

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Organ at 70: Ourania Gassiou & Eleni Keventsidou

Friday 28 June 2024, 6pm

Royal Festival Hall

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Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Bach Allegro from Brandenburg Concerto No.2 in F arr. Reger for keyboard (4 hands)	5'
Franck Choral No.2 in B minor	13'
Cochereau Scherzo symphonique	7'
Liszt Funérailles from Harmonies poétiques et religieuses, S.173 arr. Nicolas Kynaston for organ	12'
Reger Rhapsodie in C sharp minor, Op.65 No.1	7'
Reger Toccata in E minor, Op.65 No.11	5'
Leighton Martyrs – dialogues on a Scottish psalm tune for organ duet, Op.73	15'

Performers

Ourania Gassiou *organ*

Eleni Keventsidou *organ*

There are several themes running through tonight's rich and varied concert: the music of JS Bach and its seemingly all-pervasive influence; reimaginings of existing music that exploit the splendours of the organ; and the glories of the French tradition of organist-composers. Above all, however, the concert is a celebration of the organ itself, its colours and sonic variety, its grandeur and intimacy, in music by composers (and arrangers) who'd set out to demonstrate all it could do.

It's somewhat ironic, then, that tonight's first piece wasn't intended for the organ at all – neither in its original version, nor in its later keyboard rethink. Bach's *Brandenburg* Concertos have been dubbed music history's most elaborate and ambitious, but ultimately unsuccessful, pitch for work. He wrote them around 1721, sensing his employment with Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Köthen was looking increasingly precarious, and with the aim of displaying his musical skills to Christian Ludwig, Margrave of Brandenburg. He never heard back.

Born in Bavaria, Max Reger has been called the greatest German composer for organ since Bach. It's a description that would no doubt have thrilled the later composer. Reger wrote in 1905: 'Bach is for me the beginning and end of all music; upon him rests, and from him originates, all real progress!' Reger made many arrangements of Bach's music, sometimes adding his own distinctively rich voice to that of his Baroque colleague. It was a request from his publisher that led to Reger reworking Bach's six *Brandenburg* Concertos in 1904–05, originally for piano duet, and probably with the aim of stretching the capabilities of amateur players (though Reger shirks none of the music's technical challenges). With both composers' strong organ connections, transferring the two-player music to that instrument seems a natural choice – and the organ makes an ideal setting for the joyful, celebratory but intricate music of the first movement of the *Brandenburg* Concerto No.2.

Though he was born in Liège (now in Belgium, at the time part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands), César Franck took French nationality in 1870, so it's legitimate to describe him as tonight's first representative of the revered French school of

This performance lasts approximately 1 hour and 10 minutes without an interval.

organist-composers. He held prestigious Parisian posts – first as organist at the church of Saint-Jean-Saint-François-au-Marais, then at the Basilica of St Clotilde – and in both locations played luxurious, symphonic-style instruments constructed by legendary French organ builder Aristide Cavaillé-Coll. Both instruments would have a profound impact on Franck's music, and specifically on what he felt it was possible to conceive for the organ.

The *Trois chorals* are the final pieces that Franck wrote before his death in 1890. Proudly austere, somewhat uncompromising, they're also a fitting summation of a life devoted to musical creation. The Second Choral is based around a repeating passacaglia theme, first heard in the bassline at the piece's opening, which returns again and again at different guises and registers as the piece grows ever more elaborate on its journey to a reflective conclusion.

We remain in Paris for the remarkable Pierre Cochereau, organist at Notre Dame from 1955 until his death in 1984. As well as being a performer, composer and teacher, Cochereau was widely revered as an expert improviser – a particularly prized talent in church organists. The problem with improvisations, however, is that they disappear the instant they've been heard – unless they're recorded, of course. That was the case with tonight's *Scherzo symphonique*, which Cochereau improvised at Notre Dame on 10 February 1974, and which British organist and composer Jeremy Filsell painstakingly transcribed from a recording made that day. When you experience the music's quicksilver, dancing energy and its rich, Messiaen-like colours, it's impossible not to marvel at what a task that must have been – though you might imagine Cochereau himself, too, having a quiet chuckle at his mischievous ending.

From one kind of transcription to another. *Funérailles* is one of Franz Liszt's profoundest piano compositions, a sometimes harrowing response to the failed Hungarian Revolution of 1848, and the brutal crackdown by forces of the Habsburg monarchy, with tolling bells, trumpet calls, a desolate funeral march and stirring memories of galvanising heroism. Liszt himself wrote many organ works, and there's a proud, centuries-old tradition, too, of transcribing music originally conceived for other instruments (in this case piano, though often an orchestra) for the splendours of the organ. Devon-born organist Nicolas Kynaston (who taught Jeremy Filsell at Keble College, University of Oxford) did just that with Liszt's *Funérailles*, turning up the dials on the piece's colours and vivid imagery, and also demonstrating the sheer sonic power of a modern organ.

We return to Reger for tonight's next two pieces, both taken from his *Zwölf Stücke* of 1902, three years before the Bach transcription that opened the concert. This collection of 12 character pieces had been requested by Reger's publisher, who'd suggested the composer might produce music that wasn't too difficult to play (a stipulation that Reger admitted he'd more or less ignored). The Rhapsodie in C sharp minor opens the set, and it's a characteristically complex, cerebral piece built around an almost plainsong-style theme first announced at the start, a work that tests its performer's abilities to tease apart its dense web of intertwining musical lines, and navigate its rich, shifting harmonies. The ghost of Bach hovers much more noticeably behind the elaborate Toccata in E minor, the penultimate piece in the collection, which makes great play of the organ's sonic capabilities in terms of texture, volume and variety of voices.

The concert closes with an iconic work from the British organ repertoire. Kenneth Leighton's musical passions were first ignited as a chorister in Wakefield Cathedral, and he later taught music at the University of Edinburgh (where his students included Nigel Osborne and James MacMillan) from 1956 to 1968, then again from 1970 until his death in 1988. *Martyrs* comes from that second period in Edinburgh, and takes the Scottish psalm-tune that gives the piece its title – which Leighton called 'the greatest of Scottish Psalm-tunes... rock-like in quality' – as its raw material. It was commissioned by the Organ Club of Great Britain to celebrate its 50th anniversary in 1976, and in many ways, it's a somewhat austere, serious-minded work for such a function. After announcing the psalm-tune in its original form, Leighton's music begins in the depths of the organ, slowly accumulating material as it rises through the instrument, then seeming to repeat the process after a tense climax until the piece reaches its spectacular conclusion, one that surely epitomises the organ's grandeur and dazzling brightness.

Programme notes © David Kettle, 2024

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