

MARCEL DUPRÉ
1886-1971

Antiphon: “How fair and pleasant art thou,” Op. 18, No. 5

This piece comes from a set of Assumption Day improvisations that Dupré later committed to paper. It beautifully illustrates the sensual text from the Song of Solomon. Furthermore, how thrilling must it have been in those days to attend a church where such stunningly profound music was *improvised* each week?

Cortège and Litany

This diptyque is one of Dupré’s most often-played works. It was originally scored for organ and orchestra; the current version is Dupré’s own transcription for organ solo. The Cortège is an achingly beautiful plaint. The Litany is indeed a musical litany of sorts, in that it repeats a short melodic motive over and over, allowing the piece to grow organically and dynamically around it. The thrilling conclusion involves the return of the Cortège theme over the ongoing Litany.

Prelude and Fugue in A-flat, Op. 36, No. 2

One might call the typical prelude and fugue ‘well written,’ ‘structured,’ ‘severe,’ or ‘clever.’ But how often do you get to call it ‘beautiful?’ Dupré’s music often bespeaks a certain dark quality of the high Gothic architecture of Parisian churches and instruments in which much of it was conceived. But with the A-flat Prelude and Fugue, after a fairly dark prelude we are treated to one of the loveliest fugue subjects this organist has ever heard, finished off by a rapturous conclusion. The elements of ‘well written’ and ‘clever’ are still very much present. Dupré develops the same musical themes in both prelude and fugue. The prelude is surprisingly contrapuntal, though without relinquishing its status as a true prelude to what follows it. The masterful double fugue follows all the “rules” by working out two subjects and their attending counter-subjects in turn, then combining *all* these in several heavy *stretto* sections. This extraordinary piece is clearly an artistic nod to the genius of Bach, while remaining genuinely beautiful music.

Prelude and Fugue in B, Op. 7, No. 1

Marcel Dupré was an acclaimed technical genius. He made a science (and a career) out of placing every finger and foot exactly in the right place at the right time, without virtuosic display. His music demands similar attention to such economy of motion. The thrilling but brief Prelude and Fugue in B makes equal exploitation of

contrapuntal mastery, harmonic movement, the organ's resources, and the organist's stamina.

The Stations of the Cross, Op. 29

Two of Marcel Dupré's most enduring works for organ solo began as improvisations. Interestingly, both are suitable for performance during Holy Week. Dupré's debut American tour in 1921 included a huge, four-movement improvisation that eventually became his Opus 23, the *Symphonie-Passion*. And a monumental improvisation at a recital in 1932 at the Brussels Conservatory of Music eventually became *The Stations of the Cross*.

As a liturgy, observance of the *Stations* is a longstanding Catholic tradition of journeying with Jesus each Good Friday from his trial to the tomb. Often the service is arranged as an actual journey or walk, with the fourteen "stations" observed along the way. It is often called the "Via Dolorosa" or "Way of Suffering." Dupré's inspiration to create the musical tableaux of this observance came from Madeleine Renaud-Thévenet, a professor at the Brussels Conservatory, where Dupré first played them. She proposed reading fourteen poems by Paul Claudel illustrating the Stations, after each of which Dupré would improvise musical commentary. Dupré later wrote down the improvisations.

Most organ improvisations are "live," based on one or two existing melodies chosen in secret by a presenter and handed to the organist immediately before. In the case of the *Stations*, Dupré created his own set of basic melodies and rhythms, all of which he then worked out in full during the actual improvisation. Integrated throughout the work are twelve melodic and six rhythmic themes representing the Cross, Suffering, Redemption, Mary, Compassion, Pity, Consolation, Persecution, Incarnation, Crucifixion, Agony, Redemption Achieved, the Crowd, Barrabas, Stumbling, Weariness, Flagellation, and Ropes. This commentary is taken in part from Robert Delestre, first biographer of Dupré, and from Graham Steed's book, *The Organ Works of Marcel Dupré*.

Station I: Jesus is condemned to death

The work begins with a solo reed representing Pilate saying, "Guards, take this man into custody." The tumult of the crowd then grows, and the rhythm of the name "Barrabas!" can be heard over and over. Soon the rhythm of "To death!" can be heard in a huge climax.

Station II: Jesus receives His cross

The march to Calvary begins. The stumbling steps of Jesus pervade every measure.

