
Q & A

Joseph Nolan shines some light on St Etienne Du Mont



What are the merits of the St Etienne organ?

The organ itself is very fiery with regard to its *Tutti* and I felt its aggressive and immediate sound suited my playing style well. However, and I will never tire of saying this, the acoustic of the building is crucial to the character of an organ and the swirling eight seconds of St Etienne transcends any obvious difficulties in voicing or balancing the stops.

How did you choose the works for the disc?

Recording the complete works of Duruflé was not an option as this is reserved for the Titulaires of St Etienne. What was permitted was for me to record one work by Duruflé and to build a program around it, so I chose the Suite Op. 5 as I felt this work covered all the bases regarding his compositional style. It was pure chance, watching Woody Allen's comedy, *Midnight in Paris*, which features the exterior of St Etienne, that led to the remaining conception of the disc and my choosing repertoire that was dark, spooky or monumental in character.

You have a special feel for Widor, but where do Duruflé and Vierne rank in your affections?

Vierne was so close to Widor he was commonly known as 'Widor Junior'. His six symphonies evolve out of Widor's later works and tend to push technical boundaries further than Widor, particularly in the *Scherzo* and *Finale* of Symphony No 6. I would comment that the chromaticism of Widor's later symphonies is not so far removed from Vierne's than some might admit, and that Widor's monumental Symphony No 8 requires a sustained mental and technical focus that surpasses Vierne's final two organ symphonies. I would however concede that Vierne's *Pièces de Fantaisie* possess some impressionistic gems that exceed the compositional standards of Widor's isolated solo organ works. Following Widor, Duruflé would be my second favourite composer for the organ. He is the Debussy of the organ, not an easy aesthetic to achieve from such an instrument. Duruflé's works are not numerous and with his revisions you can smell the work of a perfectionist. The harmonic language and colours that Duruflé employs are utterly beguiling and bring a sense of originality, poetry and fluidity to an instrument that is often labelled as a machine played by non-musicians.