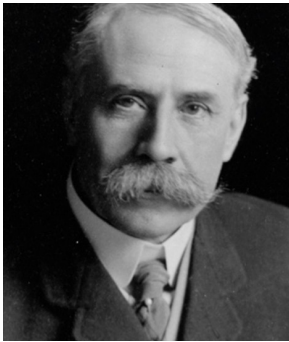


Vierne 150

A programme of French and British Music

Concert 3

Organ Sonata in G Major, Elgar
Symphony no. 3 in F Sharp Minor, Vierne



Organ Sonata in G Major

Edward Elgar (1857-1934) was a self-taught English composer, whose most famous works include the *Enigma Variations*, the *Pomp and Circumstance Marches*, concertos for violin and cello, and two symphonies, as well as a number of choral works, the most well known of which are arguably *The Dream of Gerontius* and his two oratorios *The Apostles* and *The Kingdom*.

While not one of the most prolific composers for the organ, Elgar's *Organ Sonata in G* is widely regarded as one of the most outstanding and successful compositions for the instrument in the late Romantic period. It was commissioned by Hugh Blair, organist of Worcester Cathedral, for an American organists convention, and first performed on 8 July 1895. '...Demanding but rewarding to play, it is important in the English romantic organ repertory, and significant in Elgar's output as his first quasi-symphonic piece'. In *The Cambridge Companion to the Organ*, Andrew McCrea describes the piece as an example of an orchestral composer 'looking inward', rather than an organist 'looking out'. It easily rivals the vast symphonic works of the Parisian organ school of Franck, Widor and Vierne and, in many ways, can be considered typical of Elgar's orchestral music at the time. It shares the same melodic and harmonic colours, the huge dynamic range of the orchestra, and displays varied moods and contrasting themes. In it, the composer pushes the capabilities of the organ, and allows the performer to demonstrate the scale and dexterity of the orchestra in one instrument.

The piece follows a classic four-movement sonata form:

- I. Allegro Maestoso
- II. Allegretto
- III. Andante Espressivo
- IV. Presto (comodo)

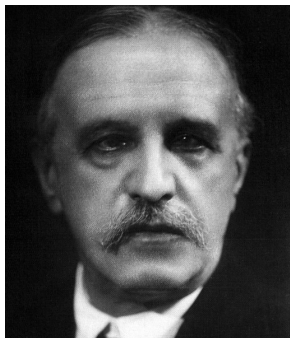
It exploits the organ's limitless lung capacity in long sweeping phrases, and features examples not only of orchestral timbres, but also of orchestral writing such as double pedalling to create a 'unison' bass line, spread chords, unusual on the organ, idiomatic string writing in the second movement Allegretto, and trills, perhaps implying orchestral woodwind, in the Andante Espressivo.

The opening Allegro Maestoso movement begins on the Great, the largest department of the organ. The music gives no indication of the registration to be used, or if the Swell and Choir manuals are coupled to the Great, adding more power. This is significant for two reasons: it allows the piece to be registered at the discretion of the performer, and acknowledges the huge variety in the number and type of stops provided by any one instrument. Typically, a forte sound on an organ of the late Romantic period could produce a 'full orchestra' effect which, if played without too many mixtures or high pitched mutations, would produce a quasi-orchestral sound, made up of diapasons, flutes, strings and reeds. After the bold opening theme, the composer creates the effect of antiphony by moving seamlessly from one manual to another, finally arriving at a passage of melody dominated homophony where repeated chords on the Swell accompany the solo second theme on the Great. The development section demonstrates Elgar's skill in counterpoint, as well as his ability to combine vastly different themes, and the recapitulation closes in typical grandiose Elgar fashion.

The second movement Allegretto is in ternary form. It was the first part of the sonata to be written and was possibly adapted from an earlier work for strings. A lot of the writing falls within the range of each instrument of the string family: the right hand accompaniment in the two A sections, for example, never goes below the lowest note of the violin, the solo left hand melody is perfectly suited to the cello, and the staccato pedal notes could easily be duplicated by pizzicato double basses. The B section, too, shows elements of string writing. Altogether, despite being a gentle and straightforward contrast to the first movement, the Allegretto is the most technically challenging part of the sonata.

The Andante Espressivo follows immediately - *attacca* - and moves the music from G minor to B flat major in just three chords. It begins with a stately solo which builds up to forte and away again, and seamlessly transitions into a beautiful *tranquillo* section in F sharp major. The music returns to B flat in an exciting *animato* passage, and subsides, settling on the opening theme, this time under triplet embellishments in the right hand.

