

Vierne 150

A programme of French and British Music

Concert 5

Toccata, Hawes
Air and Gavotte, Wesley
Symphony no. 5 in A Minor, Vierne



Toccata

Patrick Hawes (b. 1958) is an English composer and organist, whose style is influenced by the music of Vaughan Williams and Delius. He studied music at Durham University, and took up a teaching post first at Pangbourne College in 1981, and then at Charterhouse School in 1990, before deciding to pursue a career as a composer. He first rose to prominence in 2002 with his album *Blue in Blue*, a collection of orchestral and choral music recorded with the English Chamber Orchestra and the choir Conventus, and has since composed a number of other works, including the film score to *The Incredible Mrs Ritchie*, the *Highgrove Suite* for the Prince of Wales, the *Lazarus Requiem*, and a number of works written to commemorate the centenary of the First World War including *Eventide: In Memoriam Edith Cavell*, *I Know The Music* and *The Angel of Mons*.

Hawes's *Toccata* was written in 2007 in memory of his father. He had first thought about composing an elegy but, since Widor's *Toccata* from *Symphony no. 5 in F Minor* had been such a formative and inspirational part of his journey as a composer, and as something vibrant and joyful was more fitting for his father's character, he decided to write a toccata. The work is made up of two dominant elements: the *moto perpetuo* chords in the manuals, and the exuberant pedal melody based around a C major triad. A brief *legato* section brings the opening theme to a close, and the music shifts to a quieter dynamic and a second pithy melodic idea made up of scalic thirds above a

continuous left hand semiquaver accompaniment. A brief passage of ascending chords above a dominant pedal point connects this lighter material to a second statement of both the brilliant opening chords and pedal melody, and a slight variation on this spirited second theme. This time, the second section flows into a series of exciting syncopated chords. A passage of ascending thirds then hastens the music towards its energetic conclusion which uses moments of the triadic melody, thunderous double pedalling, and punchy chords to great effect.



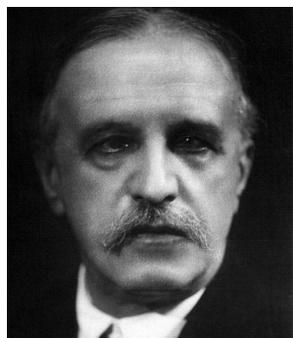
Air and Gavotte

Samuel Wesley (1766-1837) was an English organist and composer whose output includes over 100 compositions for organ, large scale orchestral works, piano solo, and a diverse range of choral music from motets and hymn tunes, to oratorios, Mass settings, anthems, madrigals and cantatas. He showed a great talent for music early on, earning the moniker 'the English Mozart' at the age of eight when William Boyce read through his recently completed oratorio *Ruth*. Boyce said, "These airs are some of the prettiest I have seen. This boy writes by nature as true a bass as I can do by rule and study." Later, despite Boyce's esteem and a reputation as one of the greatest organists and improvisers in England, Wesley struggled to find a professional organist post and, at one point, had to ask Vincent Novello for copying work to get by. He was a great advocate of the music of J.S. Bach, becoming a key figure in the 'English Bach awakening' and adapting some of Bach's music for the English organ.

The *Air and Gavotte* come from Wesley's *12 Short Pieces*, completed between 1815-16. These were originally composed for manuals only, as the English organ at the time was far less flexible than its continental counterpart. Pedal boards were not completely unheard of in English churches, but it was more common to find an instrument with just one or two manuals which extended about an octave below the now standard C-C compass. These extra bass notes provided the depth and resonance German organs had enjoyed for almost 400 years, but at the expense of a well-balanced texture. In his book *The Organ*, Leslie Sumner writes that those few organs which did have a pedal board had '...perhaps only one stop to support it. The pedals were originally short-toe pedals, and the heel could not be used to play them'. This deprived English organists of both the sonority and of the sustained legato of, for example, Brahms and Mendelssohn's music. However, despite the limitations of the instrument he was writing for, Wesley's organ music is well crafted and expressive, with moments of colour and contrast. The *12 Short Pieces* have since been arranged for organs with an independent pedalboard and many of them, including the *Air and Gavotte*, gained titles at the same time.

The Air begins with a gentle melody above a simple left hand accompaniment and a pizzicato pedal line. Each one or two bar phrase is echoed by an equal and balanced answer, giving the music a beautiful antiphony between melodic ideas, and exemplifying the elegance and symmetry of the music of the Classical era. These opening few bars are then repeated as a quieter solo above altered harmony which gradually steers the music towards the dominant key of C major. A new, flowing semiquaver melody appears in a central section and the Air concludes with a third and final theme in the tonic, which closes the movement with a little rhythmic flourish and a delicate perfect cadence.

The binary form Gavotte follows immediately after with an ebullience and lightness of touch which perfectly contrasts the tranquil Air. The first theme is a joyful melody above a largely homophonic accompaniment full of antecedent and consequent phrases. These phrases work in two, four and eight bars - listen especially for the recapitulation of the opening four bars halfway through this first section. The second theme is far more chromatic than the first, with a fast-moving quaver accompaniment in the left hand. The harmony moves quickly from D minor to A minor, before a brief transitional passage returns the music to the first theme, which closes the work with a few decorative chromatic embellishments.



Symphony no. 5 in A 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.

