



Louis Vierne: Organ Symphonies op. 14 & op. 20

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RECORD REVIEW
 Hard on the heels of Hans-Eberhard Ross's integral recording of the complete organ music of César Franck on Audite, reviewed in the January issue, comes the first volume in his projected set of the six organ symphonies of Louis Vierne on the same label. As with the Franck set, the organ used is the modern (1998) Swiss Goll instrument at St Martin, Memmingen, a choice which on paper might appear to upset enthusiasts who countenance no other organ than a genuine Cavallé-Coll, for which the music of Franck, Widor and Vierne (alongside that of other composers) was originally composed. Yet Ross's choice is a good one, for two overriding reasons: the first is that the instrument is demonstrably suitable for this music in many ways (based upon the Cavallé-Coll concepts, but by no means a 'modern reproduction', it re-creates the musical atmosphere through a superb combination of mixtures) and the second is that the sound in this church is absolutely ideal for clarity, with a reverberation of just four seconds (or thereabouts), thus enabling any contrapuntal writing to be heard clearly and entirely appropriately in a well-nigh perfect acoustic.

As with the Franck set (also recorded on this instrument), the occasional labyrinthine nature of the music is presented with exemplary clarity: one's ears have to supply no additional features to the recorded sound. In Vierne's case, this is even more of a bonus than it is in Franck's music, for the Vierne symphonies are notable for their (at times) constant contrapuntal writing, as we hear in the second movements of each of the symphonies on this disc.

The significant corpus of latter nineteenth-century French organ music was begun by Franck and followed by Widor and Vierne (together with other contemporaneous figures well into the twentieth century), yet such a succession of masterpieces as they produced could have been accomplished only on the great Cavallé-Coll instruments of their day. Vierne's first two symphonies (1899 and 1903) follow the trail begun by Franck's Grand piece symphonique (the first organ symphony) and taken up by Widor, but by the dawn of the twentieth century musical language had expanded greatly from that of half a century before. Not only that: for Vierne, as with Widor, the 'symphony' as a concept had expanded from the classical four movements, led by Berlioz and Mahler, into five or six.

The problem for such structuralization is that the 'symphony' was in danger of becoming a suite and it is a measure of Vierne's genius (not too strong a word) that he was able to embrace multi-movement form within a genuinely symphonic (i.e., cross-thematic, organic) texture, features which were not invariably achieved in the organ symphonies of Widor. This is all the more remarkable in Vierne's case in that he was virtually blind: much of it had to be done by ear alone, which he achieved magnificently.

Yet, because of his sightlessness, the editing of Vienne's work does pose certain problems: he was unable to check the printed proofs accurately prior to publication, and it is only in quite recent years that the superb Carus edition of the lamented David Sanger and Jan Laukvik, and (slightly more recently) the equally admirable Bärenreiter urtext edition of Helga Schauerte-Maubouet, have clarified many of the contentious points in earlier publications. Only now, 100 years and more after these works were first performed, can we approach Vienne's scores with a much greater degree of certainty, and Ross gives particularly fine accounts of these works, based essentially on the Sanger-Laukvik edition. Ross's choice of tempos is ideal, although I felt the closing bars of both symphonies' slow movements might have benefited from a more carefully controlled *rallentando*.

Although the First Symphony dates from the very end of the nineteenth century, the Second is inherently more forward-looking as a concept (albeit five movements instead of the First's six). The gossamer-like Scherzo is a quite remarkable inspiration, but 'fits' the overall work admirably, especially in Ross's performance. Possessors of the excellent integral sets by Sanger himself on Meridian, or by Jeremy Filsell on Signum, need not change to this new one, but the remarkable clarity of the Audite recording, and the excellence of the booklet notes by Rüdiger Heinze and Ross himself, will appeal to many keen to investigate this music – which is somewhat more wide-ranging than that of Widor, yet are works which hold together admirably as a totality. In that regard, Vienne is a more important composer than is often realized and I await the remaining issues in this series with interest.