



Louis Vierne: Organ Symphonies op. 28 & op. 32

aud 92.675

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RECORD REVIEW

The six organ symphonies of Louis Vierne naturally fall into the repertoire of such works by French composers, but they constitute a 'set' (albeit in some respects an unfinished one) far more readily put together as a sequence than any other. They virtually demand being heard as a major series of works in sequence, and I hope that at some point a dedicated organist will play all six in one recital. This is because, from the start, they were planned as such: Vierne's six organ symphonies are each in a minor key, the rising sequence – Bach-like, as in the *Clavierübung* – being D minor, E minor, F sharp minor, G minor, A minor and B minor. Vierne was unable to complete the Seventh, in C minor, for which only sketches survive.

Of the six symphonies, only the first is in six movements – the others are all in five. In discussing the first volume of Hans-Eberhard Roß's set in February 2013, I explained the multi-movement form of French organ symphonies, which I shall not repeat here, but what is remarkable in this sequence of extended works is the variety which Vierne brings to each multi-movement plan. He never 'repeats' himself in structuralization or emotional juxtaposition, and the result is – despite a certain macro-thematicism which tends to run throughout all six symphonies – that each work is quite different from its fellows, yet at the same time seems to 'belong' to the set.

It is a facet of large-scale integration of contrasts, which in my opinion has never received the musicological attention it deserves, but which these recordings in progress from this organist via Audite makes eminently worthwhile and practical.

Vierne was virtually sightless, and suffered greatly in his personal and professional life; the first element means that it is only quite recently that reliable editions of his works have appeared (he was considerably disadvantaged in checking proofs prior to publication and was often emotionally discouraged from dealing with practical matters). Although the symphonies were composed with the sounds of the great Cavaillé-Coll instrument at Notre-Dame very much in mind, the music in each symphony is sufficiently varied as to afford the performer with a number of choices, which in this case Roß explains in detail – at the same time as exhibiting his own love for and understanding of this music.

Thus it is that we have performances of these fine works which are compelling throughout. Particularly, the account of the great Adagio in the Third Symphony (arguably Vierne's masterpiece), shot through with deeply expressive invention, is very moving here, especially as the composer's individuality is strong and quite original, as we hear in the handful of recordings he made himself.

Roß's accounts are consistently very good indeed: the main facet of his interpretative

ability is that he brings out the character of each movement in both symphonies as well as relating them to the overall larger structure. This is a rare and noble quality, achieved through an integration of tempos as subtle use of registration – in the Third Symphony through relating the Adagio and the toccata-like finale, and in the Fourth (over which looms the shadow of the recently broken-out war) through thematic, cyclical, integration (César Franck was Vienne's teacher, albeit briefly) rather than emotional character (the variety in the first three movements is astonishing).

Apart from the committed intelligence of this fine player, the recording quality here is quite splendid, and this second volume deserves a strong recommendation to set alongside its predecessor.

