

THE COMPLETE
WORKS FOR ORGAN

Marcel Dupré

JEREMY FILSELL

Jeanne Demessieux

STEPHEN THARP



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH
FIFTH AVENUE

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FRONTISPIECE: Marcel Dupré at the organ, Ambrose McEvoy

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Marcel Dupré

THE COMPLETE WORKS FOR ORGAN

✧c PROGRAM VIII ✧

JEREMY FILSELL, ORGAN

SEPTEMBER 25, 2021 | SATURDAY AT 3PM



LES NYMPHÉAS, OP. 54

Rayons — Brumes — Les Fleurs — Temps Lourd — Brises
Nocturne — Aube — Vapeurs Dorées

This extraordinary work was inspired by two of the composer's most personal, private passions: his love of impressionist art and his idiosyncratic conception of 'the organ of the future'. While he was devoted to the great Cavallé-Coll organ of Saint-Sulpice, which inspired him every Sunday, Dupré was also frustrated by its cumbersome old mechanism, and he dreamed of an instrument that would use electrical devices to facilitate a much greater flexibility and independence of color. In 1934 he redesigned his Cavallé-Coll house-organ at Meudon in accordance with his new ideas. The keyboards were extended to 73 notes with numerous octave couplers, and the organ was fitted with sustainers (a device more commonly found on theater organs) and *coupures*, which enabled a keyboard to be divided so that bass and treble could produce different tone-colors. On each side of the keyboards, an array of electrical switches controlled the adjustable combination action, and later on, during the War, he installed a *régistrateur*, a device that enabled a complete set of twelve registrations to be recorded on magnetic tape, and then recalled in turn at the touch of a button — in other words

an early version of the Sequencer that is now a standard feature of contemporary solid-state technology. He proudly described the rebuilt instrument as ‘an organ for the year 2000: *Je passerai le fin de ma vie ici, dans mon laboratoire, à sonder l’avenir*’, he said — ‘I will spend the end of my life here, in my laboratory, investigating the future.’

The organ of the future turned out to be a cul-de-sac rather than an exciting new avenue; in the world at large, extension organs and oversophisticated electrical gadgetry fell into disrepute, in favor of a return to the simplicity and musicality of mechanical action. Apart from his own instrument, all that remains of Dupré’s dream is *Les Nymphéas*, a work that he composed especially for this organ in 1958/9, making full use of its *coupures* and sustainers. The work has never been published, as Meudon is the only place where it can be played in its original form; Jeremy Filsell made this arrangement for his first concert series of Dupré’s complete works, in London in 1998.

Les Nymphéas was inspired by Claude Monet’s eight vast canvases displayed in the Orangery in Paris. The titles of Dupré’s eight pieces do not correspond precisely to the individual paintings, but each movement reflects a different aspect of the artist’s luminous vision. Many writers have described Monet’s ‘visual harmony’ in musical terms (‘Claude Monet handles light-waves like a musician handles sound-waves’), and in *Les Nymphéas* Dupré creates a parallel world of sound, an elusive, profoundly original music made up of fragments of melody and dense harmonies that vibrate with subtle, constantly-changing colors. In 1973 Dupré’s protégé Rolande Falcinelli recorded the work at Meudon, and for many years this recording was played three times a week at the Orangery. ‘Each of these impressions’, she wrote, ‘evokes all the poetic and mysterious atmosphere of the final masterpieces of the great impressionist . . . making the *Sunbeams* dance in the half-light of the *Mists*; sketching the flexible yet fragile stems of the *Flowers* in delicate shades of pink; while after the brief anguish of the purple twilight in *Oppressive Weather*, the pond ripples gently with the caress of the *Breezes*, and the *Nocturne* lingers before the arrival

of the luminous, sparkling tints of *Dawn*, soon overwhelmed by the subtle *Golden Haze*...



