

The New Criterion

Dispatch July 06, 2021 10:00 am

For the organ, old and new

by Jay Nordlinger

There is nothing like hearing an organ in a church—or, perhaps better, in a cathedral. Recordings and videos don't cut it. But they are second-best, and they can be very satisfying, especially if you have good speakers.

So maybe they do "cut it," in a sense.

The Cathedral of St. John the Divine, in New York City, has been offering a music series, online, called *Tuesdays at 6*. I would like to fasten on an organ recital played on June 22, by Raymond Nagem. He is on the cathedral's staff, and teaches at the Manhattan School of Music as well. He himself studied at Yale, Juilliard, and elsewhere. He is a considerable musician.

On his program were five works, of which I would like to discuss two: one old, one new. Let's begin with the new.

It is by Edward Dean, an Englishman born in 1991. He graduated from the Royal College of Music, London, and has served as an organist in Oslo, Paris, and other cities. He now works at Holy Trinity in Sloane Square (again, London).

His piece, premiered in 2018, is called *His Genuflections Musicks*. An awkward title, certainly for those not familiar with the relevant lingo. The piece relates the experience of the genuflector. It is in three movements, whose headings tell the story: "Reverently, and without hesitation, he kneels"; "A vision of higher things (A Sarabande)"; and "Content, he rises."

The piece is understated (British, you might say); intelligent; well constructed; and affecting. In short, a winner. It certainly conveys what the composer intends. Would we feel this way if we weren't steered by those headings? Of course not—but so it is with a lot of music.

Dean's piece is relatively brief, and when it ended, I had a thought I almost never have, especially about new pieces: *Could have been longer; was almost too short*. I wanted to hear the piece again, which, of course, you can, with this marvel, YouTube.

Raymond Nagem ended his recital with Bach, first making remarks to the audience. He usually *begins* recitals with Bach, he said. You go from old to new. But some pieces, he said, can't be followed by anything. And this is true of Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D minor, bwv 538.

The one transcribed and conducted by Stokowski? Made famous in the movie *Fantasia*? No, that's the Toccata and Fugue in D minor, bwv 565. It is probably the most famous organ piece in the world. There is a debate about whether it's by Bach. I will not wade into that debate, here and now.

I'm barely over the discovery that "Bist du bei mir" —that perfect song—is not by Bach but by a man named Gottfried Heinrich Stölzel.

The *other* Toccata and Fugue in D minor—bwv 538—is known as the "Dorian." Mr. Nagem thinks it's a "much better piece of music" than bwv 565. Without getting into *that* debate, either, the "Dorian" is no doubt a masterpiece, standing out even in the Bach catalogue.

As he spoke, Nagem pointed out that the fugue in the "Dorian" is austere—on the surface, that is. Yet beneath the surface, there is great emotion, great passion. So true. And the organist played it that way, magnificently—overwhelmingly. The second it was over, I wanted to listen to it again. And did.

Let me offer a footnote, please: Bidding farewell to the audience, Nagem said, "Stay safe and may God bless you all." To my ear, he said this with complete sincerity, which was refreshing. Need a church musician be a believer? No. Many have not, and very good ones, too. But I figure, it can't hurt.

Jay Nordlinger is a Senior Editor at *National Review*.

His podcast with *The New Criterion*, titled "Music for a While," can be found [here](#).