



Louis Vierne: Organ Symphonies op. 47 & op. 59

aud 92.676

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[American Record Guide](#) (William J Gatens - 01.12.2014)

This is the third and final volume in Hans-Eberhard Ross's recording of the six organ symphonies of Louis Vierne (1870–1937). One of the chief guiding principles of the project is to bring audible clarity to the compositional details of these monumental works. It was no secret that Vierne conceived these works with the instrument and acoustic of Paris's Notre Dame Cathedral in mind. Ross counters that dense organ tone and an ultra-reverberant acoustic defeat the clarity of detail that he wishes to convey. He has a point, but I am far from certain that the present recording or its two previous volumes furnish a satisfactory resolution of the dilemma. The instrument here is the four-manual Goll organ (1998) at St Martin's Church, Memmingen (Bavaria). The tone does not have quite the passionate quality of Cavallé-Coll at his finest, but it is not worlds removed from that. The church's foursecond reverberation contributes some warmth but still allows contrapuntal lines and other details to be audible.

Donald Metz reviewed the first volume in the series (Audite 92.674; March/April 2013), and I reviewed the second (92.675; March/April 2014). Our assessments were similar. Metz refers to Ross's "more clinical approach" in comparison with other performers of this music. In my review of the second volume I thought his judgement perhaps too severe, though I am now inclined to reconsider. In addition to the instrument and the space, Ross sometimes allows a more open articulation than the continuous legato that was standard in the time of the French romantic and postromantic repertory. He also makes some alterations to the composer's registrations, but I do not find those drastic. The general categories of tone color are observed, but the details always need to be adapted to the particular organ, as no two of them are the same.

The more fully registered passages here seem to me the more persuasive, as they effectively engage the reverberation of the room. The quieter and more lightly registered movements and sections are the ones that sound clinical to me. A good example is the opening movement of Symphony 5. This is a gloomy opening and should sound as if coming to the listener from out of the shadows. Here it is just too matter-of-fact. The clarity turns out to be counterproductive. Much the same could be said of the second movement of Symphony 6 with its troubled, jagged melodies and anguished chromatic harmonies.

I would not describe Ross's performances in general as mechanical or dispassionate, but they sound as if he is more concerned about getting the notes to flow smoothly—no small feat in these formidably difficult works—than in projecting the expressive qualities of the music. It sounds as if he is so preoccupied with the surface of the music that he never really gets inside so as to convey to the listener what makes it tick. These are very unromantic performances.

Of the Vierne recordings I have encountered recently, the one that has most impressed me is François Lombard's of Symphony 6 on the three-manual Cavallé-Coll (1870) at St Peter's Church, Calais, where he is organist (Motette 13811; Jan/Feb 2014). Not only is his performance wonderfully moving, but the recording proves that it is possible to capture the sound of a romantic organ in a reverberant room without losing most of the musical detail.

