

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Carol Williams Organ Recital: Mad Rush

Saturday 23 September 2023, 4pm

Royal Festival Hall

Classical music is an incredible, centuries-long story. As we at the Southbank Centre – alongside our Resident Orchestras and Resident Artists – share that story with the world today, we're creating as many ways for as many different people as possible to experience this wonderful art form.

Whether this is your first encounter with classical music or one of many, I'm absolutely thrilled that you're joining us for more powerful human experiences. Welcome to Classical Music: Autumn/Winter 2023/24.

Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Vierne Carillon de Westminster, No.6 from Pièces de fantaisie, Suite No.3, Op.54	7'
Rimsky-Korsakov The Flight of the Bumble Bee, arr. Carol Williams	2'
Philip Glass Mad Rush, arr. Carol Williams	13'
Iver Kleive Toccata, Store Gud, vi lover deg (Almighty God, we praise Thee)	6'
Carol Williams Twilight, Op.3	4'
Carol Williams Hommage à Vierne, Op.26	5'
Tournemire Improvisation on Te Deum	7'
de Abreu Tico-Tico no fubá (Samba), arr. Carol Williams	4'
J Smith Midnight Special, arr. Carol Williams	9'
Desmond (attrib. Brubeck) Take Five, arr. Carol Williams	4'
Widor Toccata from Organ Symphony No.5 in F, Op.42	6'

Performer

Carol Williams organ

This performance lasts approximately 1 hour with no interval.

Bringing together dazzling classical masterpieces old and new, as well as jazz and popular tunes, today's colourful recital takes a widescreen look at what the organ can do right across musical styles. Scratch its glittering surface, however, and the concert also demonstrates the broad range of musical skills expected from a professional organist – as Carol Williams herself proves across the eclectic repertoire.

Take today's first composer, Louis Vierne, as an example. We should more accurately describe him as a composer/organist: he was equally respected across both roles, and occupied one

of Paris' most prominent musical positions as organist at Notre Dame Cathedral from 1900 until his death in 1937. To identify the inspiration for his *Carillon de Westminster*, however, just look across the river from where you're seated: the piece's raw material is the famous 'Westminster chimes', which have rung out across London from the Palace of Westminster's Clock Tower (aka Big Ben) since 1859. Vierne visited London in January 1924, giving a recital at nearby Westminster Cathedral, where a new organ was being constructed by legendary instrument builder Henry Willis III. Willis reputedly hummed the Westminster tune to Vierne as something he might consider using, but something went awry somewhere: listen carefully, and you'll notice that the second phrase isn't quite what the Westminster bells produce. Nonetheless, it's a flamboyant, swirling piece that packs a huge variety of musical ideas into its brief duration.

With today's second piece, we can add a third responsibility to organists' to-do lists: arranging music. There's a centuries-old tradition of arranging orchestral (or, indeed, choral) works for organ, partly in the past to bring lavish, large-scale orchestral music to locations that might not have had a decent orchestra but almost certainly enjoyed the services of an accomplished organist. Nowadays, however, organ arrangements are more about demonstrating both the skills of the arranger and the virtuosic agility of the performer. *The Flight of the Bumble Bee* – surely one of classical music's best-known pieces – started life as a humble orchestral interlude in Rimsky-Korsakov's 1900 opera *The Tale of Tsar Sultan*, in which the Tsar's son is magically transformed into a bee so that he can fly away and be with his father. In her arrangement, Williams has taken the daring step of assigning the piece's famous running, buzzing patterns not to her fingers, but to her feet.

Plenty of nimble foot- and finger-work is required, too, in Philip Glass' *Mad Rush*, originally written to mark the arrival of the Dalai Lama at his first public address in North America, during a visit to New York's Cathedral of St John the Divine in 1979. Glass' mesmerising piece alternates relatively calm, peaceful, rocking music with far brighter, more glittering sections, both repeated several times until a somewhat melancholy rising melody brings the work to a thoughtful close.

We turn from Buddhism to Christianity for today's next piece: Norwegian composer and organist Iver Kleive (also music director at the Helgerud Church in Bærum, near Oslo) is celebrated for music that combines sober church styles with jazz and Norwegian folk music. His showy *Toccata Store Gud, vi lover deg* has many similarities with Glass' glittering music, taking a Lutheran hymn tune as the inspiration for an appropriately celebratory, joyful piece.

