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

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American Record Guide (William J Gatens - 2014.03.18)

This is the second volume in a three-disc project to record the six organ symphonies of Louis Vierne (1870-1937). Hans-Eberhard Ross, since 1991 choirmaster of the deanery of St Martin in Memmingen (Bavaria), plays the four-manual 1998 Goll organ there.

At the beginning of his interpreter's notes in the booklet Ross quotes Vierne to the effect that he had in mind the instrument and ambience of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris for his organ compositions. Vierne was organist there from 1900 until he died. A few lines later, Ross is highly critical of recordings of Vierne on opulent Cavaille-Coll instruments in cathedrals with too much reverberation. Even if this contradicts the composer's stated ideal, Ross does have a point. In Marie-Claire Alain's 1989 recording of the first four Vierne symphonies at the Cavaille-Coll organ at St Stephen's Abbey in Caen (Erato), to name but one example, a good deal of contrapuntal detail is inaudible in the overwhelming cloud of reverberation. What good is compositional detail if the listener can't hear it? Ross's mission is to rectify this in the present series of recordings, and not everyone will agree on whether he has managed that.

Donald Metz reviewed the first volume of this series (Audite 92674; March/April 2013) and remarked on Ross's more clinical approach to the music in comparison with other recordings. Describing the present performances as clinical would be too severe. Ross achieves his aim of making nearly every detail of the music audible, and while his performances may not be quite heart-on-sleeve, I find them far from dispassionate or insensitive. The organ itself combines darkness with clarity in a room with a four-second reverberation that imparts warmth without obscuring the part writing. The instrument may not have the passionate character of Cavaille-Coll at his best, but it is not worlds removed from it. Ross also takes a somewhat free approach to registration in the interest of clarity, but generally reproduces the composer's intended tone colors.

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