

Theodora Primes

November 12, 2017 Organ Concert Notes

Organ Concerto #5 in F major (*organ and orchestral parts*)

I Largo • II Allegro • III Alla siciliana • IV Presto

George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)

Handel introduced a new musical form, the concerto for chamber organ and orchestra in 1735 because he was losing popularity in London due to the glittering success of a rival opera company's celebrated castrato, Farinelli. Unfortunately, Handel's considerable virtuosity at the organ was not enough to attract fans from Farinelli, who had been biologically altered in boyhood to be able to sing like a soprano. Handel's small English chamber organ had only one keyboard and no pedals, producing a much softer sound than the mighty German organs of J.S. Bach.



Caricature of Handel playing a chamber organ, 1754

Organ Sonata Op. 65 #6 in d minor (*Our father*

Who Art in Heaven)

I Choral • II Andante sostenuto • III Allegro molto • IV Fuga:

Sostenuto e legato •

V Finale: Andante

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Mendelssohn's prosperous and intellectual Jewish family moved to Berlin in 1811, leaving Hamburg in disguise fearing French revenge for their role in breaking Napoleon's blockade. They changed their name to Bartholdy and embraced Christianity. Some modern scholars have devoted considerable energy to demonstrate either that Mendelssohn was deeply sympathetic to his ancestors' Jewish beliefs, or that he was hostile to this and sincere in his Christian beliefs. Mendelssohn revived interest in J. S. Bach in Germany and one hundred nine years after Handel wrote his first set of six organ concerti, Felix Mendelssohn created an edition of Bach's organ chorales and simultaneously published his own six organ sonatas. Mendelssohn's 'sonatas' were more like Bach's suites of dances than the sonatas of his contemporaries.



German postage stamp
issued on the 200th anniversary of Mendelssohn's birth

**Chorale Prelude BWV 639 *Ich ruf zu dir,
Herr Jesu Christ***

(I call to you, Lord Jesus Christ)

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Bach was an accomplished organist, playing the most demanding repertoire of the period by the time he was 15 years old. He soon became organist at St. Boniface's Church (now called the Bachkirche or Bach church). He was granted leave to study with the organist and composer Dieterich Buxtehude in Lübeck, a 250 mile pilgrimage Bach famously made on foot. Bach was admonished for returning four months late and then further upbraided for introducing "sundry curious embellishments in the chorales" and mingling "many strange notes" in them, thus confusing the congregation. Albert Schweitzer, the great humanitarian and organist who quipped "There are two means of refuge from the miseries of life: music and cats" also wrote that the Dürer-like character of Bach's musical method is exemplified by the simplicity and perfection of these small chorale preludes. "Simply by the precision and the characteristic quality of each line of the contrapuntal motive he expresses all that has to be said, and so makes clear the relation of the music to the text whose title it bears."



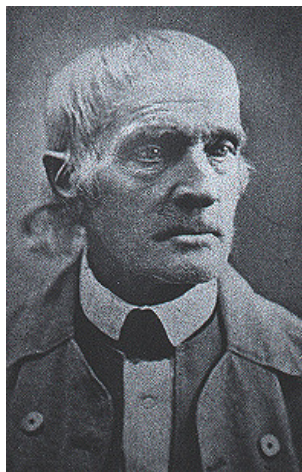
Autograph manuscript of *Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ*, BWV 639

Simple Gifts (*Shaker tune*)

Joseph Brackett (1797-1882)

set for organ by **Wilbur Held** (1914-2015)

Although composed in 1848 by Shaker elder Elisha Joseph Brackett Jr., “Simple Gifts” was largely unknown outside of Shaker communities until Aaron Copland used its melody in 1944 for the score of Martha Graham's ballet *Appalachian Spring*. Judy Collins, R.E.M., Yo-Yo Ma, and Little House on the Prairie have all used the tune, as did John Williams for president Obama's 2009 inauguration. This organ adaptation is by Wilbur Held, who moved to Southern California in 1978 and was active in the Los Angeles chapter of the American guild of Organists. His stamped personal copy of the Handel organ concerti can be found in the library of Theodora Primes.



Joseph Brackett Jr.



