

The Cherwell Singers

present

The Saint-Sulpice Tradition

*Music from organists of the
church of Saint-Sulpice, Paris*

Dónal McCann

organ & piano

George de Voil

organ

James Brown

conductor

Sunday, 7th July 2024

Chapel of New College, Oxford

Programme

Cantique de Jean Racine
Ave verum
Ave Maria

Gabriel Fauré
Gabriel Fauré
Gabriel Fauré

Organ Solo:

Boléro de Concert

Alfred Lefébure-Wély

Quatre Motets

Marcel Dupré

O Salutaris
Ave Maria

Organ solo: Regina cæli (Dupré)

Tantum ergo
Laudate

Interval

Messe à 2 Chœurs et 2 Orgues

Charles-Marie Widor

Kyrie
Gloria

Organ solo: Cantabile from 6th Organ Symphony (Widor)

Sanctus
Benedictus
Agnus Dei

Madrigal

Gabriel Fauré

The audience is asked not to applaud within the groups of pieces.

Dónal McCann
George de Voil
James Brown

main organ & piano
second organ
conductor

The Saint-Sulpice Tradition

Music from organists of the church of Saint-Sulpice, Paris

With the eyes of the world on Paris this summer for the Olympic Games, the Cherwell Singers pay tribute to the musical traditions of one of the most monumental Parisian churches, the church of Saint-Sulpice.

For just over one hundred years the position of organist was held by two great organist composers, Charles-Marie Widor, and Marcel Dupré, and our concert includes Widor's grand setting of the mass for choir and two organs, as well as the four sacred motets of his pupil, Marcel Dupré.

2024 also marks the centenary of the death of Gabriel Fauré, who held the position of choirmaster briefly at Saint-Sulpice while Widor was organist. We shall also therefore be featuring some of his choral works, including the much-loved *Cantique de Jean Racine*. The famous Cavaillé-Coll organ of Saint-Sulpice is regarded as that organ builder's masterpiece, but Dónal McCann, who will be making his final concert appearance as assistant organist at New College with this concert, will be exploring the full tonal possibilities of the impressive New College organ in solo works, as well as when accompanying the choir.

If you can't travel to Paris this summer then let the Cherwell Singers bring Paris to you.

James Brown

Notes

Paris is notable for its great churches, several of which are indistinguishable from cathedrals. Saint-Sulpice is one of the largest, being only slightly smaller than the cathedral of Notre-Dame-de-Paris.

Grand churches with exceptional organs naturally require and attract great musicians: Couperin (St-Gervais), Franck (St-Clotilde), Saint-Saens (La Madeleine), Vienne (Notre-Dame), Duruflé (St-Étienne-du-Mont), Messiaen (Sainte-Trinité) being some examples over the years. The church of Saint-Sulpice was associated with the four composers in this concert: Lefébure-Wély, Fauré, Widor, and Dupré.

These churches are also notable for having two organs, a large one at the west end of the nave (the “orgue de tribune”), and a smaller one near the choir stalls (the “orgue de chœur”) – 24 Paris churches have orgues de chœur. This pattern is not uncommon elsewhere in Europe, but is not used in Britain where the west end very often has a large stained-glass window which an organ would obscure. In Paris in particular it became usual for a composer to write at least one mass setting using two organs for accompaniment, starting with Gounod and Saint-Saens, and continuing via Widor and Vienne to Langlais (in 1951).

The Composers

The earliest of our composers is **Louis-James Alfred Lefébure-Wély** (1817-1869). He was closely associated with the organ builder Aristide Cavaillé-Coll, many of whose organs he inaugurated. He was organist at several Parisian churches, ending up at St-Sulpice in 1863. At the church of La Madeleine in 1849 he had organised the music for Frédéric Chopin’s funeral, including arrangements for organ of piano pieces by Chopin. He was most famous as a virtuoso organist and improviser, but was also criticised for not being serious enough; his compositions are mostly not remembered, except for a number of popular organ pieces.

