

Mel Butler is Canon Musician of Saint Mark's Episcopal Cathedral, Seattle, and has taught organ improvisation and church music at the University of Washington. Also a professional violist, he performs regularly with the Onyx Chamber Players in Seattle. Prior to arriving in Seattle in 1991, he was for many years Organist/Choirmaster of the Downtown Presbyterian Church in Rochester, NY. During that time he was also Associate Professor of Church Music at the Eastman School of Music, a violist with the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra, and Music Director and Conductor of the Rochester Bach Festival Chorus. During the Viet Nam War, he served his country as violist in the U.S. Navy String Quartet.

Mel Butler has performed in major concert halls, churches, and cathedrals in the U.S., the U.K. and Japan. He often presents master classes and lectures on various aspects of church music, choral conducting, hymn playing, and improvisation, and has appeared as a lecturer and recitalist for conventions of the American Guild of Organists, the Organ Historical Society, and the Association of Anglican Musicians. His organ CD's, on the Loft and ReZound labels include French on the Flentrop, Out of This World (with the Boston Brass), all recorded on the Saint Mark's Cathedral Flentrop; The Marion Camp Oliver Organ, recorded on the Fritts organ at Saint Mark's; and Tournemire in Oberlin recorded on the C. B. Fisk organ at Oberlin College. His choral recordings with the Saint Mark's Cathedral Choir appear on the Loft and Gothic labels.



Originally from Burlington, NC, Mel received the Bachelor of Music degree from the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, studying organ with Garth Peacock, and the Master of Music and Doctor of Musical Arts degrees from the Eastman School of Music, studying with David Craighead.

Facts about this Recording

Producer and Engineer: John M. Proffitt

Recorded 1983 at the Downtown Presbyterian Church, Rochester NY

**Original 2-track 15ips DBX encoded Mastertape used
for this recording**



Organ Music
from the
DOWNTOWN PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
C.B. FISK ORGAN – MEL BUTLER, organist

Cesar-Auguste Franck (1822-1890), although born in Belgium, spent most of his adult life in France and became a leading composer of the Romantic period as well as a major figure in the world of organ music of all ages. As organist at Ste. Clotilde in Paris for more than thirty years, from 1858 until his death, he achieved fame with his genius for improvisation. His written-out organ works demonstrate an absolute mastery of this kind of instruments, combining elements of virtuosity, complex yet lucid counterpoint, beauty of melodic line, and fullness of harmonic development. Franck's Three Chorales date from 1890 and were his last works, in which the composer summarized the full range of his compositional career. Each piece of the trilogy is a variation-fantasy on an original theme or Choral. The work featured on this recording is the last and most often performed of the set. Its form is a simple fast-slow-fast structure, in which brilliant improvisatory flourishes frame a sublime, otherworldly Adagio, which might very well be considered Franck's farewell to life.

Much earlier in the history of French organ music is **Nicolas de Grigny** (1672-1703), who came from a family of organists, including both his grandfather and father, and held important organist positions in both Paris, at Ste. Denis, and in his native Reims, at the Cathedral. Although he lived to be only thirty-one, his place in music history is guaranteed by one work, his *Premier Livre d'orgue* (First Organ Book) of 1697. This opus comprises an organ Mass and five Hymns for various occasions within the church year. The Hymns consist of a chorale melody followed by a set of variations, each of which emphasizes rich ornamentation and the characteristic colors of the classic French organ. These works find a parallel in the German tradition of the organ Partitas, such as those written by J. S. Bach. On this recording, we hear three movements from the Hymn *Veni creator spiritus* (Come, creator spirit), the basis of which is the famous medieval chant for the Feast of Pentecost. In the first movement heard, the Fugue à 5, the organ registration features two of the prominent solo colors of the Fisk organ: in the left hand part, the Positive organ, with the Cromorne 8' and Octave 4'; in the right hand part, the five-rank Cornet of the Great Organ; and in the Pedal, Octaves 8' and 4'. The second movement heard is the *Recit de Cromorne*, in which the Positive Cromorne 8' is joined by the Bourdon 8' for the solo line played in the right hand; the left-hand accompaniment is provided by the Great Organ's Spire Flute 8', with the Swell Organ's Cor de Nuit 8' added via a coupler. The third and last movement heard is the Duo, which contrasts two pungent tone colors: the left hand consists of the Swell Organ's Basson 16', to which is coupled the Positive Organ's cornet ranks, the Bourdon 8', Octave 4', Sesquialtera II, and Doublet 2'. In the right hand, the Great Organ's Cornet V provides the contrasting sound.