We heard one of her arrangements earlier, but next we experience Williams' skills as an original composer in two recent pieces. Like the previous works by Glass and Kleive, the evocative, atmospheric *Twilight* pits faster-moving keyboard figurations against slower-moving basslines on the organ pedals. *Hommage à Vierne* pays tribute to the perfumed harmonies and rich colours of the composer of today's first piece, contrasting an almost sinister melody with a quieter, more reflective central section.

So far we've met organists as performers, composers and arrangers. With today's next piece, we can add another responsibility: improvisation. Making music up on the spot – often based on a particular melody or theme – was a key requirement in church services, and quickly developed into a core musical skill in its own right. Charles Tournemire was a remarkable child prodigy – he was appointed organist at the Church of St Pierre in his home town of Bordeaux at the age of just 11, before studying with Widor at the Paris Conservatoire, and working as organist at the Basilica of St Clotilde in Paris from 1898 until his death in 1939. Tournemire's *Improvisation on Te Deum* dates from 1930, and had an unusual genesis. It began as an improvisation for a set of 78 discs recorded for the Polydor label, using the ancient *Te Deum laudamus* plainchant melody as its inspiration. Almost three decades later, fellow organist/composer Maurice Duruflé wrote out Tournemire's complex improvisation so that it could be performed by other musicians. The resulting piece retains the free-flowing spontaneity of a true improvisation, but also displays some of Tournemire's distinctively rich, even dissonant harmonies.

Improvisation, of course, is a core technique in a very different kind of music: jazz. But before we get to today's two jazz numbers, let's take a sideways step to Brazil for one of the best-known Latin tunes around. Zequinha de Abreu's 'Tico-Tico no fubá' has been recorded by everyone from Charlie Parker to Liberace, Ray Conniff to the Andrews Sisters. Composer and bandleader Abreu, one of Brazil's best-loved musicians, unleashed the tune (as yet untitled) on an unsuspecting world with his dance band at a 1917 ball. It made the jiving couples

dance so frantically that Abreu remarked they looked like birds fluttering around grain. When it came to deciding on a title, his bassist Artur de Carvalho suggested *Tico-Tico no fubá*: literally, 'sparrow in the cornmeal'.

But back to improvisation. US jazz keyboardist Jimmy Smith made his name on the Hammond B-3 – a very different organ to today's grand concert instrument – but his sultry, swinging music translates effortlessly across. 'Midnight Special' is the appropriately languid lead track from Smith's 1960 Blue Note album of the same name – recorded, incidentally, in a single day, alongside a second album, *Back at the Chicken Shack*.

Staying with jazz, 'Take Five' is one of that genre's most iconic tunes. And although it's often assigned to US jazz pianist Dave Brubeck or his Quartet, it was actually composed by the Quartet's saxophonist Paul Desmond, to a request from drummer Joe Morello for a tune in an unusual, five-in-a-bar time. Desmond happily obliged, Brubeck arranged the piece, and the Quartet struggled to record it for their 1959 album *Time Out* – producer Teo Macero reportedly abandoned an initial recording session after 20 failed takes, when one or more of the musicians would simply lose the beat. Luckily for us, they made it in the end.

Williams closes her concert with what's arguably the best-loved and best-known piece ever written for her instrument. Charles-Marie Widor's *Toccata* – strictly speaking the final movement from his *Organ Symphony No.5* – has brought a sense of celebration to countless weddings and is regularly used at the climax of the Vatican's Christmas Midnight Mass. Widor was arguably one of the highest-profile figures in the Parisian organ world, as organist at the Church of Saint-Sulpice for a remarkable 63 years, as well as professor at the Paris Conservatoire. He was a prolific composer across genres, and even dared to create no fewer than ten 'organ symphonies', translating all the depth and ambition of what's traditionally an orchestral piece to a piece for solo organ. This glittering finale to No.5, however, is all about wonder, spectacle and delight, and brings Williams' wide-ranging recital to a thrilling close.

Programme notes © David Kettle, 2023

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