Charles-Marie Widor (1844-1924) was also a friend of Cavaillé-Coll, who had advised his family on his education. He was appointed “provisional organist” of St-Sulpice in 1870, following the death of Lefébure-Wély, and remained in that position until his retirement in 1933; there is no record that his post was ever officially made permanent! In 1890 Widor succeeded Franck as professor of organ at the Paris Conservatoire, later becoming professor of composition, where he taught famous musicians such as Louis

Vierne, Darius Milhaud, Edgard Varèse, and Albert Schweitzer. His main organ works are called “Symphonies”, and the concluding Toccata from the fifth of these is one of the best-known of all organ pieces. But he did also write less well-known music in other genres.

The exception in our line-up tonight is **Gabriel Urbain Fauré** (1845-1924), who was never organist of St-Sulpice. From 1871 to 1874, however, he was Choirmaster at St-Sulpice, which entailed playing the orgue de chœur while Widor played the orgue de tribune. There are stories of how during services they would improvise together, each trying to throw the other off their stride! Fauré had been taught by Saint-Saens, and remained friends with him, and after leaving St-Sulpice he became Saint-Saens’s deputy at La Madeleine. Although a very fine organist, Fauré never wrote for the organ, as he preferred the piano with its greater scope for subtlety.

Marcel Jean-Jules Dupré (1886-1971) grew up with a house organ built for his father by Cavaillé-Coll. His father and both of his grandfathers were organists and friends of the organ builder. At the Paris Conservatoire he studied with Vierne (organ) and Widor (composition). He went on to tour widely as a concert organist, being sponsored in the USA by John Wanamaker, and playing the famous organ in his Philadelphia store. Later he taught the organ at the Conservatoire (with famous pupils such as Alain, Langlais, Demessieux, and Messiaen), and he also served briefly as director. On Widor’s retirement from St-Sulpice, Dupré was appointed as his teacher’s successor, holding the post from 1934 till his death. The greater part of his composition focussed on the organ, and he was above all a remarkable improviser.

The Organs

Very often organs get rebuilt and modified rather than supplied from new; but some builders impress their own character even on an old organ to the extent that it is considered simply as theirs. **Aristide Cavaillé-Coll** (1811-1899) was one such builder; he is considered to have defined the romantic French organ in his instruments, and rebuilt or supplied new the organ of many French cathedrals, great churches, and even smaller churches and homes. He also exported organs, supplying several to British buildings, such as Manchester Town Hall and Paisley Abbey.

Both the organs in St-Sulpice are now described as Cavaillé-Coll organs, though both were rebuilds of existing instruments. The main west-end organ was originally built by the baroque master builder François-Henri Clicquot (1732-1790), the last of an extensive organ-building family, and

was his greatest instrument. But Cavaillé-Coll's rebuild was such that the "new" organ was then considered to be *his* masterpiece. Although not as large as the organs of Notre-Dame and St-Eustache, it is still a 5-manual monster. The organ here in New College is by no means in a similar style; but it was also revolutionary when built in 1969, and is fully capable of handling tonight's music effectively.

The orgue de chœur was a fairly recent instrument by a minor builder when Cavaillé-Coll rebuilt the orgue de tribune, and he returned just five years later to give it matching treatment and to stamp his name on it. Tonight, its place is taken by a computer organ using sounds sampled from the organ of the small cathedral in Oloron-Sainte-Marie in southern France, which is virtually identical to the orgue de chœur in St-Sulpice.

The Music

Our first piece, the *Cantique de Jean Racine* (1865) was written while Fauré was still at school (a specialist music school), and won the first prize in that year's composition contest. The original accompaniment was for strings and organ (which Fauré played), but he subsequently made several other arrangements of it.

Verbe égal au Très-Haut, notre unique espérance,
Jour éternel de la terre et des cieux,
De la paisible nuit nous rompons le silence:
Divin Sauveur, jette sur nous les yeux.
Répands sur nous le feu de Ta grâce puissante;
Que tout l'enfer fuie au son de Ta voix;
Dissipe le sommeil d'une âme languissante
Qui la conduit à l'oubli de Tes lois!
Ô Christ! sois favorable à ce peuple fidèle,
Pour Te bénir maintenant rassemblé;
Reçois les chants qu'il offre à Ta gloire immortelle,
Et de Tes dons qu'il retourne comblé.

