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Steven Monrotus

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Farmington, Missouri

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Introduction

Organists and organ scholars are always looking for new organ music that connects with general audiences and can compliment the standard repertoire. Such is the work of this composer.

Individual scores may be previewed, heard with sample audio, or downloaded and printed from either of these links:

<http://bit.ly/2BnVT9U>

OR

<https://www.sheetmusicplus.com/publishers/steven-monrotus/10593>

Separate PDF files for cover pages, tables of contents, and suggestions for performance for these scores may be downloaded from OrganBench by clicking "Free Stuff" in the top menu bar.

Additional information concerning the construction of these pieces may be viewed on OrganBench by clicking "Blog/Archive" in the top menu bar, scrolling to and clicking "Overview," then scrolling through and clicking desired postings.

Biography

Dr. Steven Monrotus is the Principal Organist and Musical Director at the Saint Louis Scottish Rite Cathedral, a native of the Saint Louis, Missouri Metro area, a member of the Saint Louis Chapter of the American Guild of Organists and American Composers Forum, a national and international fraternal organist and blogger, and has been playing the organ for nearly 60 years.

As a composer of organ music he has five major collections of organ music to his credit, as follows: **1) Ten Pieces for Organ Op. 1-9, 2) Eight Pieces for Organ Op. 10-17, 3) Six Pieces for Organ Op. 18-23, 4) Five Preludes & Fugues for Organ Op. 24-28, and 5) Three Postludes for Organ Op. 29-31.** The scores in the first collection of pieces for two hands only have been adapted for performance at the piano and grouped separated as a sixth collection of **Ten Pieces for Piano Op. 1-9.**

During his musical training he had the good fortune to have studied the organ privately with some very dedicated and inspiring teachers and can trace his lineage, tutorially, back to Middelschulte and separately back to Dupre, and, through these two masters, on back to J.S. Bach.

Dr. Monrotus is one of the most experienced fraternal organists in the United States. He has performed at over 40 Masonic venues in North America, and his record as a Masonic musician totals well over 100 service-related years. **He is the only 8 Star Organist in Missouri Masonic history** -- meaning that he's served in the offices of 1) Primus Grand Musician for the Grand Lodge of Missouri, A.F. & A.M., 2) Grand Chapter Royal Arch Masons of Missouri, 3) Grand Organist, Grand Council Cryptic Masons of Missouri, 4) Grand Organist, Grand Commandery of Knights Templar of Missouri, plus 4 other offices at the national/international level -- in this case 5) General Grand Organist, General Grand Chapter Royal Arch Masons International, 6) General Grand Musician,

General Grand Council Cryptic Masons International, 7) Grand Organist, York Rite Sovereign College of North America, and 8) Primus Provincial Grand Organist for the United States of America, Masonic Order of Athelstan in England, Wales, & Its Provinces Overseas. He has logged over 50 service-related years in these offices and currently holds all 8 appointments ***simultaneously, the only Freemason in history to ever do so.***

Describe your music

The music contained in first of these collections was written for a one manual pipe organ with no pedals but may be performed on a larger instrument, a digital electronic keyboard, or a reed organ (harmonium). These scores have also been arranged for piano solo and have been published in that format. The pieces in the remaining 4 collections were composed for an organ with 2 manuals and pedals minimum. This writing was inspired by the historic 4-manual Kimball pipe organ of 144 stops at the Saint Louis Scottish Rite Cathedral (photo).

These stylish scores with memorable themes and are a smorgasbord of different types with heavy emphasis on canonic imitation and fugue. They all stay within the bounds of functional tonality, are highly idiomatic to the organ, and pay close attention to form. Much of it is in 3- and 4-part texture. The first 2 collections are pitched at various levels of proficiency with the second collection being a supplement to the first. The pieces in the last 3 collections are all pitched at the advanced level with the fourth and fifth collections being supplements to the third.

The guiding principle which leads this composer's work is the immutable fact that the listener's mind, as naturally created, seeks order, stability, and relationship in what it's hearing (meaning a clear beat, a sense of tonal center -- to be able to sort out how one note or group of notes relates to every other which follows it -- a discernable formal structure, and a juxtaposition of sounds that's satisfying overall). This is true with everyone's listening mind irrespective of what one's views on harmonic phenomena and their treatment may happen to be. Proof of this may be found by conducting a simple experiment -- to simply present someone with a map of their country. It never fails -- the first thing they do, after making their first quick glance at the whole map, is to fix their gaze, rivet their attention, and/or put their finger upon the spot from whence they came. Every other place on that map, for them, will be sorted out as it relates to that one place they call home.

This composer is not in denial of this and therefore believes: 1) that a composer's music should have one overriding goal in mind, viz., to connect with and convey a sense of warmth and meaning to the listener, 2) that functional tonality is the gravity that holds music together and keeps it from flying apart, 3) that counterpoint is the arterial life's blood of music, and 4) that the problem his own music should solve is to provide the organist with something new to play that will have all of these characteristics ...

something with a driving rhythm that holds together tonally ... something that has architecture ... something that sings as if it were alive ... something with interweaving lines that will captivate if not move the listener and not leave them confused about what they've just heard.

