

ORGAN CONCERT

First Congregational Church

March 26, 2023, 4:00 p.m.

Eric Plutz, Organist

Program

Third Sonata (Dedicated to Mr. Plutz)

Gerald Near
(b. 1942)

Allegro ma non troppo
Adagio e espressivo
Allegro moderato

Dedicated to Eric Plutz, the Third Sonata was published in 2020. The opening **Allegro ma non troppo** is built on two ideas. The first of these, in a buoyant 6/8 with open harmonies, is found at the beginning, middle, and conclusion of the movement. An echoing fanfare motive permeates these sections. In between are more lyric sections, in 2/4. Hints of bi-tonality are throughout, whereby it appears the music is in two keys at once. The lyrical second movement, marked **Adagio e espressivo**, highlights two sounds: a flute, and string celeste. Starting in the key of D major, Mr. Near moves to the key of E major for the central section of the movement, returning to D major for the conclusion. Throughout this movement are phrases that, while not in strict canon, are imitative. Drawing on long, singing lines, Mr. Near gives the impression, in this movement, of an experience improviser at work. The last movement (**Allegro moderato**), in the Lydian mode, repeats rhythmic motives from the first movement, but this time with fully formed, triadic chords. A prominent partner is an increasingly lengthy series of running sixteenth note scales, that finally culminates in the pedals at the conclusion. The Third Sonata was reviewed in the November 2022 edition of The American Organist magazine, and reviewer Jonathan B. Hall said in part, "The compositional craftsmanship is excellent; the musical style modern and modal, yet grounded in tradition; the audience impact probably very positive. Overall, a piece of music that is classic without stuffiness, and modern without silliness. A beautiful blend of old and new – just what the doctor ordered."

Passacaglia, BWV 582

Johann Sebastian Bach
(1685-1750)

Bach's well-known **Passacaglia** is long said to be an early work of the composer, since copies of it appeared in collections with other youthful works, however, recent research suggests otherwise. Indeed, the piece is as brilliant, complex and profound as any of Bach's later works. The eight-measure theme, in $\frac{3}{4}$ time, is played in the pedal alone, after which twenty variations follow, without break. They fall into three large groups: nos. 1-12, 13-15 (without pedals), and 16-20. The theme is present in

some form during each variation: after ten variations with the theme in the pedals, it moves to the manual voices for five variations, becoming increasingly broken up. The theme returns solidly to the pedals with variation 16. The **Fugue**, which follows, has as its subject the first four bars of the passacaglia theme. It is accompanied by not one, but two countersubjects which work their way through all voices. In a real sense, the piece may be seen either as a single set of twenty-one variations, beginning with an unadorned statement of the theme and ending with a climactic fugue on it; or as a set of twenty variations with its own unity and organic growth, followed by a fugue of nearly the same length, using the theme as its subject. Indeed, it may be that Bach intended the fugue, lengthy and complex as it is, to offset the unrelenting c-minor of the twenty variations that precede it.

Played on the Gallery Organ
Rudolph von Beckerath, 1972

Intermission

Concert Overture in C Minor

Alfred Hollins
(1865-1942)

Blind from birth, Alfred Hollins did not let his condition restrict his work. He successfully pursued an international career as organist, pianist and composer. While he was a student, music was beginning to become available in Braille, and he memorized major organ works, including all the fugues by Johann Sebastian Bach. In 1897, he moved to Edinburgh to become organist at Free St. George's Church, a post he held for over 40 years. Published in 1899, the **Concert Overture in C Minor** is the second of Hollins' three concert overtures (C Major, C Minor, F Major).

Deuxième Symphonie, Op. 20 (dedicated "à mon ami Charles Mutin")

Louis Vierne
(1870-1937)

- I. Allegro
- II. Choral
- III. Scherzo
- IV. Cantabile
- V. Final

"I came into the world almost completely blind on account of which my parents felt a very keen chagrin: Because of this fact, I was surrounded by a warm and continual tenderness which very early predisposed me to an almost unhealthy sensitivity... This was also to follow me all my life, and was to become the cause of intense joys and inexpressible sufferings."

(Louis Vierne:
'Journal,' p. 124)

From the beginning, Louis Vierne's life seemed to be marked by misfortune. As a result of cataracts, he was almost blind from birth. He underwent eye surgery at the age of six, which partially restored his vision, allowing him to see very large shapes, and actually read large letters of the alphabet. He attended a school for the blind in Paris until he was admitted to the Paris Conservatory in 1890. He began study with a beloved uncle, who died when Vierne was just eleven years old. Then, at fifteen, his father showed signs of declining health, and within the year, he also died. Vierne had begun private study with César Franck, whom he revered, before being accepted into his studio at the Paris Conservatoire in 1890. Once there, however, he enjoyed just a few classes with him before Franck died. Deeply shaken once again, Vierne persevered and studied with Charles Marie Widor, who replaced Franck as Organ Professor. Despite his near-total blindness Vierne often navigated Paris unassisted. One night in 1906, he stepped into a hole in the street that had become filled with water, severely injuring his leg, which, in turn, required him to relearn how to play the pedals of the organ. The heartbreaking discovery of his wife's adultery with a supposed friend (Charles Mutin, the dedicatee of his *Deuxième Symphonie*) led to a divorce in 1909, the same year his youngest son contracted tuberculosis (from which he died four years later at the age of ten). In 1911, both his mother and his colleague Alexandre Guilmant succumbed to kidney failure and during the early years of World War I, he lost both his brother René and his seventeen year-old son Jacques in combat. Vierne had reluctantly allowed Jacques to enlist and therefore his grief was even deeper, as he felt responsible for his son's death.

