



Joseph Nolan at the console of the Cavaillé-Coll organ, La Madeleine, Paris

Widor

'The Organ Symphonies, Vol 1'

Organ Symphonies - No 5, Op 42 No 1;

No 6, Op 42 No 2

Joseph Nolan *org*

Signum © SIGCD292 (73' • DDD)

Played on the Cavaillé-Coll organ of

La Madeleine, Paris

Saint-Saëns

Trois Rhapsodies sur des cantiques bretons, Op 7.

Dies irae. O salutaris hostia. Sarabande.

Élévation ou Communion, Op 13.

Fantaisie pour orgue-Aeolian^a

Andrew-John Smith *org*

with ^aAdrian Bending *tubular bells*

Hyperion © CDA67922 (63' • DDD)

Played on the Cavaillé-Coll organ of

La Madeleine, Paris



Widor and Saint-Saëns from the Cavaillé-Coll organ at La Madeleine, Paris

Aficionados of Widor's Toccata will be interested to know that Joseph Nolan adopts the slow and stately approach, rather than the brisk and brash one. This certainly highlights all those tiresome right-hand arpeggios and irregular left-hand chords, but gives ample space in which to savour the grandiloquence of La Madeleine's organ in all its glory; even if that long held high F above the final cadence jars unpleasantly on the ear. Nolan's carefully prepared and immaculately delivered performances also demonstrate that, while the Toccata may be Widor's most popular creation, it is by no means his best. Within the same symphony we hear the marvellous *Allegro vivace* variations, delivered with enticing neatness and full of ravishing moments. And for sheer sonic excitement, forget the Toccata; turn, instead to Nolan's breathtaking sweep over the Sixth Symphony's finale. While

neither symphony was actually conceived for this particular Cavaillé-Coll, Joseph Nolan's painstaking approach to registration yields a sound which is about as authentic as you could wish. Add to this his amazingly precise fingerwork, his total mastery of the score and his obvious empathy with this music, and, while you may find more thrilling and colourful recordings out there, this has few challengers when it comes to the utter authority of the performances.

The only problem is that this recording does nothing to dispel the complaint that Widor's symphonies are more a collection of unrelated stand-alone pieces rather than coherent musical structures and, while each movement is thoroughly enticing, taken overall there is a certain lack of coherence which, ultimately, gives it all a feeling of disjointedness. Of course, if it's the sound of the organ that matters most to you (as is the case with many collectors of organ recordings), then this would not matter one iota; but perhaps a more revealing view of the Madeleine organ is offered up in the latest instalment of Andrew-John Smith's continually outstanding and endlessly intriguing survey of Saint-Saëns.

Much of Saint-Saëns's organ music was conceived with the Madeleine Cavaillé-Coll in mind and the sound of that instrument, coupled with Smith's obvious enjoyment in playing both it and these pieces, makes for a scintillating disc. Often, with such an exhaustive survey of a single composer's output for the organ, you would expect as much dross as gold. But Saint-Saëns was a much better composer than that and, while gold is hard to come by, the precious-metallic analogy puts almost all of this firmly on a silver salver. Even the unfinished and all-but-forgotten *Thème, variations et choral* (which Smith has retitled *Dies irae*) is an eye-opener; warmly endearing and beautifully crafted. So, too, are the entertaining *Rhapsodies sur des cantiques bretons* written for Saint-Saëns's successor at the Madeleine, Gabriel Fauré; how many other composers could make a routine organ fugue sound as much fun as does Saint-Saëns in the first of these?

The most interesting – as well as the longest – piece here was not written with the Madeleine instrument in mind. Indeed, it was not intended for a French organ at all. In fact, the *Fantaisie pour orgue-Aeolian* was not even conceived for an organ played by a living, breathing human being. So Smith performing it on a great Cavaillé-Coll is probably as good an alternative as we could expect, and while we can but throw up our hands in horror at Aristide Cavaillé-Coll's catastrophic oversight in not including a set of tubular bells on his Madeleine organ, Adrian Bending steps in to hammer some real ones for all their worth. Those bells eventually add their clamour to the

cacophonous climax, which only arrives after we have wandered through a wealth of delightfully pretty sounds. Smith convincingly suggests that Saint-Saëns intended this allegedly unplayable piece for the self-playing instrument in the Grosvenor Gallery in London's New Bond Street. He does, however, dramatically prove that the work, at the hands of a true master, is far from unplayable. A fitting climax to a wonderful recorded series.

Marc Rochester