

Aleksandr Nisse (organ)

rec. Selby Abbey 2018

SELBY ABBEY ORGAN MASTERS SAOM004 [75:18]

This excellent CD of music showcasing the restored William Hill and Son organ at Selby Abbey gets off to a great start. Charles Tournemire is less-well-known than his exact-contemporary Louis Vierne. Yet his music is equally satisfying. As a pupil of César Franck and Charles Marie Widor, he was certainly a great master of the organ. The key thing to recall about Tournemire is that in his organ music he is to plainsong what Bach was to Lutheran chorales.

Tournemire produced an immense amount of music for the instrument, typically inspired by his deep Catholic faith. His magnum opus is the huge collection *L'Orgue mystique* which consists of 51 works written for the Christian Year, including the Feast Days of the Saints. Each one has five discrete pieces: *Prélude à l'Introit*, *Offertoire*, *Élévation*, *Communion* and *Pièce Terminale*. Each makes use of the proper chants of the day. The present *Paraphrase-Carillon* is largely based on the plainsong *Salve Regina* and *Ave maris stellis* taken from the Office of the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The music is sometime impressionistic, sometime hints at birdsong and often deploys complex chords. Fundamentally, it is an explosion of praise for Our Lady that certainly does ring out the bells. The listener will find it easy to hear a prefiguring of Messiaen, especially in the spooky middle section.

Whilst preparing this review, I took the opportunity of listening to one of Charles Tournemire's eight symphonies for orchestra. If you like Mahler, you will like this music. Alas, he abandoned concert music after failing to make headway in this genre.

Maurice Duruflé's *Scherzo op.2* is an amazing piece. I understand that it was composed in 1927 as an examination exercise whilst the composer was still a student at the Paris Conservatoire. It has been suggested that it may be a revision of an earlier piece. Yet, there is not a whiff of the academy about this music. There is a collection of essays about the composer called *Maurice Duruflé (1902-1986): The Last Impressionist* (ed. Ronald Ebrecht, Scarecrow Press, 2002), the title of which gives some idea of what style of music influenced the composer's work. Any hearing of the *Scherzo* displays this mood from the first bar to the last. The entire work is characterised by a misty, will o' the wisp atmosphere featuring many tempo changes and daring modulations. On the other hand, it is not a ramble but sticks to a definite formal structure: a small rondo. The work opens quietly and slowly and proceeds to explore several filigree phrases and some beautiful chorale-like motives. For a *Scherzo* it is typically reserved. The work was dedicated to 'To my dear master, Charles Tournemire in grateful homage.' Tournemire was at that time organist at Sainte-Clothilde, Paris.

I began exploring the music of Messiaen at the wrong end. I recall sitting down on the organ bench with a friendly organist who played me extracts from the *Méditations sur le Mystère de la Sainte Trinité* (1969). I think that it had only recently been published. I cannot claim that I was impressed. It was not until a year or so later that I discovered the beautiful orchestral version of *L'Ascension* (1932). I think it was an old ORTF Philharmonic Orchestra recording conducted by Marius Constant. I found this a revelation after the colourful *Méditations*. Shortly afterwards, I heard the organ version of *L'Ascension* which Messiaen had created in 1933. The first, second and fourth movements were direct transcriptions of the original, but the third movement *Transports de joie* was entirely new. Messiaen's *L'Ascension* was inspired by scripture, though it is fair to advocate that the composer has not written a programmatic work about biblical events, but a meditation on its inherent spirituality. I do not need to give a commentary on this work, save to mention that most listeners will never forget the massive explosion of organ texture in *Transports de joie*. It is possible to forget the programme and simply enjoy this vibrant music as a superlative example of a twentieth century toccata. The sound world of the other less cataclysmic sections is always thoughtful and well-wrought on this disc. I have usually listened to *L'Ascension* in Jennifer Bate's 1982 recording played on the organ at Beauvais Cathedral and the earlier version by Simon Preston on the old ARGO label. However, Aleksandr Nisse's exceptional performance is one I can engage with and recommend.

The discovery for me on this CD is the premiere recording of Danielle Salvignol-Nisse's *Six Pièces*. As her name might imply, she is related to the present soloist: in fact, she was his aunt and godmother. Salvignol-Nisse studied with Gaston Litaize and Jean Langlais at the National Institute for the Blind. After this she entered the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique in Paris. Her career included positions at St Denis Church in Amboise and the Church of Notre Dame in St Lo. In 1977 she was appointed to a professorship at the Conservatoire of Music at Perpignan. Salvignol-Nisse had a busy recital career in France, Germany, Holland and Spain. I was unable to trace any further information about her on the internet. Her remarkable *Six pièces pour orgue* was published in 1974 at the behest of Jean Langlais. There are no detailed programme notes provided for this work, but I guess that a good description would be that they reflect the sound-world of Jean Langlais, Jehan Alain and approachable Messiaen. That said, she is not writing pastiche. I would need to inspect the score before making further comments, save to suggest that the music is deeply thought out and reflects what Aleksandr Nisse describes as her 'intense [Christian] faith.' The six pieces are: *Prière*, *Ave Maris Stella*, *Élégie*, *Fantaisie*, *Offertoire* and *Communion*.

Franz Liszt's *Funérailles* is a strange work (to me). It is played here in a transcription by the French organist Louis Robilliard. It began life as no.7 of Liszt's *Harmonies Poétiques et Religieuses* for piano solo. This work was written in memory of three of the composer's friends killed in the Hungarian Revolution of 1849. The music balances several moods. From the opening funeral march building to an aggressive climax, the Chopin-like *Lagrimoso* (tearful) which is thoughtful and morose and then on towards a wonderful march which reflects the hoof-beats of the cavalry in the pedals and the blare of military trumpets in the manuals. The music calms down to a hush, reprising the tearful music, before a last cry of anguish brings the work to its conclusion. Not my favourite work on this disc, but it is certainly one that displays the resources of this splendid organ and the performer to great effect.

The soloist Aleksandr Nisse was born in the Northern German province of Schleswig-Holstein and is of Russian and French descent. He received early training as an organist in Hamburg. Influential teachers and mentors included the great Helmut Walcha, Gaston Litaize and Jean Langlais. Further studies at the Royal Academy of Music ensued with Nicolas Kynaston and Lionel Rogg. Nisse was organ scholar at Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin. In September 2011 he was appointed organist of St. Andrew's Church, Westland Row, Dublin, and music teacher at Terenure College. Aleksandr Nisse has given many recitals in Europe, including in France, Hungary, the United Kingdom and Germany.

The insert does not give a history of the organ, only the specification. A couple of facts may be of interest. The organ was built in 1909 by William Hill and Son. It is a highly-regarded example of that organ builder's craft. The oak organ case was designed by John Oldrid Scott, son of George Gilbert Scott and brother of Giles. By 2012 the organ was in danger of becoming unplayable. Over the next couple of years, it was fully restored utilising as much of the original instrument as possible. A new four manual and pedal nave console by Harrison and Harrison was installed.

The liner notes produced by the Selby Abbey Organ Masters label are excellent. They give a detailed account of each pieces, largely written by Ian Wells. It includes the all-important specification of the organ, a biography of Aleksandr Nisse, an appreciation of Danielle Salvignol-Nisse by the soloist and a brief history of the Abbey. It is well illustrated with colour photographs of the building, the console and the organist. In fact, it is a model insert (apart from omitting the organ history). Finally, although I may have missed it, there is no exact date of recording: only the year.

This is a thoroughly enjoyable CD. Great music is played with exceptional skill on a wonderfully restored instrument. What more could one ask for except further organ records from Selby Abbey Organ Masters label.

John France