



Louis Vierne: Organ Symphonies op. 47 & op. 59

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THE CD REVIEW
This is the third and final volume of the complete recordings of the Vierne symphonies played by Hans-Eberhard Roß on the 1998 Goll organ of St Martin Kirche, Memmingen, and it fully maintains the high standards set in the first two issues. This now becomes an important and in some ways unique set of performances, for, as outlined in my earlier reviews (in January and December 2013), whilst the use of this organ might go against the ideals of some purists (as the works themselves were in part inspired by the Cavallé-Coll masterpiece in Notre-Dame, where Vierne was organist), with music of this significance one cannot insist that these works should only be played on one particular instrument. The Goll organ reflects many of the important Cavallé-Coll characteristics, and the acoustic of St Martin has – as recorded here – a more remarkable clarity than Notre-Dame.

The clarity, rather than atmosphere, is important also, for as we have noted before, the textual accuracy of these scores is not something to be laid down beyond dispute. Vierne's eyesight was poor, and it deteriorated significantly as he got older: consequently, he was unable to check the page proofs from his publishers, and the Braille music notation he used was itself in certain instances unclear. In addition, there are various surviving copies of the first editions which were altered at the time of publication, or soon afterwards, by several of Vierne's pupils, presumably in accordance with his wishes.

We are fortunate today in that there have been two recent editions of these symphonies which are about as accurate as we can get, each the product of considerable erudition: the more recent is from Bärenreiter, edited by Helga Schauerte-Maubouet, which has appeared a few years after the Carus-Sanger-Laukvik edition. It is this latter edition that Roß favours – but not entirely, for he has added to the scholarship of the Carus publications with further research from Günther Kaunzinger, a pupil of Duruflé, himself a pupil of Vierne.

Roß contributes an important corollary to the excellent booklet notes by Rüdiger Heinze, on his choice of registration and the edition on which his interpretations are based. The specialist and organ enthusiast will want to have these important clarifications, but it is the fine nature of Roß's performances that will command the greatest interest. In terms of tempos, he is ideal; an important characteristic, this, in the case of the Fifth Symphony, Vierne's largest (almost 40 minutes) and in many ways most personal work. By the time he came to conceive this work (c. 1924), ten years after the Fourth, Vierne's life had continued on its downward journey with a succession of misfortunes and tragedies that would have felled a less-strong character – and almost did, in his case.

Consequently, in this work Vierne has become more inward-looking, the language

more tortured in its concentration upon an intense chromaticism at times, a tonal fluidity, that may be considered a consequence of Franckian innovation to which Vierne turned to express his inner bitterness and resignation. But the artist reigns supreme: this music has an intensity of expression that demands clarity from the interpreter, and in this important instance the Goll organ is an ideal choice, especially in the quality of these recordings. Roß's unfolding of the initial tortuous line that opens the Symphony is magnificent and deeply expressive, and throughout he gives a performance of considerable distinction.

By the time of the Sixth Symphony (1930) Vierne was seemingly reconciled to his fate: the bitterness and anguish of the Fifth has gone, replaced by a contemplative character that, in the great Adagio movement, approaches the majesty of Bruckner. This is followed by an astonishing finale – full of energy, in which earlier material is subsumed into a remarkably positive edifice of sound. Once again, in this wonderful final Symphony, Roß is deeply impressive; his tempos and choice of mixtures are well-nigh ideal: in many ways, Roß follows those known to have been used by the composer, but he is not afraid to change them when the musical argument demands a greater clarity.

All in all, this is – as I hope to have indicated – an impressive series of recordings, each of which has to be counted amongst the best yet issued, and for many this will be the first choice when seeking to investigate a truly important set of works.