

**CHARLES-MARIE WIDOR**  
**1844-1937**

**Symphony No. I in C Minor, Op. 13, No. 1**

- I. Prélude: Moderato**
- II. Allegretto**
- III. Intermezzo: Allegro**
- IV. Adagio**
- V. *Marche pontificale***
- VI. Méditation: Lento**
- VII. Finale: Fugue: Allegro**

Widor begins his groundbreaking output for organ not with Napoleonic fanfare nor storm scene, but rather with a sedate nod to Bach. The opening movement is contrapuntal and imitative and represents only the most serious intentions. The second movement is a much lighter affair played on flute stops, a sophisticated salon movement. The third movement is a chase of the most frantic order, with constant manual changes and echo effects yielding a rather free-spirited product, despite the minor key. This is the first of Widor's trademark *perpetuum mobile* forays, of which the *intermezzo* from the Sixth and the ubiquitous *toccata* from the Fifth are better known examples.

The fourth movement carries an air of longing with subtle rhythmic twists in a slow-moving 9/8. The fifth movement is the first of Widor's full-organ *tours de force*, in this case a pompous, triumphant march. The sixth movement is an aching, fainthearted lament in E-flat minor. The *finale* is a gloriously profound fugue, nodding once again to J. S. Bach.

**Symphony No. II in D, Op. 13, No. 2**

- I. *Praeludium Circulare*: Andantino**
- II. Pastorale: Moderato**
- III. Andante**
- IV. *Salve Regina*: Allegro**
- V. Adagio: Andante**
- VI. Finale: Allegro**

Perhaps the Second Symphony is the lightest of all. Its myriad movements exhibit wide ranges of color and mood. This symphony fits well between the seriousness of the First and Third Symphonies.

The first movement, 'circular' in its tonalities, states its opening material in several keys, without necessarily making circulation a primary organizational method – the movement still grows organically, true to Widor's style. The second movement, a

most charming *pastorale*, is unapologetic in its tunefulness. The third movement ventures into more sophisticated salon music; one is easily put in mind of walking past a historic country church and hearing the choir rehearsing harmoniously from inside.

The *Salve Regina* ("Hail, holy Queen") was a later substitution Widor made in place of the original *scherzo*. Widor rarely excised entire movements like this, choosing more often to revise as heavily as he saw fit. The inserted *Salve Regina* seems more than a little out of place in this early symphony, but I found it to be better music than the original *scherzo*. The chant melody makes its appearance late in the movement, somewhat unobtrusively in the tenor range, on this organ on the Tuba stop.

The penultimate *adagio* is a longing plaint in B minor, with echoes of the Rachmaninoff *Moment Musical* in the same key. The movement is a complete foil to the boisterous and joyous *finale* that follows with constant chatter and cascading waves of notes.

### **Symphony No. III in E Minor, Op. 13, No. 3**

#### **I. Prelude: Moderato**

#### **II. Minuetto**

#### **III. Marcia**

#### **IV. Adagio**

#### **V. Final: Allegro molto**

The Third Symphony is a tauter affair than its two elder sisters. Widor's style was solidifying more noticeably by now, and the range of emotions is presented with more deliberate integrity.

The first movement is a brooding churn of motives, with recurring sections in alternation. The *minuetto* is a charming conversation of sorts between oboe and flutes, then trumpet and flutes. The colossal third movement *marche* is the centerpiece of the symphony. It is not enormous for enormity's sake; rather, it develops its themes with integrity and avoids sheer showmanship, contrary to its 'older brother' march movement from the First Symphony.

The *adagio* is a subtle canon between the hands, perhaps a deliberate nod to Bach, an act of homage to which Widor was regularly inclined. The final movement was a later addition, replacing an original fugue. This movement surges with relentless energy all the way to the final page, until all dissipates and settles heavily and chromatically onto the final E-major chord.

## **Symphony No. IV in F Minor, Op. 13, No. 4**

### **I. Toccata**

### **II. Fugue: Moderato assai**

### **III. Andante cantabile: Dolce**

### **IV. Scherzo: Allegro vivace**

### **V. Adagio**

### **VI. Finale: Moderato**

Widor nodded to Bach many times in the course of his ten organ symphonies and beyond. Taken together, the first two movements of the Fourth are a toccata and fugue, a familiar combination to organists. The first movement is a heavy-handed drama, with pregnant pauses and short harmonic deviations. The fugue is a careful, dignified affair.

