

Five questions for...

JOSEPH NOLAN ORGANIST

1. What is it, or what was it, that really excites you about the organ?

When I was young it was the power. That was the great thrill. But now, playing the really truly great organs in France or Germany – when you play the music that was actually written for them (Widor in France, Bach in Germany) – the way the music comes alive is quite astounding.

2. Most people just know the one ubiquitous piece by Widor (the famous *Toccata*). What else does he have to offer?

His output is absolutely vast. He's written operas, ballets and innumerable chamber works. The Dutton label has put out the Widor Piano Concertos and they've got fantastic tunes, great rhythm. Now that people are getting sick of the usual Rachmaninov Piano Concertos and that sort of thing, they're a fantastic alternative. Widor was the one who really revolutionised the organ, alongside the organ maker Cavaillé-Coll who got him the post at Saint-Sulpice (by effectively sacking Lefébure-Wély who was there before him). That's when he really started to set up the organ as a real, serious instrument, acknowledged outside of just the loft.

3. Where should listeners go after the best known Fifth Symphony in the Widor canon?

Probably the Sixth Symphony next because that's very tuneful. The first movement is perhaps his finest ever work. Then his last works, the *Romane* and the *Gothique*, that I've just recorded on Signum. They're plainsong-based and they're very, very different. The Seventh and Eight are more Wagneresque and very long and chromatic – they might put people off at first. So I'd do Five and Six, then go to Nine and Ten, and then work backwards.

4. Who are your personal favourite composers for the organ?

It would have to be Bach and Widor. Interestingly, in Widor's organ classes he only ever taught students Bach, Widor or improvising. He would never allow César Franck – who he didn't get on with – to be played in his classes. There is also Maurice Duruflé, the organ's answer to Debussy and the perfect impressionist – not an easy task to achieve on the organ! Having had the immense privilege of recording his music on the organ of Saint-Étienne-du-Mont, the combination of organ, acoustic, and the unusual and inspiring architecture was a life changing experience.



5. Where do you see the organ going?

I really wonder. Cameron Carpenter has found this extraordinary niche, but how traditional organists will go in the future I can't answer. The organ is a microcosm compared to people who attend orchestral concerts and opera. However, I think it is fair to say that even these more visible art forms need to answer very similar questions. We are all in the same boat.

Joseph Nolan's recording of Widor's Ninth and Tenth Symphonies is out now on Signum and reviewed in next month's *Limelight*