Dr. Monrotus recognizes and appreciates modern trends in composition, to be sure, and acknowledges the logic involved in the synthesis of this new music. He also recognizes and freely admits that by trying to think far outside the box when creating a work of art there's nothing outside that box but a vacuum. Far outside the box there's no rules there, no reality there, no means of production, nothing to work against. So instead, as a composer, he prefers to think along the edges of the box because that's where the means of production are, that's where things get done, that's going to be where the audience is, and that's where he feels his own creativity can make an impact.

Keeping all of this mind and simply stated, his compositions contain no modern methods, home-made tonal systems, serialism, blurring of tonality, strange or alarming dissonances, vaguely moving voices in a vague rhythmic framework, or harmonic disorder which can initially disorient the listener. There is nothing in his music that "may seem a bit opaque" unless the listener is familiar with some obscure orchestral quotation, nor may it be "a bit challenging for some to approach" as certain "masterfully written" atonal new music is being described these days. It most definitely would not provoke Sebastian Bach, if he were alive today, to tear his wig from his head and throw it at this composer if he were one of his scholars -- this in spite of the fact that the greatest fugue writer in history would find this composer's music full of bold moves and the work of many 20th and 21st century composers so far removed from his own art as to be incomprehensible.

The liberties taken in this composer's music are at times very daring, and some of the fugue expositions are substantially brave in their construction. Occasionally a brief modal passage also will find its way into one of these scores. Examples of this may be found in the coda of the Op. 19 Toccata which has a pedal line written in F Lydian and the Op. 22 Fugue which has manual figuration written in D Dorian.

This composer likes to think horizontally, his counterpoint is busy, and he introduces imitations and canons into many of his pieces. His writing shows other signature moves: it's colorful harmonically, even spicy at times through the use of altered chords, chromatic harmonies, final major triads having added 6ths and 2nds, and the use of a harmonic vocabulary similar to the methods that Louis Vierne used. The part writing in this music is smooth and follows the rules, but this composer also views the rule book as a friend to be used as a guide, not a stern judge poised to be ready to crush a composer in an instant for the slightest deviation from common practice norms. He realizes that life may improve dramatically whenever artists decide to bend or break a rule and find beauty where they were told, or led to believe, that there was none.

In his organ music the stretch for the hands is always kept at an octave or less. Save for his Op. 2 (which is written in keyboard style) and his Op. 14 (a technical etude which teaches the entire instrument) voice lines never cross and voice ranges are never exceeded. In every piece he composes there's at least one place where the moving lines momentarily approach each other at a dissonant "near miss" minor 2nd interval, its inversion (major 7th), or its compound (minor 9th), which adds color and spice to the writing. In one of his works (Op. 10) this occurs in 17 different places. This same spacious piece, being dedicated to the memory of one Johann Sebastian Bach, also has the 4 note melodic signature (Bb-A-C-H in the German language) of the dedicatee written into the counterpoint in all 3 parts of this composition, lending additional interest.

The central movement of this work (d minor Chorale) has also been published separately for 2 hands as Op. 9, further honoring the dedicatee whose habit it often was to incorporate previously composed music of his into a new work. Passages having 2 and 3 part canons will be found in this composer's organ music. These canons are at the octave, fourth, and fifth, and some are in augmentation, inverse movement, and retrograde. The d minor Op. 9 Chorale is an example of a piece having a 2 part canon at the octave and may be performed on an organ with no pedals.

His fugues, all of which are in 4 voices, are a product of his own ten-step system of fugue writing which is explained on his blog. There are 19 of these in his compositional output. Ten (10) of them begin in the tenor voice; the rest begin either in the alto (6) or soprano (3). The majority (12) of them are paired with a prelude of some sort. These are lively pieces with a relentless driving rhythm -- nothing like the "insipid classroom fugue" that one might imagine as being the boring, low point of the art. Some of them make some very bold moves but, at the same time, they're never found disintegrating tonally midway to where the next recognizable chord is the final one.

Most (12) of his fugues begin on the 1st scale degree, and all save for one (Op. 22) are supplied with real answers. Four (Op. 19, 27, 29, 30) begin boldly on the 3rd scale degree and have subjects with a "tail" which points strongly to the dominant key, as they must; these are supplied with real answers. Two more fugues (Op. 22, 26) begin on the 5th scale degree; the first of these (Op. 22) is the only one with a tonal answer; the other one (Op. 26) has a real answer (in the subdominant). In one more (Op. 13) the subject commences on the 7th scale degree (leading tone) and is provided with a real answer.

All of his fugues are supplied with multiple countersubjects and at least one bridge (codetta, interlude, link) in the exposition. Episodes are generally of uniform length and constructed upon fragments of the subject, countersubjects, and their inversions, thus providing for a rapid and weighty development. The variety of effect this creates from the several combinations of the subject and its multiple countersubjects sounding in triple or quadruple counterpoint with such economy of means also made this a favorite method of J.S. Bach whose enormous compositional output contains many well-built

fugues, the structural supports of which are well-spaced entries of these same moving lines made in different positions and keys.