The third movement returns to a familiar salon style from earlier symphonies. Its melody, though original, suggests a Scottish folksong flavor. The *scherzo* is a diabolical exercise in perpetual motion, with lightning-speed notes flying by on quiet stops given barely enough time to speak. The calmer middle and closing sections are like quirky gargoyles cocking their heads to one side as each speaks in turn or in canon.

The *adagio* contains Widor's only indication for the *voix humaine* stop, a stop he unaffectionately nicknamed a "nanny goat" stop. As is the case with many of the symphonies, this penultimate movement is the calm before the storm of the *finale*, in this case a self-confident hymn of triumph.

## **Symphony No. V in F Minor, Op. 42, No. 1**

### **I. Allegro vivace**

### **II. Allegro cantabile**

### **III. Andantino quasi allegretto**

### **IV. Adagio**

### **V. Toccata: Allegro**

The Fifth Symphony, one of Widor's most popular, begins with a monumental first movement featuring a somewhat swashbuckling tune put through several rhapsodic and variation treatments. The second movement presents a rather Parisian-flavored melody on the Oboe stop of the organ. The third movement is a serious-minded affair on the heavier foundational stops of the organ. The fourth movement is a soothing respite before the windswept finale, the consummately famous Toccata. The Toccata makes an appearance at thousands of weddings and Easter celebrations worldwide each year, but taken in context with the rest of the Symphony that precedes it, it has an even greater effect. The Toccata was performed too fast even in Widor's day. He revised the score in an effort to get the tempo under control. It

didn't work. His final version indicates quarter note 100 beats per minute, while many of today's performances inelegantly and unnecessarily approach 200. Not me.

**Symphony No. VI in G Minor, Op. 42, No. 2**  
**I. Allegro**  
**II. Adagio**  
**III. Intermezzo: Allegro**  
**IV. Cantabile**  
**V. Finale: Vivace**

All of Widor's Symphonies contain perfectly excerpt-able movements, and Widor himself sanctioned such use. But the more mature Symphonies are best heard in full whenever possible. In that respect, the Sixth is among the most successful; each movement is mature and self-contained yet contributes to the whole. The Allegro contrasts a grand main theme on full organ with a faster moving theme. The Adagio approaches salon music, with a slow lilt of sorts in a very slow three-eight meter. The Intermezzo is a cascade of surges and snarls on reeds and mutation stops. The Cantabile is one of Widor's gentlest offerings. And the Finale does not disappoint as a grand spectacle.

My graduate organ professor Clyde Holloway (1936-2013) would play the first few measures of this Symphony to demonstrate "full organ" to visitors to the then-new organ at Rice University. Although I began learning it several weeks before his death in December 2013, I feel it is providential that this piece found its way into my repertoire at that time, and I shall always think of Dr. Holloway when I play it.

**Symphony No. VII in A Minor, Op. 42, No. 3**  
**I. Moderato**  
**II. Choral: Andante**  
**III. Andante/Allegretto**  
**IV. Allegro ma non troppo**  
**V. Lento**  
**VI. Finale: Allegro vivace**

Although doubtless inspired by César Franck and Franz Liszt along the way, Widor receives most of the credit for developing organ music to the point that whole solo symphonies were now being written for the instrument. In his Seventh, Widor continues to explore his finest expression at the organ begun with the previous symphonies, and the various movements are uniformly integral to that end. The Seventh also represents a pinnacle of sheer size: it was the largest piece for organ ever composed to that point, soon eclipsed only by Widor's full-hour-long Eighth Symphony that followed.

