

Maxine Thévenot

Review of **Maxine Thevenot plays Hellmuth Wolff op. 47** by **Dr. David Wagner - The Diapason**

Here is another fine recording from the Canadian-born organist Maxine Thévenot on the Raven label. This artist has established a distinguished international career, performing throughout Europe, Great Britain, and North America. Thévenot began her studies at the University of Saskatchewan, earning a bachelor's degree, before going on to receive master's and doctoral degrees from the Manhattan School of Music, where she was twice awarded the Bronson Ragan Prize for "most outstanding organist." In 2006, she was awarded an Honorary Fellowship by the National College of Music & Arts in London for her service to music.

In 2010 Thévenot became director of cathedral music and organist at the Cathedral of St. John, Albuquerque, New Mexico. She has held senior positions in cathedrals in New York, Calgary, and Saskatoon. She also serves on the faculty at the University of New Mexico, directing the only collegiate women's choral ensemble in the state, Las Cantantes, and also serves there as the university chapel organist. Further information about this artist can be found on her website: www.maxinethévenot.com.

This recording was inspired by a performance that Thévenot made on the magnum opus from Hellmuth Wolff for the 2009 Seattle AGO regional convention and is the first commercially available recording of the instrument. The recording was made in July 2010.

Once again, the Raven label presents a recording with a complete and detailed program booklet that is so often lacking with other recordings. Like the recent *Vision at Covenant* recording of the Fisk Opus 124 in Nashville (reviewed in the June issue), there is an essay by the builder included in the notes. Hellmuth Wolff talks about the two years in building this instrument, his inspiration for the organ, and offers a complete specification. Essays from the builder add to the enjoyment of the entire CD experience. It would be nice to see this as "standard operating procedure" as far as the first recordings of major instruments are concerned.

Organ designs are often stylistically directed by the

incumbent organist at the time of the project. Michael Gormley, the cathedral's principal organist, spent many years in Vienna and loved the South German Baroque organ for its silvery plenum, beautiful flutes, and colorful reeds. To this the builder added inspiration from Upper Swabia, a region between Stuttgart and Munich, where French building practices also were embraced, including the inclusion of a tierce rank in the mixtures of the Hauptwerk, Unterwerk, and Pedal of this four-manual instrument. There are full choruses on each manual and musical colors galore. Such blending of the French and the German works well for this colorful and impressive instrument, built to be earthquake resistant in its free-standing case!

The artist mentioned that the repertoire was chosen to show Southern and Northern German organ compositional techniques and more recent Canadian organ music that reflects, imitates, and emulates the represented here with the *Balletto del Granduca*; its five variations are colorfully presented, growing in texture and registrational intensity as they proceed to their conclusion. Beautiful registrations and flawless playing make this a true delight.

The Sweelinck piece is preceded by the music of Canadian composer Ruth Watson Henderson, who studied at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto and later at the Mannes College of Music in New York City. Her *Chromatic Partita for Organ* from 1989 consists of a chorale followed by eight variations; it was a prize winner at the International Competition for Women Composers in Mannheim, Germany. This composition makes a nice companion work to the preceding Sweelinck piece, alternating between dance-like and meditative variations, and ending with a blockbuster finale inspired by the chromatic harmony foreshadowed in the title of the work.

Also represented is a true masterwork of the North German tradition, the *Praeludium in E Minor* by Nicolaus Bruhns, a virtuoso organist and violinist who studied with Buxtehude. It was reported that Bruhns often took his violin with him to the organ loft, playing it and accompanying himself with double pedal playing as his own continuo. Only five organ works and the fragment of a *Praeludium in D Major* have survived to our day; these works show a bright musical imagination coupled with technically demanding music. It was the

second son of Johann Sebastian, C.P.E. Bach, who later stated that his father was a great admirer of the music of Bruhns.

The Bruhns is followed by the premiere recording of a 21st-century work, the *Prémère Suite* by Andrew Ager, a native of Ottawa who studied at Dalhousie University and the University of Toronto. He presently is composer-in-residence at St. James Cathedral in Toronto. The work presented here takes the Baroque suite as its inspiration, presenting a series of six movements entitled *Procession, Duo, Basse de trompette, Flûtes, Musette*, and concluding with the stunning *Sortie Joyeuse*.

Another real gem of this recording is the splendid presentation of the four movement *Pastorella, BWV 590*, by Bach. Absolutely ravishing playing by Thévenot makes this one of the highlights of the album. Enjoy the second movement in the dialogue of 4-foot flutes.

Maxine Thévenot has again produced a disc that is imaginative and beautifully engineered and recorded, with stunning playing that is both sensitive and musical, where virtuosity is used only at the service of the music, on an instrument that is perfectly matched to the repertoire presented. All should be congratulated in this project; it will make a welcome addition to one's CD collection.

Review of Maxine Thevenot plays Hellmuth Wolff op. 47 by Jean-Yves Duperron (Jan 2012)

In this day and age of computer chips, digital media, and the race to make everything as small as possible as quickly as possible, it is reassuring and comforting to know that there still exist craftsmen out there willing to plan and build pipe organs like this one, and musicians devoted enough and good enough to play them. Over the last few years, the flowering of the pipe organ into a concert instrument has certainly helped save it from the claws of obsolescence, although in most of the smaller community churches where they were used solely as liturgical support, the organ's pipes now serve as a refuge for bats more than anything else. It's depressing to think of how many wonderful instruments have been forsaken out there around the world.

The Opus 47, the largest organ ever built by the distinguished firm of Hellmuth Wolff & Associates of Laval, Quebec, Canada, was completed in 2005 at Christ Church Cathedral, Victoria, in British Columbia, Canada. For the uninitiated, Op. 47 means this is the

47th instrument designed, planned and constructed by this organ building firm. It's a wonderful instrument (with mechanical action no less) built around 61 stops, that took two years and 28,000 hours of work to create. From its 2' Flagiolet to its 32' Kontraposaune, it is extremely well balanced and can easily display many different characteristics well suited to the style of each piece. A prime example of just that is the complete change of face from the massive final chord of the Dietrich Buxtehude: *Praeludium in C Major* to the almost barrel organ like sound of the Johann Kaspar Kerll: *Capriccio sopra il cucu* complete with the song of a nightingale.

Organist Maxine Thévenot's playing always commands attention and her judicious choice of registration from one piece to the next is peerless. I'm not sure how she achieved it, but her dynamic pacing of the Dietrich Buxtehude: *Ciacona in E Minor* is to be commended. The beauty of invention and purity of voice she brings to the Bach, or the nobility she brings to the Sweelinck are but only some examples of how this musician can expose the soul within the works she performs.

The program itself is varied and goes a long way in displaying the many facets of this organ. The music spans 400 years, from Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck born in 1562 to Andrew Ager born in 1962, whose *Première Suite* makes its recording debut on this CD. It's a piece in 6 short movements that combines the best of the old traditions with new ideas and really brings out the subtle charms and the grand scale power of a pipe organ.

Once again Raven Recordings have done what they do best. Capture and reproduce the sound of an organ so well as to place you, the listener, in its environment. You can practically hear the air rushing through the low note pedal pipes of the opening Buxtehude prelude, or imagine a shepherd playing the flute in the Bach *Pastorale*. Impressive!