

Independent Presbyterian Church
Birmingham, AL
November 13, 2022
Ken Cowan, Organ

Notes on the Program

George Baker established a multifaceted career as a prizewinning organist, improviser teacher, and composer before embarking on a second career as a medical doctor. His musical endeavors remain the focus of his creative activities. *L'Envoi*, a French toccata-style work written in 2018, was conceived with an intensely celebratory spirit and is based on two contrasting themes. The first fanfare-like and leaping, accompanied by a fleeting carillon-style figuration. The second theme enters each time in a more subdued manner, but features oscillating chordal progressions which causes the momentum to continually rise. Baker extended his original ending to include dazzling runs up and down the organ's pedalboard.

Roger-Ducasse studied composition with Gabriel Fauré at the Paris Conservatoire. His style shows the influence of Fauré and Debussy, but is distinctly personal. The *Pastorale* is his only major organ work, yet it is one of the finest compositions of the French Symphonic period. A single lilting theme heard from the outset is developed most imaginatively, with contrasting sections blended seamlessly together. Roger-Ducasse follows the example Beethoven left with his *Pastoral Symphony*, producing a composition rich in orchestral color, and imitative of the sounds of nature, including a central climactic “storm” section contrasting the peacefulness of the outer sections.

Swedish organist and composer **Gunnar Idenstam** subtitles his Scherzo II “Joik,” (anglicized “Joik, or Yoik”) which is a traditional form of song in Sámi music, sung by indigenous people of Sapmi in Northern Europe. Each joik is meant to reflect or evoke a person, animal or place. Idenstam's chosen joik is a rhythmic melody with a jovial spirit. He accompanies with a variety of vivid figurations evoking a mood at times contemplative, and at times seeming to imitate joyous laughter and fairy tale characters.

Engelbert Humperdinck's promise during his youth was such that Richard Wagner requested his aid in preparing his first performance of *Parsifal*. While Humperdinck had made his first attempts at writing opera at the age of 14, it was not until 1893, at the age of 39 that he composed his most famous opera, *Hansel and Gretel*. This work began as a song-cycle for Humperdinck's sister, then evolved into the fairy-tale opera, which has remained a staple of the repertoire. The opera is a musical setting of the familiar children's story, complete with Wicked Witch and the Sandman, who sprinkles sand into little children's eyes to lull them to sleep. The chordal opening of the Prelude is a quote from the children's prayer, which they sing before nodding off. Humperdinck's style was generally more conservative than Wagner's, though he was a great admirer, and he shared with Wagner a disinterest in writing original music for the organ, in spite of lessons in counterpoint and fugue from Josef Rheinberger in 1877. This work is therefore performed as masterfully transcribed by Edwin H. Lemare.

Rachel Laurin composed “Beelzebub's Laugh” in 2013 for a commission by Ken Cowan. It simultaneously explores instrumental technique and paints a dramatic picture in the spirit of

past works, for example by Nicolo Paganini (Caprice No. 13 "Le Rire du Diable") or Franz Liszt, (Chasse-Neige, or "Snow Storm"). Beelzebub or "Lord of the Flies" is one of the many historical "nicknames" for the devil, (the same as Satan, Lucifer, etc...) In one particular French 19th Century illustration, this meddlesome adversary of humankind was illustrated as a fly, an image which influenced the composer and played a role in the musical character of this humorous piece. The "laugh" of this flying foe amusing itself is represented by repeated, descending chromatic chords. A lyric second-theme introduces a contrasting, more flowing character, but like one trying to go about their business in the presence of a buzzing fly, it is constantly interrupted by its adversarial counterpart.

Max Reger's organ music had a devoted interpreter in the great German organist Carl Straube, and many of Reger's fantasias are said to have arisen from a dare by Straube to try to write a piece which he could not play! The fantasia on the chorale "Hallelujah! Gott zu loben," is structured as an introduction, variations, and fugue on Reger's chosen theme. The composition is full of dramatic contrasts, and Reger's harmony is distinctly chromatic, and often shocking. Reger included the text of a specific verse of the chorale along with the musical notation of each variation, as well as near the end of the fugue (at which point the chorale theme is combined with the fugue subject). This would suggest that the character of each variation is inspired by the mood of the corresponding chorale text. The text of this chorale is the German setting of Psalm 146, whose text reflects the imposing joy permeating the composition as a whole.

- 1 Praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord, O my soul!
- 2 I will praise the Lord as long as I live;
I will sing praises to my God while I have my being.
- 3 Put not your trust in princes,
in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation.
- 4 When his breath departs, he returns to the earth;
on that very day his plans perish.
- 5 Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the Lord his God,
- 6 who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them,
who keeps faith forever;
- 7 who executes justice for the oppressed,
who gives food to the hungry.
The Lord sets the prisoners free;
- 8 the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.
The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;
the Lord loves the righteous.
- 9 The Lord watches over the sojourners;
he upholds the widow and the fatherless,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.
- 10 The Lord will reign forever,
your God, O Zion, to all generations.
Praise the Lord!