

Review

Organist Ken Cowan on the E.M. Skinner at Stambaugh Hall, Youngstown (April 7)

by Daniel Hathaway



In the first three decades of the twentieth century, E.M. Skinner's instruments were the Cadillacs of organs, establishing themselves in the most prestigious churches and concert halls in the United States. A wave of restoration projects has renewed many of Skinner's instruments in Northeast Ohio, notably at Severance Hall, Morley Music Hall at Lake Erie College in Painesville and most recently at Stambaugh Auditorium, an impressive, 2,500 seat, Graeco-Roman hall built in 1926 that crowns a hill near Youngstown State University.

Stambaugh has launched an organ series to celebrate the restoration of its distinguished 58-rank organ, which is divided behind the proscenium on both sides of the stage and speaks with a fine presence through grillwork into the hall. Canadian-born organist Ken Cowan, who now teaches at Rice University in Houston, played an eclectic program of Wagner, J.S. Bach, John Ireland, Rachel Laurin, Healey Willan, Saint-Saëns and Sowerby on Sunday afternoon, April 7 which brilliantly showed off the Skinner's many capabilities.

What better choice to open a program on an orchestral organ than Wagner? Cowan chose colorful registrations for E.H. Lamare's arrangement of the overture to *Der Fliegende Holländer* (with particular attention to simulating a horn section) and played it with sensitive attention to articulation and balance. The Skinner made some magnificent, velvety growls when Cowan played in the low register on reed stops with the swell boxes closed.

Bach's chorale prelude on *Ach bleib bei Uns*, BWV 649 featured the mellow Cornopean stop on the solo line, while the *Siciliano* from the second flute sonata demonstrated two contrasting flute registers. Many Bach fugues don't come off well on orchestral organs, but the *Gigue Fugue* made a fine impression and gave Cowan the first of several opportunities to show off his excellent pedal technique.

Cowan turned to British and Canadian composers for the next three works. John Ireland's

expressive *Elegiac Romance* explored extremes in dynamics, while Rachel Laurin's *Étude Héroïque* was like an organ version of Bartók's *Concerto for Orchestra*, giving various sections of the instrument their moment in the spotlight in a variety of musical textures including a pedal cadenza, an aria and a striking passage of staccato chords.



After intermission came the *Introduction, Passacaglia and Fugue* by the twentieth century British-born composer Healey Willan, who emigrated to Toronto early in his career. Cowan, who had been warmly sharing little stories about the music all along, told us that Willan wrote the work in tribute to Max Reger with the colors of the organ at St. Thomas, Bloor Street in mind. And he wrote one variation during each trip on the trolley which used to run between Toronto and his cottage on Lake Simcoe.

A big, impressive piece whose textures and harmonic complexity do invoke Reger, the Willan was a showcase for Ken Cowan's interpretive skills. He registered its dense lines with transparency and surprised the ear with special colors like the harp stop.

Cowan concluded with two unabashed showpieces. Saint-Saëns's *Danse Macabre* in his own arrangement (here the chimes made an appearance), and twentieth century Chicago composer Leo Sowerby's *tour de force* for the pedals, *Pageant*, written for the Italian virtuoso Fernando Germani (who learned it enroute to the U.S. on an ocean liner by taping off a pedalboard on his stateroom floor).

Ken Cowan tossed these fiendishly difficult pieces off effortlessly and added a third as an encore: "Let's end as we began — with Wagner", he said before launching into a spirited arrangement of the *Ride of the Walküre*, giving the audience the opportunity to hear the organ's stately reed stops once again.

The next organ virtuoso to unleash the power of the Stambaugh Skinner is Peter Richard Conte, staff organist for Macy's (formerly Wanamaker's) in Philadelphia, who plays on April 28 at 4 pm. Count on more orchestral fireworks!

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