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### **Louis Vierne (1870-1937) – Symphony No. 2, E minor, op. 20**

Louis Vierne is one of the most important organ composers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As a child, he visited the church of St. Clotilde in Paris, where he first heard César Franck. Vierne was so overwhelmed by the emotional intensity of Franck's playing, that he decided to devote his life to music.

In 1889, Vierne was accepted into César Franck's class at the Paris Conservatoire. Although, Franck passed away shortly thereafter, the relationship between Franck and Vierne certainly had a great effect on Vierne's compositional style. In 1898, Vierne married Arlette Taskin. After only five years, Vierne's life started to fill with personal problems, traumatic events and tragedies; one of his children was killed during the First World War and Vierne's younger brother, René, suffered the same fate. In 1900, the clergy announced a competition for the organist position following the death of Eugene Sergent. Nearly a hundred candidates participated and Vierne came out on top.

Vierne's *Second Symphony* was the first symphony he wrote while working at Notre Dame. He started composing the piece in 1901, finished it in 1903 and it was published the same year. Vierne dedicated the symphony to Charles Mutin, Cavaillé-Coll's successor, who refurbished the organ at Notre Dame in 1931.

In 1903, Vierne performed two movements from the *Second Symphony* at the Schola Cantorum in the presence of Claude Debussy, who was very moved by Vierne's music. In his review, he wrote:

*"Monsieur Vierne's Symphony is truly remarkable; it combines abundant musicianship with the cleverest use of the instrument's special sonority. Old J. S. Bach, Father of us all, would have been pleased with Monsieur Vierne."*<sup>1</sup>

One of Vierne's favourite movements from this symphony was the *Scherzo*, which he later decided to arrange for organ and orchestra. It forms the first movement of his *Pièce Symphonique*:

1. Scherzo (Symphony No. 2)
2. Adagio (Symphony No. 3)
3. Final (Symphony No. 1)

All Vierne's symphonies start in a minor key and follow the musical scale (D, e, f#, g, a, B). The *Second Symphony* is widely regarded as one of Vierne's more intense and personal compositions. Two main themes

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<sup>1</sup> Claude Debussy, "*Musique*", Gil Blas, (Monday, February 23, 1903), p. 2

are presented in the opening Allegro movement, where theme A has a rhythmic and energetic character, and theme B is more lyrical and gentle. Vierne combines and develops both themes before the cadenza, which is filled with fast runs and trills and brings a return of the opening material. The final section connects both themes, where theme A is hidden in an inner voice.

In the second movement, *Choral*, a new version of theme B is introduced. A very calm mood evolves into an intense, agitated mood supported by a chromatic motive. These contrasting moods increase the intensity and result in a triumphant final section that brings out the chorale theme in a very solemn style.

Vierne's inspiration for the third movement, *Scherzo*, derives from Eugene Gigout's *Scherzo*. These pieces have some similarities, for instance, they share the same key (E major), the same meter 6/8, and a similar texture. Nevertheless, Vierne's musical language is truly unique, and the rather impressionistic colours he uses create a very elegant, light and almost grotesque movement. The cello part, that is heard in the pedal, becomes a new version of theme A. The conflicting major and minor thirds in this movement also reveal Vierne's interest in cross-relationships.

The fourth movement, *Cantabile*, is very expressive and lyrical. The solo clarinet melody comes from theme A. The overall atmosphere of this movement could remind us of a song without words.

A short introduction opens the final movement. Theme A derives from a cello theme found in the *Scherzo* but a slight modification creates a Marche-like rhythm. The entire movement is rather complex, very chromatic, intense, almost stormy. Vierne concludes his *Second Symphony* with a triumphant ending using theme A in the pedal below very joyful broken chords.

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### **Franz Liszt (1811-1886) – Fantasy and Fugue on the chorale: “*Ad nos, ad salutarem undam*”**

In 1848, when Liszt decided to end his concert career and to devote his time to composition, he settled in Weimar. Weimar was a great source of inspiration for the composer, particularly with respect to organ composition. His work transcribing six of Bach's *Preludes and Fugues* for piano may also have been a source of inspiration. Three of Liszt's organ pieces are major works/ original organ compositions that have some similarities in style, structure and texture: *Fantasy and Fugue on the chorale: “Ad nos, ad salutarem undam”* (S. 259), *Prelude and Fugue on B-A-C-H* (S. 260) and *Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen* (S.673).

*Ad nos* is Liszt's first organ work. He started composing the piece in 1842 and concluded the work in 1850. Liszt himself referred to the piece as “*my least bad production*”. The piece was premiered in October 1852. In 1855, the revised version was premiered in Merseburg Cathedral, Germany, during the inauguration of a new Ladegast instrument. Alexander Winterberger, Liszt's youngest student, was selected to perform this monumental work. Besides the original organ version, it also appears in a piano version for four hands. Later, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Marcel Dupré arranged the piece for organ and orchestra as a commissioned work for the Wanamaker Foundation in Philadelphia where he also performed the piece. It wasn't heard until 2007 when the manuscript was discovered in Dupré's residence in Paris.

*Ad nos* is based on an original theme from Meyerbeer's opera *Le Prophète* (the story of a man with no religious interests that becomes a prophet and a leader of Anabaptists). The meaning of the chorale could be translated as: “*Come to us, to the waves of salvation*”. Although, the piece begins with the first part of the chorale theme, Liszt introduces the entire theme in the beginning of the *Adagio*. Unlike the title, the

piece is divided in three sections – *Fantasy*, *Adagio* and *Fugue*. They are connected by recitative passages and virtuosic cadenzas. This composition highlights three main aspects of Liszt's compositional style: organ, piano and orchestral writing. It evokes a wide spectrum of colours and mood swings. By its overall atmosphere, it could be compared to his *B Minor sonata* for piano, which is considered as his masterpiece.

A massive introduction opens the *Fantasy*. It is characterized by arpeggios, pedal trills, and very virtuosic writing that is reminiscent of pianistic compositions. While the introduction is built on the first half of the chorale theme, a fanfare-like motive is based on the first few notes of the theme tail. Use of dotted rhythms and the repetition of short sections gradually increase the intensity of the first part.

The conclusion of the *Fantasy* is followed by a free recitative passage that prepares the *Adagio* where we finally hear the chorale theme in its entirety. This section is designed to be more orchestral which allows a performer to experiment with orchestral registrations and different solo stops. As opposed to the first part of the piece, the *Adagio* brings more melodic dialogues. The compositional style of this section is similar to a variation on a choral. A bravura cadenza connects the *Adagio* and *Fugue* and is very virtuosic and technically demanding. This cadenza is build up on a dominant-seventh chord on G that characterizes the harmonic center of the piece. A fermata over the rest and the last appearance of the dominant-seventh chord announce the arrival of the fugue.

The entire choral theme, as a fugal subject, is presented in all four voices. In contrast to other composers, Liszt omitted a strict fugal form directly after the exposition. Reappearance of dotted rhythms and fanfare motive start of the final section. Once again, Liszt uses more of a pianistic approach; longer passages that don't require any use of the pedal. Nevertheless, it still contains fast runs and trills in the pedal towards the end of the piece. The grand conclusion is marked as *Adagio*. It brings the chorale theme back along with the fanfare section stressed multiple times over the pedal point which leads to the end of this monumental work.