Word of the Highest, our only hope,
Eternal day of earth and the heavens,
We break the silence of the peaceful night;
Saviour Divine, cast your eyes upon us!

Pour on us the fire of your powerful grace,
That all hell may flee at the sound of your voice;
Banish the slumber of a weary soul,
That brings forgetfulness of your laws!

O Christ, look with favour upon your faithful people
Now gathered here to praise you;
Receive their hymns offered to your immortal glory;
May they go forth filled with your gifts.

In 1877 Fauré had become choirmaster of La Madeleine where he provided suitable motets for the choir. Our next two pieces were written just before he took over as organist at La Madeleine.

Ave verum (1894) is one of a pair of motets for female chorus and organ.

Ave, verum corpus natum
de Maria Virgine:
vere passum, immolatum
in cruce pro homine:
cuius latus perforatum
unda fluxit cum sanguine:
esto nobis praegustatum,
mortis in examine.
O Jesu dulcis, O Jesu pie,
O Jesu Fili Mariae,
Tu nobis miserere mei. Amen.

Hail the true body, born
from the Virgin Mary:
You who truly suffered, sacrificed
on the cross for the sake of humanity.
From whose pierced flank
flowed water and blood:
Be a foretaste for us
in the trial of death.
O sweet, O merciful,
O Jesus, Son of Mary,
Have mercy on me. Amen.

Ave Maria (1895) is one of a pair of sacred songs for solo voice.

Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum;
benedicta tu in mulieribus,
et benedictus fructus ventris tui, Jesus.
Sancta Maria, Mater Dei,
ora pro nobis peccatoribus,
nunc et in hora mortis nostrae. Amen.

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee;
blessed art thou among women,
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.
Holy Mary, Mother of God,
pray for us sinners,
now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

The *Boléro de Concert* was written by Lefébure-Wély for a student who played the harmonium – an instrument which was much favoured by French composers of the time. The score also indicates performance on an organ without pedals. The piece was arranged later for a wind ensemble.

Although Dupré's *Quatre Motets* were published as a set in 1917, it is unlikely that they were designed to be sung as a set; the keys are unrelated, one has a single vocal line, and two have two organ parts. Nevertheless, there is no harm in presenting them as a group in a concert setting, not least given the rousing nature of the fourth which makes a nice climax.

Dupré's setting of *O salutaris* is lyrical and unexpectedly sensual:

O salutaris Hostia,
Quae caeli pandis ostium:
Bella premunt hostilia,
Da robur, fer auxilium.

O saving Victim, opening wide
The gate of Heaven to man below;
Our foes press hard on every side;
Thine aid supply; thy strength bestow.

For *Ave Maria*, Dupré provides a setting which is dark and sombre, rather than bright and innocent as the unison high voices would suggest. At the words “ora pro nobis” you may even detect premonitions of Poulenc.

(words as above)

The organ solo *Regina cæli* is a calm meditation on the Marian antiphon *Regina cæli* which is used from Easter Sunday to Pentecost. It is one of Dupré’s last works, and shows its modernity in harmonic adventurousness in spite of its calm.

The enigmatic setting (with two organs) of *Tantum ergo* seems to be a deliberate change from typical settings of these words:

Tantum ergo sacramentum
Veneremur cernui,
et antiquum documentum
novo cedat ritui.
Præstet fides supplementum
sensuum defectui.

Genitori genitoque
laus et jubilatio,
Salus, honor, virtus quoque
sit et benedictio!
Procedenti ab utroque
compar sit laudatio!
Amen.

Down in adoration falling,
Lo! the Sacred Host we hail,
Lo! o’er ancient forms departing
Newer rites of grace prevail;
Faith for all defects supplying,
Where the feeble senses fail.

To the Everlasting Father,
And the Son Who reigns on high
With the Holy Ghost proceeding
Forth from Each eternally,
Be salvation, honour, blessing,
Might, and endless majesty.
Amen.