\*\*\*\*\*

The weighty but relatively brief first movement is a fitting prelude to the Symphony. It begins outright with a stabbing, angular declaration that is as interesting rhythmically as melodically and which invades the entire movement with its energy and demands for attention:



Even the slightly more lyrical second theme of this movement (below) is always troubled- nigh unto obscured - by the relentless rhythm of the first theme churning around it:



\*\*\*\*\*

The lovely but pithy second movement *choral* turns out to be the heart of the Symphony: its rather simple opening melody – five notes down, three notes back up – appears in three of the four remaining movements afterward:



Widor's mastery is increasingly evident as he permutes this tiny theme into voice after voice, section after section, key after key. Even if the listener may not recognize every statement, the melody's organizational power still makes a subtle impact over time.

\*\*\*\*\*

The third movement undoubtedly must have informed the rather Gothic style of Louis Vierne later on. The main melody given below is a questioning, somewhat halting passage:

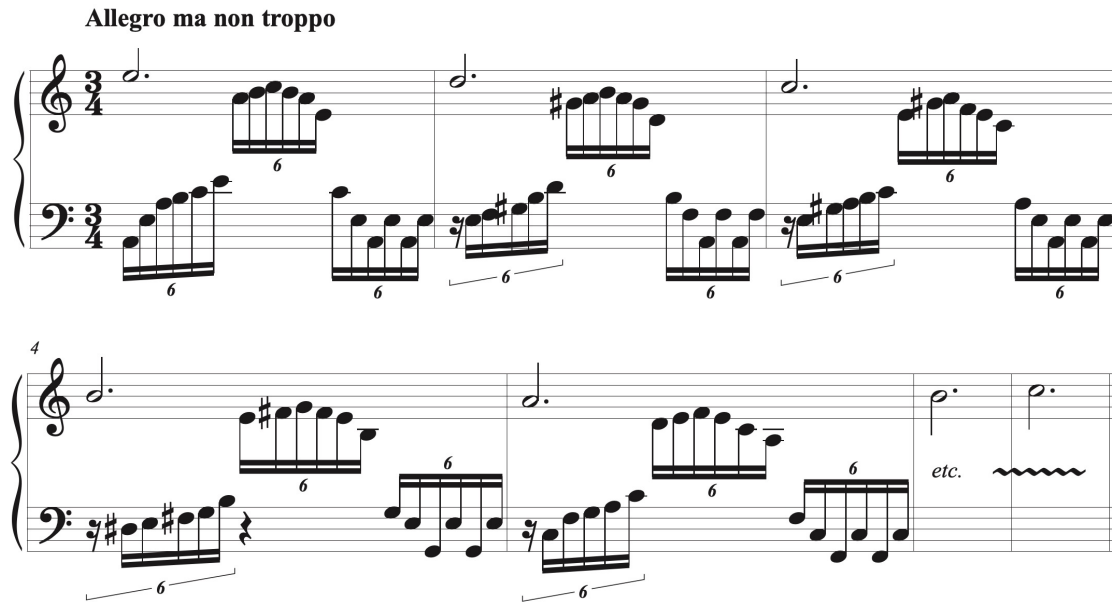


The middle section is a more restless, chromatic brooding:



\*\*\*\*\*

The fourth movement is a dreamy rhapsody on the opening notes of the second movement *choral* (dotted half notes below). This is a veritable *étude* in the style of Liszt, with rapidly swelling and ebbing figurations in the manuals (sextuplets below):



The movement slows its rhythm over time, eventually coming to rest in A Major.

\*\*\*\*\*

The fifth movement is a wailing plaint in C-sharp minor, with its main melody high in the manuals:



The main melody is contrasted by a more soothing section later on, much more diatonic and in the rare key of C-Sharp Major.

\*\*\*\*\*

The opening melody of the *finale* is the most declamatory version yet of the second movement *choral* melody, with some directional changes of the moving notes:



The recapitulation permutes the *choral* theme again:



The finale visits various textures and dynamics but never wanes in intensity. The tension remains to the very end, a glorious concluding flourish in A major, again based on the *choral* melody:



## Symphony No. VIII in B, Op. 42, No. 4

I. Allegro risoluto

II. Moderato cantabile

III. Allegro

IV. Prelude and Variations

V. Adagio

VI. Finale: Tempo giusto

At nearly a full hour, the Eighth is Widor's longest Symphony and was up to that time the largest work of organ music ever composed. The range of emotions is wide indeed, and the musical impressions are near limitless.

