

# Maxine Thévenot

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Review of *L'Orgue Magnifique* by James Hildreth – *The American Organist* (May 2011)

Maxine Thévenot presents a powerful program on Ernest Skinner's magnificent creation at Girard College. It opens with three works receiving their world premiere recordings. British organist Martin Stacey's virtuosic 'Totentanz' employs incessant rhythmic drive and ostinatos in the manner of Eben. It quotes a few of Eben's themes, all the while remaining a compelling, original work. Canadian pianist, composer, and poet Jeanne Landry created a quiet, evocative mood in her 'Hesychia,' which is Greek for 'peace' or 'stillness'... Canadian composer John Burge is best known for his choral music. The organ work, (Dance) is highly rhythmic and harmonically complex. Thévenot performs these works with passion and brilliance. Three short works by Louis Vierne ('Sur le Rhin, Stèle pour un enfant défunt, Méditation') precede the complete *Symphonie No. 3*.

Thévenot's choice of works by Vierne for this program is fortuitous. His great admiration of the work of Ernest Skinner is well known, as documented in Jonathan Ambrosino's essay "Girard College and its *Orgue Magnifique*" in the program booklet. Vierne never heard the Girard organ, which remains basically intact, being the last grand organ in a grand space that Skinner produced with his company. It sounds splendid in this recording. The music thrives with Thévenot's superb playing and her masterful manipulation of the instrument's myriad tonal colors. The combination of the unique, cavernous acoustic with the marvelous sounds of the instrument results in a sensational sonic experience. Thévenot's brisk tempos in several of the movements of the *Symphony* create impressionistic swirls of color while maintaining clarity. In the *Final*, the opening swells and crescendo into full organ are extraordinary, as is the throbbing 32' *Bombarde*. Here is the opportunity to hear three exciting new works and some of Vierne's finest music, all splendidly performed on one of the world's most exciting instruments. *Très magnifique!*

Review of *L'Orgue Magnifique* by John L. Speller – *The Diapason* (Feb 2010)

Maxine Thévenot, like several of the rising stars of the younger generation of organists, is Canadian-born, though she currently resides in New Mexico, where she

is associate organist and choir director of the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John in Albuquerque and a member of the faculty at the University of New Mexico. On this recording she has included compositions by two fellow Canadians, Jeanne Landry and John Burge, as well as an Englishman, Martin Stacey, and several works by Louis Vierne. All of these are performed on the magnificent Ernest M. Skinner organ in Girard College Chapel in Philadelphia, which is, of course, an academy or high school rather than a "college" in the usual American sense.

The first piece, Martin Stacey's *Totentanz*, was commissioned by the British periodical *Choir & Organ* as a memorial to the Czech organist Petr Eben. It is dedicated to Dr. Thévenot, and she gave the first performance in 2008 on the organ in Royce Hall at UCLA. This is the premiere recording of the work. It is an intense and majestic piece—not exactly the normal conception of a dance, whether of the dead or otherwise—and though very appealing in a number of ways, not exactly displaying a great deal of influence of Petr Eben, to my ears at least.

The second piece on the compact disc is my favorite of the three original compositions that are given their first performance here: *Hesychia* by Jeanne Landry, a former student of Nadia Boulanger. The title comes from the Greek for stillness, and refers to a form of meditative prayer practiced by the Hesychasts, a monastic group within the Eastern Orthodox Church who pursued a solitary existence in the desert. It is a haunting aria-like composition played on the harmonic flute and accompanied on the strings. There is a certain timeless quality about it and the Skinner organ provides the perfect medium for its performance.

The third track, the first recorded performance of *Dance* by John Burge, is not unlike the first in being impassioned and dignified, though I did not find it particularly dance-like either. It has some slightly more virtuosic elements than the *Totentanz*, and there are several passages on the Tuba, which, so far as the Skinner at Girard College is concerned, is something that is always welcome.

