

PROGRAM NOTES: Sunday Afternoon Recital at the Cathedral of St. Philip, Atlanta

May 23, 2021

Dr. Jack Mitchener, organist and artist-in-residence

Since this recital is being played on the Day of Pentecost, I envisioned the program you will hear as a liturgical journey to Whitsuntide. The Wedding March is the procession into the holy realm. The “Agnus Dei” (Lamb of God) represents the season of Lent. *Victimae paschali laudes* is one of the great plainsong hymns for Easter. The final two works are based on the best-known Gregorian hymns for Pentecost, *Veni sancte spiritus* and *Veni creator spiritus*.

Helena’s Wedding March – Organ Solo on the Bride’s Name was completed March 24, 2005 and was a commission by Dr. Don J. and Lois E. Gerhardt in honor of their daughter Helena’s marriage. This work is a festive march in G major with the tempo indication of *Andante maestoso*. The opening theme sets the mood for a grand procession. Thematic material in the opening and middle of the piece was created from the bride’s name, **Helena**. In the softer middle section Sandresky presents the theme first in its original form and then backward (from the last note back to the first). Then the theme is transposed and mirrored up the interval of a 5th and once again is heard backwards.

The ***L’homme armé* Organ Mass** was composed during the first few months of 1979. It includes six movements (Introit, Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, **Agnus Dei**) and is based on the medieval tune, *L’homme armé* (the armed man). This tune was the most popular secular song of the Burgundian School of chanson in the 15th century and was the genesis for over 40 settings of the mass ordinary in the medieval and renaissance eras. Margaret Sandresky spent much of her teaching career studying music theory and placed a particular focus in the 1970s on these early masses. She also studied French baroque organ mass settings during this time. Her *L’homme armé* Organ Mass combines these multifarious styles into a unique and compelling work in which the cantus firmus, the *L’homme armé* tune, is omnipresent. The final movement of Sandresky’s organ mass, Agnus Dei, opens with slow-moving chords played on flutes and soft reeds. The writing, including occasional open fifths, is meant to imitate the medieval style. Subtle dissonance prepares the listener for the entrance of the tune played on a 4-foot flute stop, an imitation of a wooden recorder.

Victimae Paschali Laudes was completed in January 2021 and is Sandresky’s most recent composition for solo organ. It was commissioned by Dr. Don J. and Lois E. Gerhardt for the 2006 Klais organ in Saint Elizabeth Church, Marburg, Germany to support peace for all mankind. This 12th-century early gothic church was founded by the medieval Order of the Teutonic Knights with whom the hymn, *Victimae Paschali Laudes*, is closely associated.

After a short and quiet introductory section in which the first phrase of the chant, *Victimae paschali laudes* (Praise to the paschal victim), is heard twice (first in the pedal and then on a solo flute), the work proceeds with seven distinct sections. Sometimes the plainsong melody is stated

clearly on various solo stops. There also are interpolations of the melody as well as variations on it. In addition, there are new melodies that are created accompanied by colorful harmonies. The work grows towards the end and concludes with big chords on the full organ stating the first phrase of the chant. The acoustics of a large reverberant space make the ending particularly effective.

Veni Sancte Spiritus – Five versets on the Golden Sequence was completed April 10, 2017 and was a commission by Dr. Homer A. Ferguson III to celebrate the new Fisk organ at Emmanuel Episcopal Church, Southern Pines, North Carolina. The “Golden Sequence” is another name for the well-known Pentecost hymn, *Veni sancte spiritus*. Like *Victimae Paschali Laudes*, this work utilizes the entire resources of the organ. The opening is played on the Clarinet and announces the Invocation: “Come, thou Holy Spirit, come.” A slow chordal section follows and leads to the first verse: “Shed a ray of light divine.” The brilliance of light is depicted through the use of the cymbelstern (“cymbal star”: an organ stop that activates a set of small bells that rotate and create a tinkling sound). Verse 2: “Thou of comforters, the best,” is the longest verset and is divided into three parts: it begins with a beautiful melody with a simple chordal accompaniment; the middle section is chordal and has a gradual crescendo and immediate decrescendo. A return to the lyrical melody follows. Verse 3: “Shine within these hearts of thine,” is a quiet reflection on the text and includes clear statements of the chant on a soft flute. The 4th verse: “Guide the steps that go astray,” is rife with word-painting. The “steps” are evident in the moving eighth notes in the pedal, first ascending from low E at the bottom of the pedalboard to high F, then descending down to low C (the lowest note), and ascending again, this time all the way to G, the highest note on the pedalboard. Dissonance is included along the way to depict the steps that go astray. The final and 5th verset, “In thy sevenfold gifts descend, give them joys that never end,” the cymbelstern returns briefly. The concluding notes of the chant are heard in this section and are repeated several times, thus giving the allusion of “joy that never ends.” The last two measures gently disappear and will be heard on the Celestial division of this organ (a part of the instrument located in the ceiling above the crossing of the Cathedral nave).