TRIPTYQUE, OP. 51

Chaconne — Musette — Dithyrambe

After devoting three years of his life to eight non-stop tours of North America, Dupré decided that his six-month visit in 1946 would be his last. But in 1957 his childhood friend, the conductor Paul Paray, persuaded him to make a brief return trip to inaugurate the new organ of the Ford Auditorium in Detroit. It was for this concert that Dupré composed his *Triptyque*. The solo recital was followed by a performance and recording of Saint-Saëns' Third Symphony, and this recording, in Mercury Living Presence stereo sound, caused a sensation in those early days of stereo LP. Dupré was also contracted to record two solo LPs, but the sound of the organ left much to be desired in the poor acoustics of the Auditorium (which

was eventually demolished in 2011). So the recording sessions were transferred here to St. Thomas in New York, where the church's Francophile organist William Self had engaged Dupré to play a concert on his way home. Despite the constant interruptions of subway trains, which necessitated a record number of tape-splices and edits, these LPs (of Franck, Widor and Dupré) were also a great success, and they include a magisterial performance of the *Triptyque*.

Specially conceived for the inauguration of a new instrument, the opening *Chaconne* is a kaleidoscopic set of variations on a brief four-bar motif announced on the pedals at the start; in the words of a review of the premiere in Detroit, 'the manifold beauties of the organ voices were brought forward in an exciting array of tone-color.' The whole movement has the character of a brightly-colored mosaic, finally building to a thunderous climax, and then suddenly dissolving into a hushed, mysterious coda. The *Musette*, of fearsome technical difficulty, is a delicate study in repeated notes for the pedals; their incessant patter on a 4ft flute barely pauses for breath as it accompanies the naïve melody of the manual parts. The heroic final *Dithyrambe* also features some virtuoso writing for double pedal in rapid thirds and sixths, finally erupting into a torrent of octaves as the music storms to its spectacular conclusion. These last two movements recapture the transcendental energy and virtuosity of the Studies which Dupré wrote for Demessieux in the 1940s, and maybe this is where they originated . . .

VARIATIONS SUR IL EST NÉ LE DIVIN ENFANT,
 WOO (1948)

The second half of this afternoon's program gathers together Dupré's modest but colorful output of music for the Christmas season. After her marriage in 1948, his daughter Marguerite moved to a small village where she was enlisted as organist of the local church. For her first Christmas in the village, she asked her father to write an Offertory for Midnight Mass, in the style of Daquin and the 18th century French *noëlistes*. Dupré replied with this set of four miniature variations on a well-known carol, all precisely conceived and registered for the church's modest instrument (12 stops and two manuals, one of which was of limited 3-octave compass). The four pages of manuscript were brought to light by the late Graham Steed, and the piece was published in *The American Organist* in December 1996, almost fifty years after it was written.

SIX ANTIENNES POUR LE TEMPS DE NOËL, OP. 48

Composed in 1952, this set of six Antiphons forms a kind of post-script, thirty years on, to the famous set of 15 which we heard last week. By this time, of course, the practice of *alternatim* had long fallen into disuse, so Dupré conceived these modest pieces for performance at any suitable stage during the liturgy. The themes are selected from the Vesper Antiphons of six Sundays of the season of Christmas, from Advent to the Feast of the Purification, and the plainsong permeates all the textures; Dupré's art, as so often in his liturgical works, is concealed with natural, unassuming grace amid the flowing contrapuntal lines and evocative harmonies of each of these contrasting pieces.

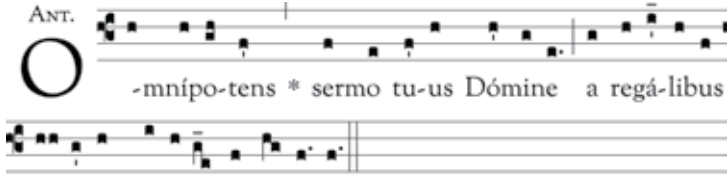
☞ Ecce Dominus veniet (*Andante con moto*)—First Sunday of Advent

ANT.

E Cce Dóminus véni-et, * et omnes sancti e-jus cum e-

o: et e-rit in di-e illa lux magna, alle-lú-ia.