Station III: Jesus falls under the weight of the cross

The march continues. Dupré introduces musical themes for Weariness, Suffering, and Redemption; he does not choose to illustrate an actual falling but rather the exhaustion that causes a fall.

Station IV: Jesus meets His mother

A flute solo with string-tone accompaniment depicts Mary. No gesture, no words escape from her; her grief is too deep for tears. This music will be revisited in Station XIII as Mary receives her Son's lifeless body.

Station V: Simon the Cyrene helps Jesus carry the cross

Simon, coming into the city from the countryside, lends reluctant assistance and does not find it easy at first. Gradually he synchronizes his steps with those of Jesus.

Station VI: A holy woman wipes the brow of Jesus

Veronica comes out of the crowd to wipe Jesus' brow. Dupré's musical theme of Compassion.

Station VII: Jesus falls a second time

The crowd presses in on all sides, and the burden becomes intolerable. The horror of the scene is matched with ever more grinding dissonance. This is the halfway mark through the Stations; in many churches, the Stations are posted evenly on either side of the building.

Station VIII: Jesus comforts the women of Jerusalem

This may be the most beautiful and melodic movement of all. Jesus' voice of consolation is heard as a reed stop in the tenor range. This music is partially revisited in Stations XII and XIV.

Station IX: Jesus falls a third time

This is the fastest and most difficult movement. The crowd grows in its exasperation and insults. A brief period of calm represents finally arriving at the place of execution.

Station X: Jesus is stripped of His clothes

This angular music represents the shaking of dice for Jesus' clothes. Interestingly, Dupré introduces a new theme of Incarnation, representing Jesus naked, as the day He was born.

Station XI: Jesus is nailed on the Cross

Dupré is unrelenting with his representation of hammer blows, shouts, and Suffering.

Station XII: Jesus dies upon the Cross

Jesus' seven last words are represented on a reed stop, some of which recalls his words of comfort in Station VIII. Then follows an earthquake and an unearthly stillness.

Station XIII: *Jesus' body is taken down from the cross and laid in Mary's bosom*

The descent from the cross brings forth a curious representation of Ropes, a sliding movement in triplet figures in the accompaniment. Mary's music returns from Station IV as she holds the body in her arms.

Station XIV: *The body of Jesus is laid in the tomb*

After some fleeting revisits of earlier themes of Pity, Suffering, Redemption, and Christ's voice from Station VIII, there is a faint glimmer of light as the work ends on the first inversion of an E Major triad.

Symphonie-Passion, Op. 23
I. Le Monde dans l'attente du Sauveur
II. NATIVITÉ
III. CRUCIFIXION
IV. RÉSURRECTION

At his 1921 American debut on the famous Wanamaker organ in Philadelphia, Dupré was handed several musical themes, upon which he would conclude his program with an improvisation. The array of themes inspired Dupré to improvise a four-movement symphony, rather than the "usual" prelude and fugue or a set of variations. The result has become one of the literature's most famous staples, the *Symphonie-Passion*, which Dupré immediately began committing to paper following that historic recital.

The *Symphonie* is constructed as a musical commentary on the life of Christ. Each movement makes use of an ancient chant appropriate to that movement's subtitle. The first movement, "The World Awaiting the Savior," illustrates through its relentless repeated chord patterns the unrest of a world in chaos before the arrival of the Christ child. The movement quotes the melody *Jesu redemptor omnium*, stated on a soft reed stop after a restless exposition. The melody returns at the end of the movement on full organ, in canon between the topmost voice and the pedal.

In the second movement, one hears a meandering, pastoral shepherd's melody followed by the pompous march of the Magi, before coming to rest at the manger with the familiar *Adeste fideles*. The third movement, with a ponderous, labored march theme and explosive climax quiets down to the melody *Stabat Mater dolorosa*, played in sporadic shifts between a soft flute and deep, distant pedal.

The fourth movement begins with what at first seems to promise a handsome, triumphant resurrection depiction, but in fact the movement is full of unrest and some of the most acute chromaticism in the *Symphonie*, perhaps in illustration of the age-old struggle between the forces of good and evil. The melody *Adoro te devote* appears at the beginning in long notes in the pedal, then passes to the left hand and then to the upper voice. The movement proceeds through a gradual and dramatic harmonic buildup and concludes with a dashing toccata, with the melody in canon between the upper voice and the pedal. A short section of rapid, alternating major and minor chords on full organ brings the entire work to an exultant end in D major.