His professional life was one of triumphs, mostly, rather than tragedies: Widor chose Vierne as his assistant at both St. Sulpice (1892-1900) and at the Conservatoire. In 1900 Widor recommended him to fill in for the ailing organist at Notre Dame Cathedral. Soon after Vierne's first Sunday there, Eugène Michel Sergent (1829-1900) died after serving the Cathedral for 53 years. Ninety-eight applicants applied for the position, and it was awarded to Vierne.

The last great late Romantic French organ composer, Vierne died while giving a recital at Notre Dame Cathedral, on Wednesday, June 2, 1937. He performed his *Triptyque*, Op. 58, and an improvisation was to follow. Vierne pressed a pedal key, suffered a heart attack, lost consciousness, and died a short time later in spite of efforts to revive him. At his funeral (held three days later at Notre Dame) the grand organ that he had played for 37 years remained silent.

Vierne wrote a total of six organ symphonies, following the lead of his teacher, Widor. The key of each follows from the previous (all are in minor keys): No. 1 is in D, No. 2 is in E, No. 3 is in F-sharp, No. 4 in G, No. 5 in A and No. 6 is in B. Symphonies 2, 4, 5, & 6 are cyclical – each symphony contains two themes upon which its movements are based. The themes can be modified, but the thematic material of each movement can be traced to themes that are indigenous to each symphony - pillars that support the entire work. As a student of both Widor and Franck, Vierne seemed destined to bring the Organ Symphony to its pinnacle with his Six Symphonies. In Vierne's music, one can see the influence of Widor's clear command of counterpoint and classical forms, as well as Franck's attention to melodic development.

Vierne began work on his **Second Symphony** in 1901, it was completed in April of 1903, and published later that same year. He played two movements (Choral and Scherzo) at a concert on February 21, 1903, which Claude Debussy attended. In his review, Debussy wrote, "Monsieur Vierne's Symphony is truly remarkable; it combines abundant musicianship with ingenious discoveries in the special sonority of the organ. Old J.S. Bach, the father of us all, would have been pleased with Monsieur Vierne."

Eric Plutz

Eric Plutz is University Organist at Princeton University, where his responsibilities include playing for weekly services at the Chapel, Academic Ceremonies, and solo concerts, as well as accompanying the Chapel Choir in services and concerts. He coordinates the weekly After Noon Concert Series at the University Chapel, is Lecturer in Music and Instructor of Organ at Princeton University, and maintains a private studio. Also in Princeton, Mr. Plutz is rehearsal accompanist for Princeton Pro Musica. In 2016 Mr. Plutz received the Alumni Merit Award from Westminster Choir College of Rider University. More information is available at www.ericplutz.com.

In celebration of Louis Vierne's 150th birthday in 2020, Eric initiated The Vierne Project; performances of the complete organ symphonies. One of a handful of organists to embark on such a venture, he performed in Beverly Hills (CA), Durham (NC), Minneapolis (MN), Lancaster and Reading (PA), Ithaca (NY), Houston (TX), Evanston (IL), Portland (OR), and Olympia (WA). "Louis Vierne: The Complete Symphonies," recorded on six different instruments, was released in August, 2022.

As an organ concert soloist, Mr. Plutz, who "performs with gusto, flair, clarity, and strong yet pliant rhythmic control (James Hildreth for *The American Organist*)," has accepted engagements in distinguished locations across the United States and abroad including Germany, Austria, Philadelphia (Verizon Hall, the Wanamaker Organ, Longwood Gardens), New York City (Avery Fisher Hall, Church of St. Ignatius Loyola, Cathedral of St. John the Divine), Washington, DC (Washington National Cathedral), and San Francisco (Grace Cathedral). He has been a featured artist at three Regional Conventions of the American Guild of Organists (2007, 2011, and 2019), the Annual Convention of the Organ Historical Society (2016), and at the 2010 National AGO Convention in Washington, DC, Mr. Plutz performed twice, in collaboration with two local groups. His playing has been broadcast on "With Heart and Voice," "Pipedreams," and "the Wanamaker Organ Hour."

Eric has made four solo recordings on the Pro Organo label, www.proorgano.com. *French Trilogy* (on the Æolian-Skinner Organ at Byrnes Auditorium, Winthrop University, Rock Hill, SC), about which James Reed (*The Diapason*) wrote, "Plutz is a master craftsman... his performances are sensitive, emotional, stunningly accurate, and spectacularly musical... truly a world-class performance by a world-class musician," and *Denver Jubilee* (restored 1938 Kimball Organ of St. John's Episcopal Cathedral, Denver,

CO), about which David Schwartz (*American Record Guide*) wrote, "...he understands, as would a great orchestrator, how to register the more orchestral side of the instrument...."

Two previous recordings are of the Princeton University Chapel Organ: *Musique Héroïque* and *Carnival*, about which Mr. Hildreth (*TAO*) writes, "Plutz's extraordinary musicianship and dexterous command allow him to perform the most challenging passages (of which there are many!) with apparent ease. He performs the quiet pieces with poetry and grace."

From 2005 to 2020, Mr. Plutz was rehearsal accompanist for the Westminster Symphonic Choir at Westminster Choir College. Additionally, he has worked with many organizations, including The Bach Choir of Bethlehem, National Symphony Orchestra, Choral Arts Society of Washington, and the Cathedral Choral Society (DC). As a teacher, he held the position of Adjunct Assistant Professor of Organ at Westminster Choir College three separate times.

Originally from Rock Island, Illinois, Mr. Plutz earned a Bachelor of Music degree, *magna cum laude*, from Westminster Choir College and a Master of Music degree from the Eastman School of Music. Additional study consists of two visits to Europe: in 2005, he studied the complete organ works of César Franck with Marie-Louise Langlais in Paris, and in 2019 he studied the complete organ symphonies of Louis Vierne with Ben van Oosten in The Hague, Netherlands.