

New Recordings

Evocations. Katelyn Emerson plays the Aeolian-Skinner organ at the Church of the Advent, Boston, Massachusetts. Pro Organo, CD7277 \$14.98. Available from www.proorgano.com.

Praeludium in E Moll (the larger), Bruhns; *Allein Gott in der Höh' sei Ehr'*, BWV 676, J. S. Bach; *Sonata No. 4 in B-flat*, op. 65, no. 4, Mendelssohn; from *Messe pour les couvents*—Benedictus, *Élévation* (Tierce en taille), *Offertoire sur les grands jeux*, François Couperin; *Variations sur un thème de Clément Jannequin*, Jehan Alain; from *Pièces de fantaisie*—Naiades, op. 55, no. 4, Louis Vierne; *Choral improvisation sur le "Victimae paschali laudes,"* Charles Tournemire; *Évocation III*, Thierry Escaich; *Rhapsody*, op. 17, no. 3, Herbert Howells.

Since she won the first prize in the 2016 American Guild of Organists National Young Artists Competition in Organ Performance, Katelyn Emerson has taken the organ world by storm. I do not know anyone, myself included, who has heard her play and has not been impressed. In addition to her status as an international recitalist who is increasingly in demand, she was associate organist of the Church of the Advent, Episcopal, in Boston, and was active in choir training as well as playing the organ.

The organ in the Church of the Advent was originally a three-manual, 77-rank Aeolian-Skinner, Op. 940 of 1936, finished by G. Donald Harrison. It was altered by Aeolian-Skinner as Op. 940A in 1964, and again, rather unfortunately, by another builder between 1972 and 1978. When I heard it at the Organ Historical Society convention in 2000, though very pleasant in its way, it did not sound to me very much like Harrison likely left it. Though Nelson Barden has reversed many of the unfortunate changes of the past, I am still doubtful whether the instrument still deserves to be called a Harrison-designed Aeolian-Skinner organ. For example, the removal of original Great 5½' Quint has altered the sound of full Great, although it must be admitted that this stop was probably never a good idea. The removal of the original Great 2' Super Octave is inexplicable

since the only 2' pitches now available on the Great are in the Mixtures. Even as it is, however, the organ is a very fine instrument, and the Church of the Advent supplies an excellent acoustical environment for it.

The works featured on this compact disc are mostly drawn from core repertoire, and one might think there was not much new to say about them. At least I might have thought that if I had not read Katelyn Emerson's program notes in the leaflet, which are refreshingly original and interesting. The compact disc begins with Nicolas Bruhns's *Praeludium in E Moll*, in which Katelyn Emerson's tempi and phrasing are impeccable, particularly in the transitions between the different sections of the work. In the fugal second section she makes particularly effective use of the organ's beautiful Choir Clarinet, and some very pretty flutes come into play in her ebullient performance of Bach's *Allein Gott in der Höh' sei Ehr'*, BWV 676, from the third part of the *Clavierübung*.

No compact disc of core repertoire is complete without one of Mendelssohn's six organ sonatas, and I was not disappointed by Emerson's performance of *Sonata No. 4 in B-flat*. Once again her phrasing and tempi are faultless, and once again she makes effective use of the Clarinet contrasted with the flutes in the second (Andante religioso) movement. The fugal (Vivace) section of the last movement quite took my breath away.

We then return to the eighteenth century for a couple of sections of François Couperin's *Messe pour les couvents*. The first of these is the *Tierce en taille* written for the *Élévation*. This is unfortunately not entirely suited to the Advent organ, since the mutations are hardly classical French in character and there is no 1½' Larigot, so that the solo line in the tenor lacks a certain piquancy. By contrast the *Offertoire sur les grands jeux* comes off surprisingly well, especially since G. Donald Harrison was not compelled to provide any Great reeds.

We then travel forward a couple of centuries to Jehan Alain's *Variations sur un thème de Clément Jannequin*. Emerson's notes inform us—which I for one did not know before—that the

theme is not actually by Clément Jannequin, as Alain mistakenly thought, but is from a song called "The hope I have of obtaining your favor," by an anonymous sixteenth-century composer. The performer very successfully captures the almost medieval flavor of the piece, both in her playing and in her registration. Next Emerson demonstrates her manual dexterity in Louis Vierne's well-known piece, "Naiades," from the *24 Pièces de fantaisie*. Every note can be heard distinctly, which is a tribute both to the performer and to the action of the organ. Another twentieth-century work, Maurice Duruflé's reconstruction of Charles Tournemire's improvisation on *Victimae paschali laudes*, is full of excitement, and once again the changes of tempi and dynamics are most interesting.

For the next track, although remaining in France, we move to the twenty-first century and to the composer Thierry Escaich (b. 1965), who with Vincent Warnier succeeded Maurice Duruflé as *co-titulaire* of Église de Saint-Etienne-du-Mont in Paris, France. He has written much orchestral as well as organ music. Among his compositions are a number of *Évocations* for various ensembles including at least four for organ, of which the Advent work, *Évocation II*, is probably the best known. The work performed here, *Évocation III*, is also an Advent work, based on the chorale, NUN KOMM DEN HEIDEN HEILAND. Escaich writes in a refreshingly original way, and Emerson has clearly taken a great deal of trouble to study his intentions in the way she performs the work. She includes her own translation of Escaich's explanations of the piece in the leaflet.

The final work on the disc is Herbert Howells's *Rhapsody*, op. 17, no. 3. There is a certain darkness to the work, which it owes to having been composed during a Zeppelin raid in World War I. I had always assumed that the Zeppelin raid was in London, but I discovered from Emerson's very comprehensive notes that Howells was in fact convalescing in York from an illness and was staying at the house of his friend Sir Edward Birstow, the organist of York Minster. The piece comes off well on the organ of the Church of the Advent.

It ought not come as a surprise that I thoroughly enjoyed and heartily recommend this compact disc.

—*John L. Speller*
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