

## Recording Review

MARJORIE JOHNSTON

**Organ Music by Frank Ferko & Leo Sowerby.** David Schrader, Organ; James Ginsburg, Producer; Bill Maylone, Engineer (Cedille Records, 2021), \$25.83 Amazon; Apple Music, plus multiple online streaming services; web page for the recording: [www.cedillerecords.org/albums/organ-music-by-frank-ferko-leo-sowerby/](http://www.cedillerecords.org/albums/organ-music-by-frank-ferko-leo-sowerby/)

Spoiler alert: this is a must-have recording for serious organists and for many musicians beyond that niche. This release represents an enormous undertaking for Cedille Records, for Frank Ferko—the represented composer who is alive and well and still composing, and even for the astonishingly talented organist, Dr. David Schrader. Do not be daunted by the length (seventy-nine minutes with an additional eight-and-a-half for the online version that includes Sowerby’s “Two Sketches”); any trepidation will vanish on the very first track. The repertoire choices for each composer are ideal and this recording is compelling from beginning to end. The liner notes are especially helpful here and specifications for each organ used in recording are provided.

In a phone interview, Schrader explained: “The recording came to be because of a dinner Frank and I had at an AGO convention in 2016. I said, ‘your choral music is well recorded, but the organ music is under-visited and we should do something to change that.’ I made a call to Jim Ginsburg and he ran with the idea.”

Dr. Ferko currently holds the position of Music Metadata Librarian at the University of California, Berkeley, but he is a product of the Midwest and spent thirty years living and working

in Chicago. His considerable gifts as a pianist, organist, and conductor made him a natural fit as a church musician early on, and his career began even before his first organ lessons. He was only 13 years old when his Lutheran church called on him to play. By 15 he’d found a good organ teacher, and by 16 he was conducting from the console. Dr. Ferko is especially well known for his sensitive setting of texts in a *cappella* choral works; that reputation can only be expanded once these world premiere recordings of some of his best compositions for organ become more widely known. While he had an early start as a choirmaster/organist, composing came along much, much later. He took a keen interest in new music being written for the church and had studied composition a bit in college, but it was not until he was already working on a music theory doctorate at Northwestern University that he realized that composition—not music theory—should be his primary focus. In our phone interview, Dr. Ferko shared, “I was thirty-five years old; I’d finished my degree, and on the day my friends were going through the graduation ceremony, I stayed at home and poured myself a stiff drink and wondered...‘what am I going to do with my life?’ So I gave composition a shot, and after getting a few things published and winning a competition, I was encouraged to continue.”

Disc 1 of this two CD set is all Ferko, and it opens with an engrossing piece titled “Music for Elizabeth Chapel,” commissioned for the dedication concert of the nineteen-rank Jaeckel organ, Op. 41, at House of Hope Presbyterian Church in St. Paul, Minnesota. (Three of the four organs at House of Hope are featured in these recordings.) Dr. Ferko was charged with arranging hymn tunes *Leoni*, *St. Elizabeth (Crusader’s Hymn)*, and *St. Anne* for the three-movement work. The opening chorale with six variations on *Leoni* was my favorite, with its harmonic ingenuity and offset rhythms plus a variation for pedals only. The *St. Elizabeth* movement, also a chorale and variations, is the longest at seven-and-a-half minutes and I dare you not to chuckle with delight during the last variation—a waltz. *St. Anne* is presented as a Toccata and Fugue. Ferko describes

the Toccata as having been “written in a minimalist style,” and its light textured, fluid form provides a balanced contrast to the fugue. Schrader recorded this on the instrument for which it was written and the variety of sounds available on this small organ is very impressive, demonstrating that organists without access to a large pipe organ can certainly program it. There are multiple instances for which this piece could be useful. Either the full set (twenty-and-a-half minutes) or the hymn-based movements would be tasteful choices in recital, and the variation style is easy to pilfer for voluntaries for a Sunday morning service.

*Symphonie brève* is a favorite Ferko work of Dr. Schrader, and in fact, was dedicated to him when it reached publication. In the first movement (Andante), the ear is coaxed to focus on the pedal work of the ground bass, which breaks form and becomes a bit shorter with each repetition. The stabbing chords on the swell reeds interrupt that focus with disarming intensity. The second movement (Very fast, lightly) is a transcription of an improvisation that Ferko had played a few months before this larger work was conceived in 1987. The third movement’s huge “Chorale” hints at themes from the “Andante” movement to conclude the twelve-and-a-half minute symphony. Schrader recalled: “I first heard the second movement of this piece when Frank played it in recital in Indianapolis, and I asked for a score. This was before the days of music notation software, and Frank had the most beautiful calligraphy I had ever seen! When I saw the other two movements, I just loved them and incorporated *Symphonie brève* into my repertoire.”

