

# Midnight at St Etienne du Mont - SIGNUM RECORDS SIGCD470 [DC] Classical Music Reviews: February 2018 - MusicWeb-International



## *Midnight at St Etienne du Mont*

**Charles TOURNEMIRE (1870-1939)**

Improvisation sur le 'Te Deum' (1930, arr. Duruflé) [6:05]

**Louis VIERNE (1870-1937)**

Fantômes, from *24 Pièces de fantaisie, Op. 54* [3:44]

Scherzo, from *Symphony No. 6, Op. 59* (1930) [3:44]

Finale, from *Symphony No. 5, Op. 47* (1923-24) [10:22]

**Maurice DURUFLÉ (1902-1986)**

Suite Op. 5 (1931) [21:24]

**David BRIGGS (b. 1962)**

Le Tombeau de Duruflé (2009) [30:54]

Joseph Nolan (organ)

rec. 2015, St Etienne du Mont, Paris.

**SIGNUM RECORDS SIGCD470 [78:31]**

This is one of those organ discs from which the synergy between player and instrument is palpable from the outset. The organ at St Etienne du Mont is a spectacularly fine instrument revised by Cavaillé-Coll in 1863, but with a history that takes us back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The church has an eight-second reverberation which has been managed superbly by recording engineer Mike Hatch, who deserves a mention for producing one of the best organ recordings I've ever heard on conventional CD. There is plenty of detail and impact in the sound, but balanced with a sense of atmosphere that heightens Nolan's expressive and sublimely virtuoso performances.

Charles Tournemire is known for his *L'Orgue Mystique* and his influence on the young Olivier Messiaen. The *Improvisation sur le 'Te Deum'* is one of a series of improvisations he recorded onto 78 rpm shellac discs, subsequently reconstructed and transcribed by Duruflé. I've only come across these once before on a recording by Andreas Sieling on the MDG label ([review](#)), but this St Etienne recording makes an entirely different and much more memorable impression. It makes one pause for thought to think how many such performances must have been lost as soon as they were played in this way, and this remarkable opening to the programme is a dramatic and incredibly effective work in its own right.

Louis Vierne followed in the tradition established by his teacher Charles-Marie Widor in his creation of organ symphonies. I'm not normally a fan of chunks of larger pieces being removed and put on recordings, but as a recital-type programme the sequence of pieces here works very well. *Fantômes* is a quirky and programmatic fantasy that refers to characters such as 'the Beggar who plays the street organ' and a final musical personification of 'Fate'. The *Scherzo* from Vierne's *Sixth Symphony* is light and sparkling, reflecting the light and fauna of the Mediterranean, while the *Finale* of the *Fifth Symphony* is described by Ateş Orga in the booklet as "an all-conquering 6/8 carillon-toccata of gripping figuration, texturing and footwork."

Maurice Duruflé's substantial three-movement *Suite* is dedicated to Paul Dukas, a contemporary critic summing it up as having "ample brilliance

without display.” Duruflé’s perfectionism resulted in a small catalogue of works, the *Requiem* ensuring that his name is not forgotten, but his complete organ works easily fitting on a single CD. I compared Joseph Nolan with Henry Fairs at the Cavaillé-Coll organ in the Church of Notre Dame d’Auteuil, Paris on the Naxos label ([review](#)) and found it interesting to contrast the colours between the two instruments. Nolan is more lilting and has greater forward momentum in the central *Sicilienne* but both are very good, the closer clarity of the Signum recording and the intense buzz of the St Etienne reeds in the final *Toccata* making this the winner by some margin.

The real coup in this programme is the world premiere recording of David Briggs’ *Le Tombeau de Duruflé*. Briggs can trace his organ lineage back to Tournamire, so in a sense we come full circle. This work had its first public performance by Briggs at the first Cirencester Organ Festival in 2010. Divided into eleven sections, the movements represent the story of Christ in a feast of organ music that draws, among other things, on the legacy of the great improviser Pierre Cochereau. Each movement is based on its associated plainchant melody, sometimes set straightforwardly but with modern harmonisation, such as *Rorate Caeli desuper*, but always with inventive texture and at times some remarkable embellishment, such as what sounds like a peal of bells in *Adeste fidelis*. At times edging towards bombast, this is never less than a highly enjoyable ride on a music machine that takes us back in time to the likes of Bach in the gentle *Hodie Christus natus est* – but with exquisite twists of course, pictorial impressionism with something like *Omnes de Saba venient*, subdued romanticism for the *Attende Domine*, the whole thing bookended with spectacular music that should blow your socks off.

Superbly produced, there are one or two niggling misprints on the CD release, including a miniature timing of 1:54 for *Le Tombeau de Duruflé* on the back cover. Other than this I can only say that, as far as organ CDs go, this should pretty much set us up for the rest of 2018. The only improvement I could imagine is if it were a SACD recording, but that’s more of an audiophile thing. Be sure to look out for Joseph Nolan’s complete recording of Widor’s organ symphonies on Signum as well – in my opinion the best set currently available.

If you are a fan of the French organ tradition and are interested in hearing something of its transition from the 20th to the 21st century then St Etienne is a wonderful place in which to revel, again and again.

***Dominy Clements***