The first movement carries a huge, Elgar-esque flair in its fanfare style and myriad rhythmic trickery in 6/8 meter. The second movement harks back rather faithfully to the style of Mendelssohn in its texture, and it refuses to indulge in the registrational grandeur of the time. The third movement is a challenge, with punishing sixteenth notes and lightning-quick manual changes cast in an unrelenting *Allegro*.

The centerpiece of the Symphony is a sprawling set of loosely-organized variations on an original theme. In later revisions, Widor cast aside a prelude to these variations, which I have reinstated. The prelude is a slow-moving "melody chorale" in 4/4, ending inconclusively before the variations begin with the melody in the pedal, much like a passacaglia, in 6/8. The entire movement is epic, with many swings of mood and texture. As a form, the variations are subtle and often incomplete, but the listener soon senses that the nucleus of a melodic or harmonic idea continues to present itself throughout.

The penultimate movement contains some of the densest, most unsettled writing in the Symphony. The opening melody and harmony are chromatic and slippery, in the rich key of F-Sharp. The rather voluptuous melody is interrupted by an agitated fugal exposition. The unrest builds to include increasingly disquieted fragments of both themes, before subsiding and giving way once again to the original melody.

The *Finale* is often accused of having a quality beneath that of the other movements. Primarily in B Minor except at the very end, this movement is the least good-humored of the lot, but the role it plays in achieving the Symphony's gamut of emotions is important. An insistent tempo infused through the different sections keeps things taut, while the movement both speaks its own mind and serves to close the Symphony.

### ***Symphonie gothique* in C Minor, Op. 70**

#### **I. Moderato**

#### **II. Andante sostenuto**

#### **III. Fugue: Allegro**

#### **IV. Moderato**

The *Symphonie gothique* was the product of a new capturing of Widor's imagination, reducing the sheer size of concert music to hover now around chant melody, in this case, the Christmas chant *Puer natus est nobis* ("Unto us a boy is born"), which makes increasingly discernable appearances throughout the third and fourth movements. Widor also writes more succinctly with this symphony of about 35



minutes in length, as opposed to the near-60 minutes required to play the preceding Eighth Symphony.

The opening movement in C minor is one sweeping crescendo and decrescendo, aching for repose and never quite receiving it. Truly it is one of the most sobering, Gothic movements in Widor's output for the organ. The second movement, the ravishing and oft-excerpted *andante sostenuto*, takes on new meaning when flanked by its sister movements within the context of the entire work. The fugue of the third movement is surprisingly rowdy, as is its final cadence that jumps abruptly from a momentarily prevailing A-flat tonality back to the home key of G. During the course of the fugue, the pedal introduces *Puer natus* twice, unassumingly in the bass, below the frenetic upper voices.

The epic *finale* is a set of loosely-formed variations on *Puer natus* and on original counter-melodies, showcasing various solo stops of the organ before giving way to a mighty and extended coda. The intensity and registration build to a grand climax of *Puer natus* played in pedal octaves, before settling down into a calming coda in C major.

### ***Symphonie romane* in D, Op. 73**

#### **I. Moderato**

#### **II. Choral: Adagio**

#### **III. Cantilène: Lento**

#### **IV. Final: Allegro**

Throughout all of music history are scattered those occasional pieces that are beautiful and moving on their own yet are also instructive from any amount of probing into layer after layer of meaning. Such is Widor's **Symphonie romane**. It is at once beautiful and groundbreaking, yet it is built around only a few melodic notes of the "plainest" music: plainchant. The *Romane* is Widor's tenth and final symphony for organ solo. The first eight symphonies had been absolute concert music, but the final two, the *Symphonie gothique* and the *Symphonie romane*, turned toward the church, using ancient Christmas and Easter chant melodies as their bases. With these pieces, solo organ music in France was changed forever, and this concert/sacred style that Widor inherited from Franck passed smoothly into its next splendid era with Vierne, Dupré, Duruflé, Langlais, Messiaen and a host of others.