*Angels: Chaconne for Organ* is an eight minute, forty-five second work that was commissioned for the twenty-five-rank Hellmuth Wolff organ at St. Giles Episcopal Church, in Northbrook, Illinois, but is played here on the primary organ at House of Hope Presbyterian—the C.B. Fisk, Opus 78. The large, mechanical action instrument is considered to be the magnum opus of builder Charles Fisk, and Schrader went on to say, “this Fisk is a very important organ in the history of organs...you can make it sound

like anything you want. There are few registration aids, but everything is where you need it. It was so helpful to have the composer at the recording sessions, and I definitely called on him to help pull stops." *Angels* breaks in tradition from the typical chaconne in that it does not use a ground bass, but instead repeats a *harmonic* pattern played on the manuals. That pattern is based on the chant *O aeterna Deus*, written in the twelfth century by Hildegard von Bingen, a particular subject of interest for the composer. Here Ferko ingeniously set his variations from perfect intervals—the octave and the fifth—"to depict the perfection of the angels themselves." In the composer's notes (scholastic, but very readable) he describes the sixth and final variation as extending... "to a full-blown tango to express the exuberant joy of the angels praising Almighty God."

"I discovered Hildegard von Bingen in my late 30s," he explained. "I was reading more and more and getting to know her chants. By 1989, I was writing music based on her work, and that's when composition really took off for me." There are two additional works that organists will appreciate: *Variations on Veni Creator Spiritus* and *Mass for Dedication*. The Finale of the *Mass* uses fragments of the Hildegard von Bingen chant *O orzechis Ecclesia* (*O vast Church*), which Ferko points out was "originally written to be sung at a time of dedication."

I was taken with a novelty piece entitled *Tired Old Nun*, a theme and variations set that was written as a birthday gift for a friend. It is designed to be played entirely on the pedals, and while the six-minute romp (incorporating a waltz, plus blues and boogie styles) is not suitable for liturgical use, it would make a splendid concert offering and an even better encore. Two shorter works, "Missa O Ecclesia: Communion" and "Variations on a Hungarian Folk Tune," fittingly round out the Ferko disc.

Where do new compositional ideas come from? Ferko said he identifies with Ned Rorem's take on the question: "A composer is always composing. Musical ideas are constantly going on in the mind, hundreds of which are lost forever because I don't write them down! Frequently the ideas are there

for a long time before I actually write, and sometimes the piece is almost fully composed before I get it out." Another aspect of the profession is not to tinker with what's already out there, and he said that's hard to do. "When you write, it documents what your thinking was *at that moment*, and it needs to stay that way."

All of the Sowerby tracks were recorded on the 1951 Wicks organ (Opus 2918) renovated in 2003 by H. A. Howell (Opus 94) at St. Ita's Catholic Church in Chicago. The production team had narrowed down the choices of where to record two or three of the best organs in Chicago, and Schrader said the combination of the instrument and the acoustic at St. Ita's made it the perfect choice for Sowerby. Leo Sowerby is often referred to as "the Dean of American church music," and the city of Chicago remains proud to claim him. The disc opens with one of the composer's best-known works, "Comes Autumn Time." It was written in a single afternoon, inspired not only by the verses of Canadian poet Bliss Carmen, but by the unexpected announcement in *The Chicago Tribune* by Mr. Sowerby's friend and advisor, Eric DeLamarter, that the piece already existed and was to be featured in recital the following week! It became a staple of organ repertoire and Sowerby later orchestrated it.

In 1931, Mr. Sowerby wrote "Pageant," a commission from the virtuoso Italian organist, Fernando Germani, who wished to show off his renowned pedal technique. Virgil Fox later popularized the complex showpiece in recitals, and the esteemed Sowerby annotator, Dr. Francis Crociata, explains that the piece has since become a "rite of passage" for up and coming organists. When I asked Schrader about this, he exclaimed, "I only learned it for these recording sessions! I already had my own set of virtuoso pedal pieces for recitals, including another one written for Fernando Germani. The Italians came late to pedaling, but they embraced it with a vengeance."

