation of the plainsong as the inspiration for each piece, while the four hymn verses naturally stay closer to the theme, and are more in the nature of chorale preludes. The six *Magnificat* versets are again more free in inspiration, each integrating a subtle contour from the Psalm tone into their varied melodic lines,

FIVE ANTIPHONS


⌘ Dum esset rex (*While the King sitteth at his table*)

1. ANT. 
D UM esset rex * in accúbi-tu su-o,


⌘ Laeva ejus (*His left hand is under my head*)

2. ANT. 
L Æva e-jus * sub cápi-te me-o,


⌘ Nigra sum (*I am black but comely*)

3. ANT. 
N igra sum sed formósa, * fí-li-æ Jerúsa-lem:

⌘ Jam hiems (*Lo, the winter is past*)

4. ANT. 
J AM hi-ems tránsi-it, *

⌘ Speciosa facta es (*How fair and pleasant*)

5. ANT. 
S Pe-ci-ósa facta es * et su-á-vis

AVE MARIS STELLA

HYMN. 
A -ve ma-ris stella, De-i Ma-ter alma, Atque semper
 Virgo, Fe-lix cæ-li porta.

⌘ Verse 2, Sumens illud (*When the salutation Gabriel had spoken*)

⌘ Verse 4, Monstra te esse matrem (*Jesus' tender mother, make thy supplication*)

♫ Verse 6, Vitam praesta (*So now as we journey, aid our weak endeavor*)

♫ Amen

8.G

M agní-fi- cat * ánima me-a Dóminum. 2. Et exsultá- vit spí-ri-tus me- us * in De-o sa-lutá-ri me - o.

- Et exsultavit (*For he hath regarded the lowliness of his handmaiden*)
- Quia fecit mihi magna (*For he that is mighty hath magnified me*)
- Fecit potentiam (*He hath shewed strength with his arm*)
- Esurientes (*He hath filled the hungry with good things*)
- Sicut locutus est (*As he promised to our forefathers*)
- Sicut erat (*As it was in the beginning ... Amen*)

SUITE, OP. 39

Allegro Agitato — Cantabile — Scherzando — Final

These three works had a common origin, but strangely it was not revealed until six years after Dupré's death, with the publication of extracts from the wartime diaries of Jeanne Demessieux. Dupré first encountered the phenomenal talent of Demessieux in 1936, when she was just 15; immediately taking her under his artistic protection, he personally prepared her for entry into his Organ Class, from which she emerged with a brilliant *premier prix* in 1941. For the next five years he continued to give her private lessons, nurturing her outstanding gifts for improvisation and composition, perfecting her unparalleled virtuoso technique, and supervising her interpretation and memorization of virtually the complete organ repertoire, in preparation for her sensational debut

recitals in 1946. Working together constantly in Dupré's music room at Meudon for the duration of the War, master and pupil developed a close artistic relationship, which was abruptly and inexplicably terminated by Dupré on his return from a 6-month American tour early in 1947. The causes of this 'rupture' remain a mystery, but Dupré was implacable, concealing all traces of their artistic collaboration, and never mentioning her name again.

It is from Demessieux's diary that we learn of the existence of a set of 12 transcendental studies which Dupré composed for her between 1941 and 1943, with the intention of confirming and challenging her incredible pedal technique. On 23rd September 1943 she played the whole set at Meudon, in the presence of a private invited audience. However, early the next year Dupré decided — for reasons that are not entirely clear — not to publish his studies in their present form. He arranged instead for Demessieux to write some of her own (these were to become her legendary *Six Etudes*), and he decided to remodel his own studies into 'a Suite and some Esquisses, etc'. But the pieces that were grouped together and published as Op. 39, 40 & 41 do not account for all twelve studies — two of them are missing. (Though it is possible that Dupré incorporated them into his last major concert work, the *Triptyque* of 1957, which appears in next week's program ...)

The F minor *Allegro agitato* that opens the *Suite* is a unique and remarkable invention, teeming with hectic semiquaver figuration in scales and broken thirds. On one occasion Demessieux 'dared to reveal something of my poetic impressions of the *Etudes*: I find in them an intense life, which is typified by the F minor. Concerning this last, I suggest to the *Maître* that one needs to have heard the agitation of millions of molecules in a forest to be able to assimilate this independence of writing.' To which Dupré replied, with characteristic modesty: 'You have seen the living side of the *Etudes*. Me too, I wished to capture the swarming activity of life; but I am afraid that it may just be agitation, that everything is moving too fast at the same time ...'

The G major *Cantabile* is an exquisite six-part *ricercare*, of the kind that Dupré loved to improvise, with two parts each for each hand and 8ft pedal; the voices move dreamily through this rich contrapuntal texture, and the canon between soprano and first bass passes almost unnoticed. On 27th August 1943 Demessieux played during her lesson 'five of the *Etudes* by heart, twice ... The *Maître* exclaims 'After all, maybe they are not so bad as compositions'. He is in a very good mood, and claims to have discovered 'a bit of the accordion' in his music'. This must surely refer to the captivating *Scherzando* in B flat, a syncopated staccato study which requires considerable digital and pedal dexterity in the negotiation of its sequences of dancing thirds, sixths and octaves. After the more delicate textures of the preceding movements, the *Suite* ends with a swaggering march in C minor, aptly entitled *Final*, and exploiting the full resources of the instrument.

OFFFRANDE À LA VIERGE, OP. 40

Virgo Mater — Mater Dolorosa — Virgo Mediatrix

The three movements of the meditative *Offrande* were developed out of some of the quieter *Etudes*, but much more remodeling and rewriting was required here, and it seems that most, or all, of the second piece may have been based on new material. Dedicated to the memories of three of Dupré's own pupils who had been killed in the War (Alain, Touche and Gilles), these pieces reflect on the traditional attributes of the Blessed Virgin. In *Virgo Mater* we can hear the rocking of the infant Christ's cradle in the 4ft pedal melody, which alternates with other evocative motifs in an atmosphere of serene tranquility. The *Mater Dolorosa* is more troubled; it opens with bare harmonies above an ominous pedal ostinato, but it is the plaintive lament of a soft solo reed that makes the most memorable impression, and after further developments it is the lament that has the last word. The ecstatic final movement invokes the Virgin as the medium of prayer; it is much more richly scored for flutes and strings, and perhaps betrays its origins in the complexity of its dense chromatic textures.

TROIS ESQUISSES, OP. 41

ut majeur — mi mineur — si bémol mineur

Dupré prepared three of his *Etudes* for publication under the title of *Esquisses*, but in the event he only actually published two of them; the C major piece was discovered in his library after his death, and published by his executors. The 'new' No.1 is an uneasy, restless, virtuoso pedal study that rises to a ferocious central climax and then dies down again. In complete contrast, the E minor *Esquisse* is a delicate study in manual repeated notes, in which the pedals have only brief flurries of activity, accompanying the chordal second theme. In April 1943, shortly after a heavy German bombardment close to Meudon, Dupré presented Demessieux with 'the tenth *Etude*, which he describes as *tumultuous*'; this must surely have been the final *Esquisse* in B flat minor, a titanic study in octaves in which one can almost hear the bombs, especially on the frenetic final pages.