☞ Omnipotens sermo tuus (*Lento*) — Fourth Sunday of Advent

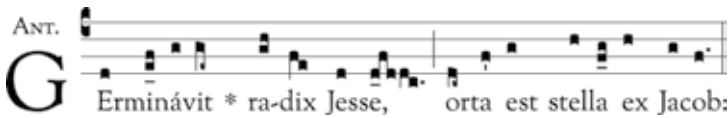
ANT.

O -mní-po-tens * sermo tu-us Dómine a regá-libus

☞ Tecum principium (*Cantabile*) — Nativity

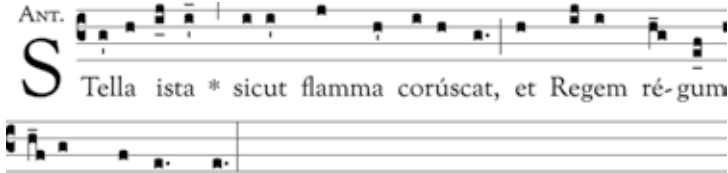
ANT.

T Ecum princí-pi-um * in di-e virtú-tis tu-æ, in splen-
dó-ribus sanctorum, ex útero ante luci-ferum genu-i te.

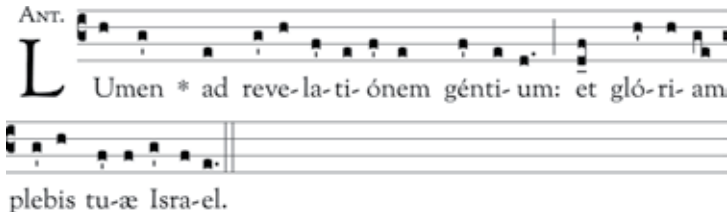
☞ Germinavit radix Jesse (*Poco animato*) — Circumcision

ANT.

G Erminávit * ra-dix Jesse, orta est stella ex Jacob:

☞ Stella ista (*Alla breve*) — Epiphany

ANT.

S Tella ista * sicut flamma corúscat, et Regem ré-gum

☞ Lumen ad Revelationem (*Animato*) — Purification

ANT.

L Umen * ad reve-la-ti-ónem génti-um: et gló-ri-am
plebis tu-æ Isra-el.

IN DULCI JUBILO FROM 79 CHORALES,

OP. 28

Dating from 1931, Dupré's 79 *Chorales* are elementary settings of all the chorales used by Bach, and are intended to prepare the student for the study of Bach's *Orgelbüchlein*. They were not intended for public performance, but Dupré did make one exception — the exquisite little prelude on the carol *In dulci Jubilo*, which he often included in his own programs (including his final recital here at St. Thomas in 1957).

VARIATIONS SUR UN NOËL, OP. 20

In the course of three transcontinental tours between the fall of 1922 and the spring of 1925, Dupré spent more time in America than in his own country, and his compositional style was profoundly influenced by the organs that he encountered here. 'America has gone far ahead of any other country in the organ building industry', he said. 'The many mechanical improvements resultant from this have made possible effects heretofore unthought of. They have made necessary a new idiom of music.' The first product of his American period, the *Variations sur un Noël* were composed in 1922 during his first tour; he later recalled that each variation was written in a different city, ranging from London to San Diego and all stops in between. He described the work as 'a synthesis of the orchestral possibilities of the modern organ', and the variations embrace a kaleidoscopic variety of colors and textures, of a kind that had never been heard before. The immediate accessibility of this music and its astonishing richness of invention have ensured it a secure place among his most popular concert works.

In five of the variations the tune can be clearly heard, sometimes in one voice, sometimes in canon between two voices, and once (Var. 6) in a double canon at the fourth and fifth, with right hand, left hand and pedals all playing in different keys. These contrapuntal movements alternate with 'orchestral' variations, in which the contours of the tune are absorbed into a rapid stream of virtuoso

figuration — a flowing invention for flutes, a scintillating flute solo, a dancing stream of crushed notes, and a chromatic waltz for the Clarinet. The variations culminate in a brief but brilliant fugato, teeming with contrapuntal devices, and leading straight into the final toccata, which erupts at the end into a resounding peal of Christmas bells.