The fugato (12th) variation from his C Major Op. 4 Variations on a cantus firmus (c.f.) also begins boldly on the 3rd scale degree and (due to the "tail" of the subject pointing strongly to the dominant) is supplied with a real answer, but it has no bridge in the exposition between the 2nd and 3rd entries of the subject. Both this variation and the 7 Fugues from Op. 10, 21, 22, 28, 29, 30, and 31 are supplied with 3 countersubjects and are worked in quadruple counterpoint. The remainder are all worked in triple counterpoint. The 1st countersubject from the fugato variation of Op. 4 is the inverted c.f., and the 1st countersubject from the D Major Op. 28 Fugue is derived by inverting the subject of the Fugue from the previous work (Op. 27).

The Op. 28 Prelude, for its part, uses the 3rd countersubject from its paired Fugue for a free theme and is treated in the same 6-part improvisational form employed in several other works. The first 5 notes of the 3rd countersubject in this Fugue happen to be identical with the first 5 notes of Bach's dashing D Major organ Fugue in the same key. Further homage is paid to J.S. Bach with the 2nd exposition of the Prelude's theme which is presented as a 3 voice canon at the octave. These types of canons figure in many other of Dr. Monrotus' pieces.

When multiple countersubjects participate in Fugues like this the counterpoint becomes thrillingly dense, and even more miraculous sounding when all voices are clear, clean, independent, and mutually complimentary. Historically, coordinating this complexity so that the final unity is aesthetically successful, for composer or performer, has been an achievement of high art. It may also be that some of these new organ Preludes & Fugues, by plowing in a furrow all their own, have broken new ground. The pairing process used to create the a minor, b minor, F Major, and D Major Preludes & Fugues (Op. 25-28), where in each case a Fugue with multiple countersubjects worked in triple or quadruple counterpoint (both methods being favored by J.S. Bach) is paired with a related Prelude employing a single free theme worked as an improvisation in 6 parts (a method favored by Louis Vierne), only in compressed form, seems to represent, so far as this composer can determine, a new synthesis, something heretofore untried in the written organ repertoire.

There's a lot going on in these polyphonic pieces, and the moves they make at times explore the boundaries of the art of fugue writing. Because he composes entirely from the mind away from the instrument some of his scores look deceptively easy to play when the opposite is true. While this is so, voice lines remain singable with no awkward leaps. All of this helps to set his writing apart and gives it an identity, a personal stamp, a stylishness.

Additional info

Much contemporary organ music being written these days, some of which has been award-winning, loses the listener and sounds strange, if not grotesquely ugly, in its stark logic. This composer's music does not. It was composed entirely from the mind away from the instrument with themes developed polyphonically for the most part using fugal and other contrapuntal procedures. Music with contrapuntal complexity like this demands a different approach to practice, and the process involved for learning this type of music with success is fully explained on this author's web site (OrganBench.com).

This is essentially concert music that can be used for recitals, in the worship service, for fraternal ceremonies and work, or for instruction. As such it's written for a smaller, elite audience of work-a-day organists, teachers, and church musicians within an already small classical music listening public. Looking at it through the lens of the organ, anyone focused on composing organ music these days is writing for a medium whose core repertoire spans hundreds of years and is automatically entering into a dialogue with the past and having enduring works for models. It was therefore natural that this composer give some thought to what it might take for his writing to become something that speaks to a broad variety of musicians and music lovers over a span of cultures, places, and even epochs -- something that might have a life beyond its original premiere and even possibly labored over, loved, interrogated, or admired by future generations.

The overwhelming majority of music being created today is made with an entirely different goal in mind, i.e. to create a hit, catching fire with the broadest possible listening public at the moment, with no concern or regard for any kind of historical endurance. The desire to write a piece that would enter the organ repertoire is particularly apposite, and contemporary works simply do not figure prominently in the organ repertoire. We see this, notwithstanding noteworthy contributions by such eminent composers of the last 50 years as diverse as Philip Glass, David Lang, Milton Babbitt, and Gyorgi Ligeti, among others, and the tireless efforts of people like Carson Cooman who proselytize for contemporary organ music.

Nevertheless this composer's music has a certain stylishness, substantive ideas, integrity with a seriousness of purpose, craft in the sense of attention to detail, and an inner propulsion that carries the listener forward from start to finish including a little of the unexpected. Within it may be found elements of intricacy, subtlety, and sophistication that balance simplicity, contrasting ideas which generate interest, and a form molded with the intention of creating a satisfying sense of a musical journey. History teaches that all of these are necessary conditions for a contemporary work to enter the standard organ repertoire.

It is not for any composer to say whether their music is good or not; that is for others to decide. What can be said, is that this body of work is crafted on the same principles that have withstood the test of time for hundreds of years.

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