

MAURICE DURUFLÉ
1902-1986

Prelude and Fugue on the Name “Alain”

Maurice Duruflé was a master at constructing huge, magnificent works from tiny musical motives. His *Prelude and Fugue on the Name “Alain”* pays homage to Jehan Alain (1911-1940), prodigious and pioneering organist/composer. Duruflé sets up a five-note theme based on the letters A-L-A-I-N, developing that theme through his characteristically rich harmonies and use of canon and motivic expansion, then finishing off with a masterful fugue that increases in velocity and excitement. The Prelude contains one direct quote from – and several clever allusions to – Alain’s famous *Litanies* for organ solo.

Prelude, Adagio et Choral varié sur le theme du “Veni creator,” Op. 4

Of Duruflé’s mere output of fewer than ten works for organ solo, four are based on pre-existing music, two of which are based on liturgical plainsong melodies. Duruflé developed a highly individual compositional style through ingenious use of canon and modal manipulation, the best examples of which are found in his *Requiem*, Op. 9. Of the *Prelude, Adagio and Variants on “Veni creator,”* only the variations are based directly on the original chant. The Prelude and Adagio are based much more loosely, almost undetectably, on small motives from the chant.

The Prelude is a *perpetuum mobile* based on notes buried within the third phrase of the original chant. Even the “second theme” – prominently displayed in four distinctive treatments between sections of the running motive – is its own theme, borrowing perhaps only one or two small motives from the chant.

A short, curiously dissonant interlude separates the Prelude and the Adagio. Although the Adagio begins with the first nine notes of the chant proper, this is merely a small motive used in a larger, freer form. The Adagio itself is quite beautiful and alternates with sections of greater dissonance and unrest. The movement builds into a huge culmination of dissonance and volume, rapidly receding into a single note, at which point the Variants commence without pause.

After the first two movements’ mere hinting at and alluding to the original, the chant is finally stated in a straightforward, imposing setting in five voices. Four variations follow, each with a unique registration. The fourth and final variation is a toccata, steadily building in momentum and sound, with a closing flourish in a modal setting. As a result of this modality, the final chord may sound somewhat inconclusive with conventional tonal analysis. Duruflé’s command in combining this ancient music and its modes with his own twentieth-century, fluid tonal style renders a worthy musical development of a timeless chant.

Suite
I. Prélude
II. Sicilienne
III. Toccata

Duruflé was his own worst critic. His complete compositional output would probably fit on about three or four CDs. But judging from the quality of that output, we would be correct to mourn the huge stack of music he must have destroyed, citing it unfit for publishing (or even discovering after his death). The *Suite* is an early work published when Duruflé was only 32, but the composer's mastery is evident and enduring. Anyone familiar with the experience of, say, entering a Parisian church can understand just how *French* this music sounds. The Prélude is brooding in a Gothic sense of the word. It builds from the darkest stops to full organ and back down again, closing with a mournful soliloquy on a pungent reed stop. The Sicilienne could be high-quality background music for lunch at a café – with a storm in the distance. The sun tries its best to shine, but that Gothic brooding is still evident, and yet the rhythm lilts gently. The Toccata changes everything: for many organists, this Toccata is **THE** piece, the most difficult, the most revolutionary, the ultimate conquest. And yet, the self-critic Duruflé was never entirely satisfied with it and forbade its performance in his presence, even in lessons. Thankfully, the piece remains among the living. Duruflé breaks the mold of the typical French organ toccata, infusing this one with *much* increased seriousness and a more sophisticated form, with two contrasting themes and subtle use of derived motives in the background, all in a relentless compound meter full of sixteenth notes and off-beat accents. And Duruflé, not wanting his “less-than-perfect” piece to be over-interpreted, fills the score with instructions on what to do and what *not* to do: slow only slightly here, go faster here without speeding up gradually, hold this note only briefly, do not slow down the end, pause only briefly here. Fortunately, Duruflé was right; if one just plays what he wrote (which is difficult enough), the piece speaks for itself – quite well.