The rest of the compact disc is devoted to a number of compositions by Louis Vierne. The first of these, one of Vierne's *Pièces de fantaisie*, is the color piece

Sur le Rhin, which displays the richness of the Skinner diapasons to very good effect. It is evocative of the slow-running yet majestic waters of the Rhine. The pathos of the following piece, *Stèle pour un enfant défunt* ("Tombstone of a dead child"), from Vierne's Triptyque of 1936, is evident; the strings and harmonic flutes are again used very effectively. This was the piece that Vierne had just finished playing when he died in 1937. The third of the shorter Vierne compositions on this compact disc, *Méditation*, was actually originally one of three improvisations recorded on a gramophone record in 1928 and subsequently transcribed by Maurice Duruflé.

The remaining five tracks of the compact disc are devoted to Vierne's *Symphonie No. 3 in F-sharp Minor*, op. 28. While the Final from the *Symphonie No. 1* has always been a favorite composition, and the symphonies of Widor have enjoyed considerable popularity of late, it is unfortunate that Vierne's equally fine symphonies have largely been ignored. The third symphony is a particularly fine one, perhaps the finest of the lot, and so it is good to have such an excellent performance of it here, and also to have it performed on such a magnificent instrument. This symphony in particular makes the compact disc well worth its purchase price.

**Review of *L'Orgue Magnifique* by Victor Hill, Ph.D. – The Journal of the Association of Anglican Musicians (Nov 2009)**

Our colleague Maxine opens with first recordings of three striking contemporary works and concludes with a series of less familiar music by Louis Vierne. The first is the *Totentanz: Hommage à Peter Eben* by the British-born Martin Stacey; it was commissioned by *Choir & Organ* magazine for internet publication and dedicated to Maxine. The work is energetic and virtuosic, displaying influences of Eben (whom Stacey admired) combined with original elements. A complete contrast is the *Hesychia* (Greek for peace or stillness) by the Canadian Jeanne Landry, a study in meditation and—on the part of the performer—exquisite control in continual pianissimo. The extended *Dance* by Canadian John Burge is, again, rhythmically intense and virtuosic. All of these pieces are well served by the IV/108 E. M. Skinner organ of 1931-33 in Girard College Chapel, Philadelphia. (The same instrument served Peter Sykes admirably for his transcription of Holst's *The Planets*, reviewed here in November 2006.)

The remainder of the program is devoted to works of Louis Vierne, beginning with three short pieces. Sur

le Rhin is one of the less familiar of the 24 *Pièces de Fantasia* and not one that especially appeals to me, though it does express the mighty Rhine as it flows toward the sea. The *Stèle pour un enfant défunt* (the last piece Vierne played before his fatal heart attack) and the *Méditation* (from *Trois Improvisations*) are more familiar; they receive especially sensitive performances here.

The major work is the *Third Symphony* in the unusual key of F-sharp minor (I can think of only a few other works in this daunting key other than, of course, those in the WTC). Dating from 1911, a particularly turbulent period in the composer's life, it combines anger and passion with a search for consolation – ending in a triumphant blast at the final conclusion. Maxine plays with authority, solid technique, and an evident sympathy for the idiom. In my experience, this is one of the less frequently heard of the Vierne symphonies, and it is gratifying to have it in such a fine performance.

The liner includes notes by David Gammie, a biography, an extensive discussion of the Girard organ and its connections with Skinner, session photos, and a stoplist. The recorded sound is clean and true.

**Review of *L'Orgue Magnifique* by Francis O'Gorman – Organists' Review (Aug 2009)**

Girard College, Philadelphia, was the gift of an exceptionally wealthy man. Stephen Girard, a financier, bequeathed \$5 million for a school for fatherless boys, which opened in 1843. By 1933, it had acquired a large new organ by the eminent American builder E.M. Skinner, celebrated for Romantic, orchestral instruments of power, delicacy, technical sophistication, and expressiveness. The instrument as it now found is not quite in its original state, but it is still very largely to Skinner's original design. There is no case; the organ speaks from ceiling grilles, just as the large Compton organ of Wolverhampton Civic Hall dominates a great space without being visible. The Canadian organist and conductor, Maxine Thévenot, on the faculty of the University of New Mexico, presents an original programme, with the works of three living composers, and, with some separate pieces, perhaps the most tragically compelling of Louis Vierne's symphonies, number 3 in F# minor, O. 28. The three new pieces, all 'world premier recordings', are characterful, and I particularly admired Jeanne Landry's *Heyschia*. Landry was born in 1922 and studied piano with Nadia Boulanger. This piece, the title refers to the Eastern Orthodox tradition of *Hesychasm*, or inward contemplation, is a delicate and appropriately meditate