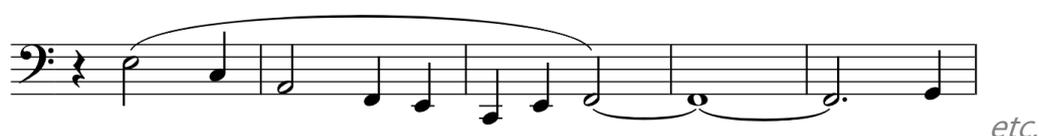
Symphony no. 5 in A Minor, composed between 1923-24, is Vierne's longest symphony, and the most tragic. Not only does it mark the general post-war shift from noble, triumphant Romanticism to a more dissonant, atonal musical language, it also expresses Vierne's outpouring of grief at a succession of hardship and loss: his son Jacques had committed suicide in 1917, his brother Rene had died in 1918, and he had spent almost four years away from the organ after unsuccessful glaucoma treatment in Switzerland. He had expected to be away for just four months but, at one point, he had to spend half a year in a dark room recovering. By the time he returned to Notre Dame,

the organ had become severely dilapidated and he undertook a concert tour across Europe, Canada and America to raise funds for its repair.

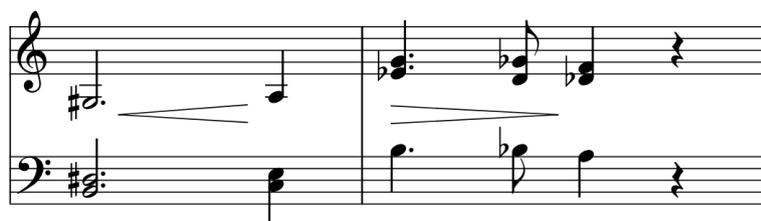
- I. Grave
- II. Allegro molto marcato
- III. Tempo di scherzo ma non troppo vivo
- IV. Larghetto
- V. Final

The symphony begins with the austere Grave, which states the two themes which will form the basis of the entire work in the first five bars. Theme 1 is a series of descending thirds, first heard on the pedals, and answered by the more chromatic Theme 2 which rises and falls with a gentle dynamic swell.

Theme 1:



Theme 2:



Vierne layers and alternates these two themes before introducing a melody on the swell foundations and hautbois which begins to move the music forward with more energy. This second section also has a more firmly established sense of key, although the anguished chromaticism remains, just below the surface of the sweeping melody. The movement reaches its climax with a passage of crotchets, based on Theme 2, which gradually rise above a heavily chromatic pedal line. The dynamic gradually falls away during a series of chords, and a brief pedal solo and swell interlude precede the return of Theme 1. The pedal meanders beneath syncopated rhythms in the manuals, and the Grave concludes with a subdued 8' registration.

In the Allegro Molto Marcato, Vierne inverts Theme 1 and breaks Theme 2 up into heavy staccato chords which function as an accompaniment. The rhythms bear some similarity to Symphony 4's Allegro, but the harmony is far more progressive, and both themes undergo far more development and transformation. There are brief flashes of diatonic harmony in places but, for the most part, the Allegro combines a dull despair with an angry, tormented dance making the sudden appearance of an A major chord in the last bar all the more unexpected.

The Scherzo, by contrast, has a slightly mischievous character. Its opening rhythms and melodic contour are not dissimilar to Paul Dukas's *Sorcerer's Apprentice*, and its chromaticism no longer feels dissonant, but natural. This excitable opening section is followed by a pedal statement of Theme 1 on the choir chromhorn. The introduction of this relatively diatonic melody beneath such a chromatic accompaniment immediately changes the atmosphere from playful to disconcerting and, from there, the Scherzo alternates passages of the brighter opening material with moments of surreal and mocking caricature.

The predominantly homophonic opening of the Larghetto is expressive and graceful, but an element of chromaticism always introduces a feeling of disquiet before long, shattering any calm that the lilting 12/8 time signature may have established. A middle section builds momentum through the use of a quicker harmonic pace, and a fast-moving syncopated melody built on an inversion of Theme 1, before the music presses forward into the third and final section. This uses much of the same melodic material as the opening, this time beneath a succession of searching semiquavers. The movement draws to a close with a series of gentle dotted crotchet chords, settling on an F sharp major chord.

Jean Huré, a contemporary of Vierne, wrote of the Final after first hearing it in 1925 that '...I think it wise to warn the unsure, and those who do not practice technique daily, not to attempt to play this Final. It is tremendously difficult'. It is a brilliant carillon in the tonic major, which transforms the lugubrious falling thirds of Theme 1 into something hopeful and triumphant. The highly chromatic and dissonant second theme also makes an appearance, but is softened by the 6/8 time signature and the predominantly upwards movement. A quieter, *meno mosso* central section follows, but it is not long before the carillon returns, beginning with a relatively subdued registration, but gradually building in both dynamic and intensity through the use of imitation, syncopation and splashes of counterpoint. After another brief *meno mosso* passage, the semiquavers return on registrations which whisper above a noble statement of Theme 1, and the movement finally closes with a display of brilliant pedal writing, from scales, to a thunderous - and double pedalled - statement of Theme 1, which requires incredible dexterity to play legato, finally closing with the most difficult and virtuosic pedalling in the entire symphony.