The title page of the *Romane* is inscribed to the Romanesque basilica of St. Sernin in Toulouse. Widor took for musical inspiration the first few notes of the Easter gradual hymn *Haec dies quam fecit*, "This is the day the Lord has made":



These notes appear throughout three of the *Romane's* four movements, sometimes in part, sometimes in full. Widor explained in his preface to the scores that his treatment of plainchant attempted very little development but rather tended toward simply stating those notes over and over, albeit disguised within modern harmonies, rhythmic permutations, and dense textures. Taken together, the four movements of the Symphony could give the effect of one splendid, four-movement improvisation.

*Haec dies* appears over and over in the Symphony, sometimes in solo relief, sometimes hidden in other voices or in fragmentary statements. After a while, the unaccustomed ear begins to recognize the melody, not just as a melody but now as a fundamental organizational element for the Symphony. Given below are some of Widor's permutations:

First movement:

Moderato

Pedal

Pedal

Second movement:

Adagio

Pedal

The third movement contains no statement of *Haec dies* but rather statements of another chant from the Easter Mass, the sequence hymn *Victimae Paschali*, "To the Paschal victim offer your thankful praises." The appearances are brief and subtly disguised amid the flow of other material in the texture. Given here is the chant followed by Widor's adaptation:

Vi - cti - mae Pa - scha - li lau - des Im - mo - lent Chri - sti - a - ni. A - gnus re - de - mit o - ves:

Lento

Fourth movement, opening notes. Exultant return to *Haec dies*:

Allegro

Fourth movement, climax. (Soprano voice):

Andante quasi adagio

*fff*

*fff*

Finally, evidence exists here and there in the *Romane* of the influence of Richard Wagner, of all people. The “Tristan chord” appears toward the end of the second movement:

A musical score in three staves, likely for piano. The top staff is in treble clef, the middle in bass clef, and the bottom in bass clef. The key signature has one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is common time (C). The music features a complex, chromatic melody in the upper voice with two asterisks and the word "almost" above it, and another asterisk and the word "definitely" above it further along. The lower voices provide a harmonic accompaniment.

It may be argued that the “Isolde motive” appears toward the end of the first movement:

A musical score in three staves, likely for piano. The top staff is in treble clef, the middle in treble clef, and the bottom in bass clef. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#) and the time signature is 12/8. The music features a melodic line in the upper voice with several asterisks above it, and a dense, rhythmic accompaniment in the middle and lower voices.

... but is much more obvious toward the end of the second movement:

A musical score in three staves, likely for piano. The top staff is in bass clef, the middle in bass clef, and the bottom in bass clef. The key signature has one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is common time (C). The music features a melodic line in the upper voice with several asterisks above it, and a rhythmic accompaniment in the lower voices.

Widor admired Wagner's music, and it is certainly within the realm of possibility that Widor subscribed to Wagner's assertion that the opera may be compared with church or a "temple," an institution in which Widor was of course right at home.

***Bach's Memento: Six pieces for organ***

**I. Pastorale**

**II. *Miserere mei Domine***

**III. Aria**

**IV. *Marche du veilleur de nuit***

**V. Sicilienne**

**VI. *Mattheus-Final***

Many organists own at least one volume of "the Widor-Schweitzer edition" of Bach. It does not yet come as a surprise to the current generation to learn that Widor – a composer more closely associated with the Romantic aesthetic – actually co-edited the organ works of Bach as a scholarly project in his day. Bach was a constant companion in Widor's playing and – upon closer inspection – in his compositional output. Therefore, it seems fitting that Widor paid yet more homage by recasting/paraphrasing/transcribing for the organ six of his favorite Bach movements from other genres. It is from this perspective of *homage* that an appreciation of these pieces can best be grounded today. There was lukewarm reception at their premiere, with most people (probably expecting another symphony) wondering why Widor needed to do this and just *how* he could re-write Bach to such a personal (*gauche*) degree. Today, history can afford to be kinder, and the listener and scholar may now approach these pieces as a treasured glimpse into Widor's favorite Bach and resulting tribute.

I feel these pieces are the hardest Widor wrote – not only because the notes are difficult to reach at times but also because the difference in ornamentation from Bach to Widor may threaten the integrity of either composer's wishes. Widor was clear that all grace notes should occur before the beat and that all trills should begin on the main note – just as in his own music. This is in diametric opposition to current standards that say that *Bach's* ornaments should begin on the beat and on the auxiliary.