Laudate Dominum is an uninhibited outburst of praise with the main organ contributing toccata-like interludes while the smaller organ supports the choir in this uplifting conclusion to the group.

Laudate Dominum, omnes gentes; laudate eum, omnes populi.

Quoniam confirmata est super nos misericordia ejus, et veritas Domini manet in aeternum.

O praise the Lord, all ye nations: praise him, all ye people.

For his merciful kindness is great toward us: and the truth of the Lord endureth for ever.

Widor’s *Messe à 2 Chœurs et 2 Orgues* was intended for liturgical use, one choir’s part being sung by the students of the seminary associated with the church, the other by the church choir (tonight the seminarians’ part is also sung by the choir). It has a grandeur that matches the church of Saint-Sulpice and reinforces the splendour of the liturgy, but is musically straightforward so as to fit the dignity of the service while not distracting from it. The orgue de chœur accompanies the choir, while the main organ provides interludes and additional colour and commentary.

Kyrie eleison.
Christe eleison.
Kyrie eleison.

Lord, have mercy;
Christ, have mercy;
Lord, have mercy.

Gloria in excelsis Deo.

Et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis.

Laudamus te. Benedicimus te.

Adoramus te. Glorificamus te.

Gratias agimus tibi propter magnam gloriam tuam.

Domine Deus, Rex caelestis, Deus Pater omnipotens.

Domine Fili unigenite, Iesu Christe.

Domine Deus, Agnus Dei, Filius Patris.

Qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.

Qui tollis peccata mundi, suscipe deprecationem nostram.

Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris, miserere nobis.

Quoniam tu solus Sanctus. Tu solus Dominus.

Tu solus Altissimus, Iesu Christe.

Cum Sancto Spiritu, in gloria Dei Patris. Amen.

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of good will.

We praise you. We bless you. We adore you. We glorify you.

We give you thanks for your great glory.

Lord God, king of heaven, God the Father almighty,

Lord, only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ,

Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father,

you who take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us;

you who take away the sins of the world, receive our prayer;

you who sit at the right hand of the Father, have mercy on us.

For you only are holy. You only are Lord. You only are most high, Jesus Christ,
with the Holy Spirit, in the glory of God the Father. Amen.

The ***Cantabile*** from Widor's 6th Organ Symphony provides a moment of calm reflectiveness, and is often called his most beautiful slow movement. Tonight it fills the gap which liturgically would contain the offertory.

Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus,
Dominus Deus Sabaoth.
Pleni sunt coeli et terra gloria tua.
Osanna in excelsis.

Holy, holy, holy
Lord God of hosts.
Heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.

Benedictus qui venit
in nomine Domini.
Osanna in excelsis.

Blessed is he who comes
in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, dona nobis pacem.

Lamb of God, you who take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.

Lamb of God, you who take away the sins of the world, grant us peace.

At the end of the mass, the priest sends the congregation out into the world. In the same spirit, we are ending this concert of religious music with a secular item: Fauré's *Madrigal* (1883).

Fauré had a liking for the poems of Paul Armand Silvestre (1837-1901), and set a number of them. This one, simply titled *Pour un chœur alterne*, comes from his collection *La chanson des heures*. With its theme of young men and women accusing each other of selfishness and cruelty in affairs of the heart, Fauré set it as a mischievous wedding present for his friend and former pupil André Messager. The song has the wittiness and suggestiveness of a speech by the best man at a wedding.

The opening line of the music strongly suggests two similar themes by J. S. Bach (the subject of the fugal opening of Cantata 38; also that of fugue 8 of the first book of the Well-Tempered Klavier) which may have had some private significance for the two friends.

(Les jeunes gens)

Inhumaines qui, sans merci,
Vous raillez de notre souci,
Aimez ! Aimez quand on vous aime !

(Les jeunes filles)

Ingrats qui ne vous doutez pas
Des rêves éclos sur vos pas,
Aimez ! Aimez quand on vous aime !

(Les jeunes gens)

Sachez, ô cruelles Beautés,
Que les jours d'aimer sont comptés.
Aimez ! aimez quand on vous aime !