Former piano and organ students occasionally requested toccatas from Mr. Sowerby, and his 1941 "Toccatina in C" for organ is a marvel. Although it does not rank among the most popular

of Sowerby's organ works, it was a particular favorite of Mr. Sowerby himself, who consistently programmed it in recital. In his younger years, the composer was called into service during World War I and was a bandmaster in the 332<sup>nd</sup> Field Artillery in France. He shared with his friend and colleague, M. Searle Wright, that the ceremonial marches and military processions served as inspiration for the fourth movement from this *Suite for Organ*, "March." The suite's four movements were published independently first, and later as a set. The Sowerby liner notes by Dr. Crociata are a joy to read, and this reviewer has liberally borrowed from them. Crociata writes of the "March"... "Depending on the organist's approach, it can strut or swing or meander." I choose strut, and Dr. Schrader concurred. "It's strut with an element of Gothic humor in it. You can just see a Halloween version of a stately Anglican processional. And the piece has Sowerby's tricky chromatic harmonies all over the place."

Sowerby's *Organ Symphony in G major*, completed in 1931 and destined to stand the test of time, is indeed a masterpiece. In a letter to E. Power Biggs, Mr. Sowerby wrote, "It is as much a piece of architecture in sound as any of the works of the masters of the Baroque period, though I do not pretend to make any further comparisons." David Schrader's ebullient performance on this recording is nothing short of remarkable, and the recording quality is excellent as well. Listening to the twenty-minute first movement (*Very broadly*) without a score to follow was almost too much to grasp, and Dr. Crociata did note that it "reveals more of its beauty and power with repeated hearings." Its cerebral and complicated form (harmonic as well as structural) is a challenge for the listener, and I asked Schrader how he initially approached learning this movement. "For years I didn't understand it either. I thought it looked like a great Anglican anthem where the choir just never came in! Later as I plumbed the depths, eventually the thematic development and exquisite colors brought me to the conclusion that yes, it's a gorgeous piece." The second movement entitled *Fast and sinister* is interpreted by the organist world to mean "fast for the

## News of Members

### Brennan Szafron

has been appointed the new organist and choirmaster of Holy Cross Episcopal Church in Tryon, North Carolina. He will preside over the four manual Lincoln Pipe Organ Company instrument, direct choral and instrumental ensembles, and organize a concert series. He recently finished an eighteen-year tenure as the first full-time organist and choirmaster of the Episcopal Church of the Advent in Spartanburg, South Carolina. Szafron holds degrees from the University of Alberta, Yale University, and the University of Michigan.



engaging host for a Bach Week Festival candlelight concert, highlighting a theme in a harpsichord piece for the listeners during his opening remarks, and then impishly mugging to the audience when that theme came up in performance. He was that famous organist who survived a freak accident as a pedestrian in the Loop in September of 2002 that left him with a badly broken leg. He admitted thinking, "I'm an organist; they're gonna have to shoot me," but four months later he soloed on Samuel Barber's "Tocatta Festiva" (with its extensive pedal credenza) with the Chicago Symphony. The fact that he is also an approachable, pleasant, and really funny person makes him even more of an enigma. "People don't realize there is so much wit in classical music," he said. "They see *Grand Passion*, but there's so much more."

Kudos to Cedille Records and producer Jim Ginsberg for this first-rate recording. Both Dr. Ferko and Dr. Schrader made a point to say that Mr. Ginsberg has a remarkable ear, and that he made each session as easy as possible. Cedille Chicago is a not-for-profit organization devoted to promoting the finest musicians and ensembles in the Chicago area, and it's no hyperbole to say that this is a world-class recording.

audience and sinister for the organist." (This reviewer regarded it as a reward for listening to the first movement three times.) It's a rondo in 5/4, and the subject takes on a new personality with each repetition. Michael Barone (of NPR's *PipeDreams*) is credited with "the insightful suggestion that the second movement's opening dissonant dialogue of chords is evocative of car horns on Chicago's Michigan Avenue at dusk..." The closing movement is titled *Passacaglia*. Parallel foot pedaling is only one of the technical difficulties that lie in wait for the (already exhausted) performer, but Schrader said that for him the second movement was the technical bear, calling it the *Dark Scherzo*. "The challenge with Sowerby is figuring out the registrations; he only gives dynamics, but St. Ita's had so many wonderful choices."

The bonus tracks on the recording are Mr. Sowerby's "Two Sketches": 1. *Nostalgic* and 2. *Fancy-Free*. The composer playfully referred to his work as, "The Jekyll and Hyde music," and these pieces are a prime example. In *Nostalgic*, he makes use of a tone-row, although the subdued work still has a sweeping and comprehensive quality, what one critic described as "mid-western impressionism." Naturally, *Fancy-Free* is more spirited and would be more of a crowd-pleaser.