Matters get further complicated when one is tempted to use ordinary touch on these pieces (because they're Bach) but then required to play them legato (because they're Widor). Honoring one composer snubs the other!

The first movement is based on the third section of the organ *Pastorale* in F. The second is a complete metamorphosis, including new title and key, of the Prelude in D minor from Book I of the Well-Tempered Clavier. The third movement is based on the Prelude in E minor from that same source. The fourth movement is a rather quirky rendition of the familiar organ chorale setting *Wachet auf! Ruft uns die*

*Stimme* from the six Schübler chorales. The fifth movement is based on the slow movement of a flute sonata. The grand finale is indeed grand, based on the final chorus from the St. Matthew Passion; the organ serves to fine effect as both orchestra and chorus.

***Suite latine, Op. 86***

**I. Praeludium: Moderato**

**II. *Beatus vir*: Andante**

**III. Lamento: Allegro moderato**

**IV. *Ave Maris Stella*: Andante moderato molto**

**V. Adagio**

**VI. *Lauda Sion*: Tempo di marcia**

More than once, Widor asserted that he had said all he needed to say as a composer for the organ. And more than once, he returned to it with renewed creativity. Such was the naissance of the *Symphonie gothique* and *Symphonie romane*. Even years after *those*, in his eighties, Widor put pen to paper once again on behalf of the organ, composing his somewhat quirky *Bach's Memento* and the more serious *Suite latine* and *Trois Nouvelles Pièces*.

The *Latine* gets its name from the three of its six movements based on Latin chant melody. The six movements do not necessarily exhibit the compositional prowess of the elder master. That is certainly not to say they are inferior music; rather, they may put the listener more in mind of grand and sophisticated improvisations, surely treasured glimpses into Widor's improvisational skills. This is particularly true of the first, third, and fifth movements – the non-chant-based movements – which are more through-composed – or through-improvised – and are allowed to develop in their own way rather than in service to a pre-existing melody. That said, however, the improvisation factor does not completely retreat in chant-based movements two, four, and six, which quote their melodies subtly, sometimes deep within the texture or in fleeting sections of their own.

The stirring first movement presents a recurring theme alongside various harmonic experiments without significant changes of registration – clearly Widor was finished with theatrics by now. In fact, throughout the *Suite*, Widor indicates far fewer registration directives than ever, leaving to the performer issues of “orchestration” at will. The *Beatus vir* (“Blessed is the man”) melody of the second movement makes a fleeting appearance in its faster middle section; otherwise, the movement is another rich harmonic and rhythmic experiment in this late stage of Widor's output.

The third movement, with nary an indication of registration change, ventures into rich harmonic fields of Widor's maturity and inspiration. The *Ave Maris Stella* is awash with swirling figurations. The chant melody “Hail, star of the sea” makes calm appearances between agitated sections, as if to suggest that the Queen of the sea is

watching over us on shore, just over the horizon. The melody makes another triumphant appearance toward the end, like a sturdy hymn, and then closes the movement with one final, comforting statement.

The fifth movement might be the most cohesive music of the set, turning a short theme over and over in increasingly sophisticated ways. Only brief fragments of the *Lauda Sion* ("Praise, Zion") melody appear in the final, rhapsodic movement; Widor's chant basis continues as one of formal suggestion rather than melodic development.

***Trois Nouvelles Pièces, Op. 87***  
**I. *Classique d'hier*: Moderato**  
**II. *Mystique*: Andante**  
**III. *Classique d'aujourd'hui*: Moderato**

These represent an older Widor, one apparently increasingly interested in musical statement without excessive fanfare. With these three beautiful miniatures, Widor may even be stating questions and then stepping aside for us to answer as we will. His vague movement titles may refer to their dedicatees Albert Riemenschneider, Charlotte Lockwood, and Frédéric Mayer. At any rate, the "newness" promised in the title is real: these are not epic movements as from the symphonies. Rather, they unfold in a satisfying stream of consciousness that fittingly caps Widor's organ output.