Louis Vierne (1870-1937) was a prominent French organist and composer, a product of the Paris Conservatoire and pupil of Franck and Charles-Marie Widor. During his distinguished career, he toured widely, including the United States, and occupied the important posts of organist at first Ste. Sulpice and later Notre Dame, in Paris. His compositions include a number of symphonies for organ plus smaller pieces, all of which continue the grand symphonic organ style as epitomized by his teachers. On this recording, we hear an occasional piece, the *Carillon de Westminster* (Chimes of Westminster), a virtuoso fantasy based on the well-known English clock-tower tune.

Like his French counterpart De Grigny, **Nicolaus Bruhns** (1665-1697) lived but a short time, nevertheless making an important contribution to the Baroque organ repertoire. He studied with Dietrich Buxtehude in Lübeck, Germany, and became that master's favorite pupil. Today, on the basis of the handful of organ works that have come down to us, he is recognized as a master of the North German tradition in his own right, along with Georg Philipp Telemann, Georg Böhm, and Vincenz Lübeck. His Prelude and Fugue in e, heard on this record, closely parallels in form the like-named works by Buxtehude, with its alternation of toccata-like passages with fugal interludes to produce a composition that sounds freely rhapsodic, almost improvisatory.

The works of **Johann Sebastian Bach** (1685-1750) form the core of the organ repertoire. One secret of Bach's universality in this medium is the consistency of inspiration and approach, with the smaller, intimate pieces showing the same attention to detail and spirit as the larger, more famous show pieces. Bach had an ability unique in the history of music to distill whole theologies and professions of

faith into a two or three minute prelude for organ. This achievement is all the more amazing for his ability to do that without departing from the common musical language of the time. Such a group of short, intimate works is the Schübler Chorale set of 1746. These six preludes for organ are all original transcriptions by Bach from assorted church cantata movements for soloists, instruments, and orchestra. The collection takes its name from Johann Georg Schübler, a pupil and friend of Bach, who commissioned and later published the arrangements. On this recording, we hear three of the six chorales. *Ach bleib' bei uns, Herr Jesus Christ* is arranged from the soprano aria of Cantata No.6, becoming a trio for pedal and two keyboards in the process. The right hand, played on the Positive Organ, features the sound of the Trechterregal 8' and Baarpijp 4'. The left hand features the Swell Organ's Cor de Nuit 8' and Italian Principal 4'. In the Pedal, we hear the Bourdon 16' and Octave 8'. *Meine Seele erhebet den Herren* is arranged from the duet for alto and tenor of Cantata No.10, which features the German text of the Latin Magnificat. In this, appropriately enough, Bach uses the traditional chant melody for the Magnificat. The organ registration in this recording features the Principal 8' stops from the Pedal, Positive (left hand) and Great (right hand), with tremulant. *Kommst du nun, Jesu, vom Himmel herunter* originates as an alto aria from Cantata No. 137. Bach's transcription is here at its most radical, with the virtuoso bass line and wide-ranging violin phrases of the original rendered playable, albeit with difficulty, on the keyboard of the organ. The featured registration uses in the Pedal the Superoctave 4', to which is coupled the Swell Organ's Italian Principal 4', Waldflöte 2', and Quinta 1-1/3'; in the Great (left hand) the Prestant 16', Spire Flute 8', and Flute 4'; in the Positive (right hand) the Bourdon 8' and Baarpijp 4'.

This recording presents a single work from the extensive English organ literature, the *Siciliano* for a High Ceremony by **Herbert Howells** (1892-1983). As a prominent participant in the English Musical Renaissance, Howells followed his teachers Charles Villiers Stanford and Hubert Parry in promoting the growth of a distinctly English, as opposed to Continental, musical voice in the 20th century. Along with Ralph Vaughan Williams and Gustav Holst, whom Howells succeeded as Music Director at St. Paul's Girls' School in 1936, Howells contributed a number of large-scale orchestral, choral and vocal scores to the repertory. Howells's prominence as a writer of church music resulted in, among other things, the composition of a number of organ rhapsodies, preludes and occasional pieces. These works are relatively unknown outside of England, perhaps due to their peculiar suitability for the English cathedral organ. Nevertheless, like all of Howells's works, they partake of the same English pastoral tradition of melodic simplicity and great beauty that produced the masterpieces of Vaughan Williams, Holst, Ireland, Bax, and Rubbra. The practical experience of recording Howells's *Siciliano* demonstrates the music's suitability for performance on a classic instrument such as the Fisk Organ at Rochester's Downtown Presbyterian Church.

Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) was the foremost composer of organ music in the 20th century (The relatively short-lived Max Reger, who otherwise would certainly rise to that level of importance in organ composition, straddled the 19th and early 20th centuries). As a Frenchman and devout Roman Catholic, he falls firmly within the rich tradition represented by such distinguished predecessors as DeGrigny, Franck, and Vierne, whose pupil Marcel Dupré was Messiaen's principle teacher in organ composition and improvisation. From 1930 on, Messiaen was titular organist at Ste. Trinite in Paris and from 1942 on, he taught at the Paris Conservatoire. His pupils included such latter-day luminaries as Pierre Boulez, Karl-Heinz Stockhausen, and Iannis Xenakis. As a composer or organ music, Messiaen was the dominant influence in the Western tradition post World War II. His works include such vast frescoes as *La Nativité du Seigneur* of 1935, *Les Corps glorieux* of 1939, *Messe de la Pentecote* of 1950, *Livre d'orgue* of 1951, and the *Meditations sur le Mystere de la Sainte Trinite* of 1969. Messiaen describes his music as having three continuing threads of inspiration: his mystic vision of the Roman Catholic faith; human love; and nature, as symbolized by his use of bird song as a thematic and structural element in composition. The Mass for Pentecost, from which this recording features the Communion portion, was written in a short time in Paris in 1950. The composer describes it as "a summing up of all my improvisations," and the work does, indeed, retain the freshness and enthusiasm of free imagination. The title *Communion: Les Oiseaux et les sources* (Birds and Springs) refers to Messiaen's paraphrase from the Book of Daniel, "Spring of water, bless the Lord; birds of the air, bless the Lord!"

Notes by John Proffitt

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| 1) Cesar Franck - Chorale No 3 in a | 11:51 | 5) J.S. Bach Three Chorale Preludes | 8:29 |
| 2) Nicolas de Grigny - Three movements from Veni Creator | 7:53 | 6) Herbert Howells Scilliano for a High Ceremony | 7:28 |
| 3) Louis Vierne - Carillon de Westminster | 7:07 | 7) Olivier Messian Les Oiseaux Pentecote: Communion | 5:14 |
| 4) Nicholas Bruhns - Praeludium in E Minor | 8:18 | Total Play Time: 56:20 | |

ABOUT THE ORGAN OF DOWNTOWN PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The design of the Fisk organ is basically inspired by the North German baroque era, the so-called Golden Age of organ building. Each division of the organ contains its own complete principal chorus, the primary colors of the majestic and vigorous sound associated with the classic organ. The physical and visual layout of the decorated wooden case which houses the pipes reflects this classic approach: the pipes of the Great division are located in the center of the main case, those of the Swell division are located at the top of the main case, and those of the Pedal division are in the tall flats at the sides of the main case. The Positive division is cantilevered in front of the main case by steel I-beams, simulating the traditional gallery rail placement of the classic Rückpositiv division.

To this basic North German baroque scheme of pipe layout, timbre and voicing, Charles Fisk added several additional elements which give this organ a distinctive and eclectic character. He included baroque French reeds on the Great and Positive divisions and added expression shutters to three sides of the Swell division to give a high degree of dynamic control and flexibility for 19th century music. Fisk also added 19th century-style French stops in the manner of the great organ builder, Aristide Cavaille-Coll, including the gambe, voix, celeste, basson, hautbois, and flute harmonique. As is often standard with Fisk organs of this type, a choice of wind systems is available: flexible winding for the lively, supple performance of early music; or more stable winding for music from the 19th and 20th centuries.

The organ is tuned to a mild unequal temperament devised by Fisk so that each key retains its own characteristic color. The operation of the organ is achieved by the classic era's proven mechanical means: each key and pedal is connected directly to a valve which admits wind to each pipe via a system of rods or trackers, giving the organist the benefit of sensitive touch and intimate connection to the sound-producing parts of the organ. The adjustable mechanical combination pedals allow almost all music to be played without the aid of assistants, and indeed there were no assistants used in the performance of the works during the production of this recording.

Since its dedication in 1983, The Downtown United Presbyterian Church's Fisk has garnered praise from musicians and music lovers alike for its brilliant yet warm sound, which is complemented by the excellent acoustics of the church.

Note by Mel Butler



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