The fourth movement Presto begins disarmingly quietly for a final movement, but the energy and dynamic soon build to the *fortissimo* entry of the first theme. This is quickly followed by a *dolce* second theme which, despite its subdued dynamic, sparkles with character. The restless rise and fall of dynamics established in the exposition continues throughout the development as Elgar again demonstrates his skills in combining and reshaping themes not only from this movement, but also from the preceding Andante Espressivo whose theme returns, rhythmically augmented, in E flat. Throughout each change in dynamic and mood, the Presto remains unwaveringly bright and light hearted, with dotted rhythms, triplets and intervallic leaps. At its most serious, a solemn left hand melody stretches beneath dancing right hand figurations, before the second theme returns and the piece begins to crescendo towards the recapitulation. The piece ends with grand full organ chords, brilliant semiquaver flourishes, and a powerful tuba solo, whose E flats unsettle the G major tonality until, at last, the piece ends on a decisive unison G.



Symphony no. 3 in F Sharp Minor

Louis Vierne (1870-1937) was a French organist and composer who, despite being born almost blind, displayed an exceptional talent for music from a very early age. He first heard the piano at the age of two and, after hearing a Schubert lullaby, is reputed to have been able to pick out the notes of the melody on the piano. He went on to study at the Paris Conservatoire and, from 1892, served as assistant to Charles-Marie Widor at the church of Saint-Sulpice in Paris. He was appointed organist of Notre Dame in 1900 and held the post until his death in 1937, where he famously died at the console.

Vierne began writing the third symphony in the spring of 1911, and completed it in the summer while on holiday with Marcel Dupré and his family. The work is dedicated to Dupré, who gave the premiere performance in March 1912. It is made up of five movements:

- I. Allegro maestoso
- II. Cantilène
- III. Intermezzo
- IV. Adagio
- V. Final

The first movement Allegro Maestoso is in sonata form - again demonstrating Vierne's move away from the 'suite' style symphony, to an orchestral equivalent - and opens with a stark but spirited theme. This will become instantly recognisable throughout, due to its distinct augmented second. By contrast, the second theme is noble and

sincere, although its accompaniment is highly chromatic, disorienting any feeling of a home key. In the development section Vierne combines both themes amid intensely chromatic harmony, before transitioning seamlessly into the strident *fortissimo* recapitulation.

The second movement begins with a gentle introduction, before the solo hautbois is introduced. The melody is lingering and searching, full of interval leaps and subtle syncopation, above a slow-moving chromatic accompaniment. A largely homophonic middle section follows, which builds in both dynamic and urgency, until the solo melody returns, this time on the trompette, and the movement ends softly on the strings.

The third movement Intermezzo is an exuberant scherzo in three time, which follows the form: ABA-ABA. The A section is characterised by light, playful staccato, with triplet figurations and a leaping pedal line; the B section in F sharp major is more sustained, although the pedal retains a light 'pizzicato' feel.

The movement which follows is a soothing Adagio, which Vierne described as a 'song without words'. It begins with what sounds like a canon between the pedal and the soprano voice of the right hand, but the bass line soon settles onto a tonic pedal point, which anchors the piece in B minor. Moments of imitation are scattered throughout this movement: melodic ideas established in the opening bars are developed and repeated, and woven seamlessly into new material. A contrasting flute solo begins about halfway through, which Vierne indicated should be performed slightly faster than the opening, giving the music direction and urgency as it builds towards its highest point and suddenly drops back to a mellow alto tessitura. A transitional passage brings the music to a brief recapitulation of the first melody, followed by a gentle flute solo. The last few shimmering bars use the melodic contour of the theme to bring the Adagio to a peaceful close. As he had done previously with movements from Symphony 1 and 2, Vierne arranged this movement for orchestra, and used it as the middle movement of his *Pièce Symphonique*. (The first movement was the Scherzo from Symphony 2, and the last movement was the Final of Symphony 1.)

The fifth movement Final is a dark and vigorous toccata, full of rapid semiquaver movement in the manuals, punchy chords, pedal melodies and, unusually for a toccata, counterpoint. It is in sonata form and takes its first theme from the fiery melody of the Allegro Maestoso, but reshapes and softens it with a gentler melodic contour.

Allegro Maestoso Theme 1



Final Theme 1



etc.

The second, quieter theme in B flat major rings out over a trill-like ostinato in the left hand, which keeps up the energy established at the beginning. At the peak of the development section, the first theme returns, rhythmically augmented, in the pedal and transitions into the recapitulation. Like the Final of Symphony 2, Vierne only establishes the tonic major towards the very end in a fantastic coda which combines the main theme with virtuosic writing for pedal.