Prepare the Way, O Zion

My Jesus, I Love Thee

Blessed Assurance

arranged by Dale Wood (1934-2003)

Dale Wood was born in Glendale, California of Finnish-Polish parentage (his father's last name was Wojtkiewicz, which immigration authorities shortened to Wood). Most of his vast array of organ works were composed at The Sea Ranch, 115 miles north of San Francisco, amidst acres of redwood trees and gentle meadows on the rural and spectacular coastline of Northern California. Some of his original melodies sound uncannily like ancient folk tunes. In 1992 in "Softly and tenderly, Volume 1, he wrote, "The tunes gathered in this collection all stem from unpretentious origins. They are etched into the memory and never fail to appear in national polls which name favorite hymns of the people. The melodic appeal which is at the very heart of these hymns suggests organ settings which are direct and uncomplicated, and it would seem inappropriate to garb such simple tunes in formal attire."



Dale Wood with blind jazz pianist George Shearing
at The Sea Ranch in January 1977

Jesus Loves Me/Clair de Lune

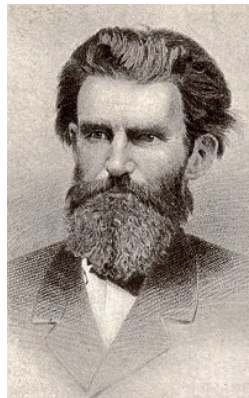
W. Bradbury 1816-68 Claude Debussy 1862-1918

Fred Bock 1939-98

The complex origins of this piece begin with the deeply religious American poet Anna Bartlett Warner who in 1860 published “Jesus loves me-This I know for the Bible tells me so.” Two years later, in New York City, the equally devout William Batchelder Bradbury set Anna Warner’s poem to music adding the refrain, “Yes, Jesus loves me”. It became an immensely popular hymn. A few years later Paul Verlaine, part of the French ‘Decadent’ movement penned a quite secular poem *Clair de Lune* (Moonlight), whose piano accompaniment was famously written by Claude Debussy, whose personal religion embraced *Mysterious Nature*. He stated, “I do not believe that a man is any nearer to God for being clad in priestly garments”. Fred Bock, organist of the First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood merged these equally popular but seemingly disparate compositions into a single haunting piece made even more poignant by Theo’s sensitive tonal registrations.



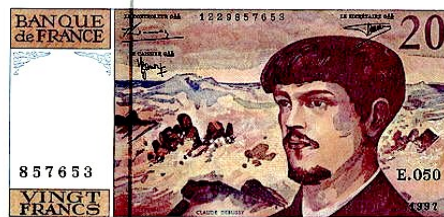
Paul Verlaine
'Decadent' French poet



William Batchelder
Bradbury



Anna Bartlett Warner



Debussy was literally 'on the money'
on French 20 Franc note circa 1997



Fred Bock

Toccata from the Fifth Organ Symphony

Charles Marie Widor (1844-1937)

Saint Sulpice, not Notre Dame, was and is the most prominent position for an organist in Paris. Because of the lobbying of legendary organ builder Aristide Cavaillé-Coll and composers Camille Saint-Saëns and Charles Gounod, Charles Marie Widor was appointed as "provisional" organist of Saint-Sulpice when he was only 25 years old. He remained as organist there for nearly 64 years. His students included Marcel Dupré, Louis Vierne, Darius Milhaud and Albert Schweitzer.

Widor was at the forefront of a movement that utilized a new organ design pioneered by Cavaillé-Coll with a much warmer sound, a vast array of stops, unprecedented abilities for smooth crescendos and diminuendos and a truly orchestral range of voicing that was fully symphonic in scope.

Many organists speed through the 5th symphony's monumental Toccata as a breathless demonstration of dexterity and virtuosity. But Widor preferred a more controlled articulation. Saint Sulpice is an extremely tall, narrow and live cathedral. The reverberations are long and loud. Musical lines must be made deliberately quite distinct to be heard through the decaying din of their predecessors.



Charles Marie Widor at his 5 manual Cavaillé-Coll at Saint Sulpice

♦PROGRAM NOTES BY ROBERT PRIMES ♦