piece for the softest of colours. Dance does everything you might expect: percussive, rhythmic, syncopated writing, with graffit-like splashed from high-powered reeds, all played with zest. Lively, to be sure, it does not to my mind convey a particularly distinctive voice.

But listeners may well turn first to the performance of the master work on this disc. Vierne's third symphony, from 1911, is embedded with the composer's feelings about the end of his marriage, the death of his mother, and the promotion above him of Gigout as Alexandre Guilmant's successor at the Conservatoire. It is easy to read autobiography into music, and it is worth remembering the Irish poet W.B. Yeats' observation on a fellow writer about the difference between life and imagination: John Keats' 'art is happy,' Yeats said, 'but who knows his mind?' This is an admonishment all the more apt for music. Nevertheless, this powerful, half-bitter, almost angry, and certainly angular work is hard to imagine separately from Vierne's fretful life. I'm not too convinced by the vast swelling of sound in the Final with those left-hand chords; this is close to being both vertiginous and vulgar. And the great opening, Allegro Maestoso, with all its vexation and almost table-thumping anger, feels a little underpowered and unexciting to me. But the swirling sound of this magnificent organ, speaking uninhibited into a deep space, thrills as much as it makes one envious. Here are performances both brave and fortifying, with an organ that is, literally, above them both.

Review of *l'Orgue Magnifique* by **Christopher Nickol** – **Choir and Organ** (July/Aug 2009)

Rating: \*\*\*\*

New works by Martin Stacey, Jeanne Landry and John Burge make an arresting and stunning opening to this CD with their adventurous harmonies and rhythmic energy, recalling Eben and Guillou. The better known pieces by Vierne, including the Third Symphony, receive excellent performances from Thévenot with well-judged tempos. The 4-manual, 99-stop Skinner organ is a typically grandiose Romantic affair. Its location in the chapel's ceiling does mean that quiet passages are occasionally a little too distant. However, the well-blended tutti is thoroughly convincing and perfectly suited to the late-Romantic/modern idiom of Thévenot's programme.

Review of *l'Orgue Magnifique* by **Craig Smith** – **Pasatiempo, Santa Fe New Mexican** (27 Mar 2009)

American pipe-organ builder E. M. Skinner (1866-1960) crafted instruments ideal for the symphonic-organ repertoire of his day, but his legacy was distorted when many were cruelly 'improved' during the 20th century Baroque revival. This disc highlights one of the few to escape artistic fire and sword: the noble instrument in Philadelphia's immense Girard College Chapel. It remains a veritable orchestra of one for those able to master it. Fortunately, Thévenot—Associate Organist-Choir Director at Albuquerque's Cathedral of St. John—is one of the elect. As earlier Raven recordings have shown, her technique is formidable and her musical instincts good, and she gracefully plays both large-scaled and intimate repertoire here. She projects Louis Vierne's brooding, thickly chromatic "Symphony No 3 in F-sharp minor", boring in the wrong hands, with unusual clarity, while "Sur le Rhin" from *Pieces de Fantaisie* exudes sun-shot nobility through its wall of dark, massive sound. The introspective "Meditation" and touching "Stele pour un enfant defunt" give Thevenot the chance to reveal and revel in the instrument's quieter, rainbow-hued palette. Martin Stacey's 2007 "Totentanz" (Hommage à Petr Eben), dedicated to Thévenot, proves to be a cacophonous yet persuasive dance of devilish delight, stunningly played. Raven's technical staff keep the chapel's ponderous acoustic on a judicious rein; but even so, this one will put your speakers to the test.