One might assume that Dr. Schrader is a specialist in the music of Frank Ferko and Leo Sowerby and was therefore the obvious choice for this recording, but he admitted, "I'm relatively new to Sowerby and I remember sweating a lot while learning it for these sessions. You can channel a composer through the notes on the page, and by following your instincts from there. I didn't know I had a kindred spirit with Sowerby." The truth is, *every* genre David Schrader plays sounds like his specialty. During my years in Chicago, I marveled at this multifaceted musician. He had an amazing thirty-five-year tenure as Organist at Church of the Ascension and was a favorite professor at the College of Performing Arts at Roosevelt University. He was the organist that the Chicago Symphony and the Grant Park Symphony Orchestras called upon when the organ part was non-standard (read: unplayable). He was the

### *Requiescat in Pace*

### Paul Lindsley Thomas

1929 ~ 2021

Paul Lindsley Thomas, 92, died on October 10, 2021. Thomas was a chorister under Norman Coke-Jephcott at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City, and earned a Bachelor's of Arts degree from Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut, in 1950. From 1950 to 1955, he served as organist and master of the choristers at St. George's by the River in Rumson, New Jersey. He then went on to earn both Bachelor's and Master's degrees in music from Yale University, before serving as organist at both St. James Church, West Hartford, Connecticut, and Wesleyan University.



In 1960, Thomas accepted the position of organist and choirmaster at St. Michael and All Angels Church in Dallas, Texas, where he served for thirty-seven years. He was a long-time member of AAM, and served as dean of the Dallas chapter of the AGO, chairing the 1972 AGO Convention in Dallas. He was predeceased by his wife, Joyce, and is survived by a son, Craig Thomas, of Empire, Colorado.

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## Camille Saint-Saëns's Obsequies

ROLLIN SMITH

*His example and his work remain with us. The man is no more, but his thoughts, alive and glorious, hover over the world and will continue to hover as long as there are orchestras and instruments.*

— Charles-Marie Widor

Born in Paris on October 9, 1835, Camille Saint-Saëns was baptized at the Church of Saint-Sulpice on October 27. His father, greatly weakened by pulmonary tuberculosis, died on December 30, a month after his first wedding anniversary and less than three months after his son's birth. It was feared that the child had contracted consumption and he was sent with a nurse to Corbeil, a town about eighteen miles from Paris, in the hope that the fresh country air would improve his health.<sup>1</sup> He was not brought back to Paris until the age of two. Saint-Saëns continued to suffer from diminished pulmonary function for the rest of his life. He was physically small, thin, and pale in appearance, and the cold and damp Paris winters were especially difficult for him. In October 1873, Saint-Saëns sailed from Marseilles on the first of his annual winter trips to Algiers. There, the two months spent at Saint-Eugène, and the warm dry climate improved his lungs. Almost every year, he would winter in Algiers, including what was to be his last trip, when he arrived on December 1, 1921, and settled in at the Hotel de l'Oasis, where he usually stayed.

He began working on several projects, among them orchestrating for the Dutch violinist Johannès Wolff his 1868 *Romance*, originally for violin, piano, and harmonium, and had begun the orchestration of the *Waltz Nonchalante* for Stacia Napierkowska<sup>2</sup> who wanted it to accompany one of her dances.

On Friday, December 16, after a peaceful day of working, reading, and even singing a few Verdi arias, the composer went to bed. By ten o'clock he had trouble breathing—he had already had several attacks of pulmonary congestion—and, as his breathing became slower and heavier, he told his valet, Jean Laurendeau, "This time I think it's really the end," and by half past ten, breathed his last. Coincidentally, both his parents had died in the month of December.

Saint-Saëns did not plan any music for his funeral; rather, in his will, he left instructions that "If my funeral is religious, I want the Mass to be short and I forbid the performance of the *Pie Jesu* known as the 'Air by Stradella,'" referring to a popular sacred song "Pietà Signore," set to the closing words of the Dies Irae, misattributed to Alessandro Stradella, and probably written by Louis Niedermeyer; it was published in 1845 by Choudens.

Saint-Saëns's body lay in state in his rooms over the weekend and on Monday, December 19, at six o'clock in the morning, it was carried to the Cathedral of Saint-Philippe d'Alger, which was draped in black for the occasion. The Requiem Mass was celebrated by the Archbishop of Algiers, Auguste-Fernand Leynaud, and all