(Les jeunes filles)

Sachez, amoureux inconstants,
Que le bien d'aimer n'a qu'un temps.
Aimez ! aimez quand on vous aime !

(Ensemble)

Un même destin nous poursuit
Et notre folie est la même :
C'est celle d'aimer qui nous fuit,
C'est celle de fuir qui nous aime !

(The young men)

Inhuman women, who mercilessly
Mock our cares,
Love! Love when we love you!

(The young women)

Ungrateful men, who do not suspect
The dreams you provoke as you go,
Love! Love when we love you!

(The young men)

Know, O cruel beauties,
That the days of love are numbered.
Love! Love when we love you!

(The young women)

Know, fickle lovers,
That true love lasts a single season
Love! Love when we love you!

(All)

The same destiny pursues us
And our folly is the same:
It is loving those who flee us,
It is fleeing those who love us!

Biographies

Dónal McCann organ & piano

Originally from Belfast, Dónal read music at King's College, Cambridge, where he was an academic and organ scholar, and accompanied the choir in daily chapel services, as well as in recordings, broadcasts and extensive tours, including to America and Australia. Prior to this, Dónal was the Andrew Lloyd Webber Scholar at Eton College, where he gained the FRCO with the Limpus Prize, subsequently being nominated for the Silver Medal of the Worshipful Company of Musicians. The following year he won the inaugural Dame Gillian Weir Medal at the Northern Ireland International Organ Competition.

Dónal studied piano at the Royal Irish Academy of Music in Dublin, and organ with Professor Gerard Gillen at St Mary's Pro Cathedral. He has performed as a soloist with the Ulster Orchestra and the Academy of Ancient Music, and has given many recitals in the UK and abroad.

He is currently Assistant Organist at New College, Oxford. In September he moves to Winchester College as Director of Chapel Music.

George de Voil organ

George is a versatile conductor, working with a range of ensembles in and around London. He is Director of Music at St James's, Sussex Gardens since 2015, and has revitalised the distinguished musical tradition of this church. For six years George was Director of Chapel & Choral Music at Wellington College, taking the Chapel Choir on tours to Spain, France, and Germany. He now directs the choir of Strawberry Hill House in London, and he is delighted to have been entrusted with the directorship of Wokingham Choral Society.

A prizewinning Fellow of the Royal College of Organists, with a first-class degree from Oxford University, George has broadcast on BBC Radio 3 and Radio 4, and given organ concerts across the UK and Europe.

James Brown conductor

James Brown was organ scholar of Girton College, Cambridge before doing further study of organ with Lionel Rogg at the Geneva Conservatoire, Switzerland. After two years as Guest Artist in Residence at the First United Methodist Church, Lubbock, Texas, USA, he returned to England where he was Organist of Dean Close School.

In 2006 James moved to Oxford where he is Organist of the historic University Church, and teaches organ at Abingdon and New College Schools as well as pursuing freelance work as an organist and pianist. He is also a tenor lay clerk in the choir of New College, and organist at St John's College. In 2023 he was appointed Director of Music at Mansfield College.

James has given recitals in the UK, USA, Belgium and Switzerland, and appeared on both BBC radio and television. He also performs solo classical piano recitals for Cunard, P&O, and Fred Olsen cruise lines, and appeared as the solo classical artist on the Cunard flagship Queen Mary 2 twice in 2023.

James has been conducting the Cherwell Singers since 2007.

The Cherwell Singers

Soprano

Sian Cattell
Janet Johnson
Stephanie Garner
Sreya Rao
Elina Screen
Eve-Marie Wenger

Alto

Virginia Allport
Elizabeth Kreager
Ann Leggett
Jenny Ayres
Wendy Morris
Anna Orłowska

Tenor

William Harpin
Nathan Mulcock
Simon Murray

Bass

David Gillespie
Paul Hodges
Simon Jones
Brian Leach
Kieran Suchet

If you are interested in joining us, please contact James Brown at:
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Please visit our web site to learn more about the choir, and listen to some of our recordings online. Use the web form to register yourself on our email list, to ensure you receive notification and full details of future concerts.

www.cherwellsingers.org