Toccata: Veni Creator Spiritus – “Come Holy Ghost our souls inspire and lighten with celestial fire,” perhaps the most popular hymn for Pentecost in the plainsong tradition. This work was commissioned by the choirs of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Winston-Salem, North Carolina in honor of Margaret Mueller on her 25th anniversary as organist in May of 1989. This piece is in three distinct sections: it opens with quick manual figuration in which the chant melody is clearly heard. The rapid movement of the notes suggests the flight of the dove for Pentecost. After the sound of the organ increases, a full statement of the plainsong melody is heard in the pedal. The middle section is for the manuals only and expands on the opening figuration with more daring harmonies. Following this, there is a restatement of the chant in the pedal. The concluding section is free and improvisatory and invokes the excitement of Pentecostal rapture. The harmonies and rhythm are engaging and help to bring the work to a magnificent and thrilling end.

Margaret Vardell Sandresky was born in Macon, Georgia on April 28, 1921 and grew up in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Her father, the noted composer, Charles G. Vardell, was professor of organ and composition at Salem College for many years. She graduated from Salem Academy and College, obtaining the Bachelor of Music degree in 1942. She received a master's degree in 1944 at the Eastman School of Music where she studied composition with Howard Hanson and Bernard Rogers and organ with Harold Gleason. In the mid-1950s Sandresky received a Fulbright grant to study at the Hochschule für Musik in Frankfurt, Germany. While there she studied organ with Helmut Walcha, composition with Kurt Hessenberg, harpsichord with Maria Jäger, and improvisation with Johann Köhler. Above all, Sandresky has been influenced by the neo-romantic style of Hanson, the avant-garde approach of Rogers, and the neo-baroque and contrapuntal sphere that dominated Germany in the middle of the 20th century.

Sandresky taught theory at the Oberlin Conservatory and the University of Texas at Austin before returning to North Carolina where she was professor of theory and composition at Salem College from 1946-1986. In 1965 she was a founding faculty member at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts. She served as organ professor at UNCSCA from 1965-1967. During the 35 years since her retirement in 1986, she has composed prolifically for solo organ, organ with instruments, choir, orchestra, piano, and chamber music. She has received many accolades through the years including the 2004 Distinguished Composer Award given by the American Guild of Organists at the AGO national convention in Los Angeles. Her compositions have been performed and recorded by musicians worldwide.

Wayne Leupold Editions has published ten volumes of organ music by Margaret Vardell Sandresky. Volume 11 will appear in the summer of 2021. Her choral works are published by Paraclete Press. Sandresky's oeuvre includes works such as the *L'homme armé* Organ Mass in six movements (1979), Sonata No. 1 in three movements (1993), and numerous pieces of varying lengths and difficulties that serve the concert and liturgical repertoire exceedingly well.

Jack Mitchener is Organist and Artist-in-Residence at the Cathedral of St. Philip, Atlanta. In addition, he is Professor of Organ, University Organist, Chairman of the Keyboard Department, and Director of the Townsend-McAfee Institute of Church Music at Mercer University in Macon, GA. He has concertized widely throughout the USA, Europe and Asia and has recorded on the Albany, Gothic, and Raven labels. He is a former professor at the Oberlin Conservatory, Salem College, and the University of North Carolina School of the Arts. Dr. Mitchener has enjoyed a long friendship with Margaret V. Sandresky. She was his first improvisation professor, and he later taught her organ lessons over a period of several years. He has premiered many works by Margaret Sandresky including compositions for solo organ as well as choir and organ.