

2020 VIERNE COMPLETE ORGAN WORKS

# SAMUEL LIBRA

*Associate Cathedral Organist*

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24 Pièces en style libre, op. 31

Louis Vierne

Livre I

1870–1937

Préambule

Cortège

Complainte

Épitaphe

Prélude

Canon

Méditation

Idylle mélancolique

Madrigal

Rêverie

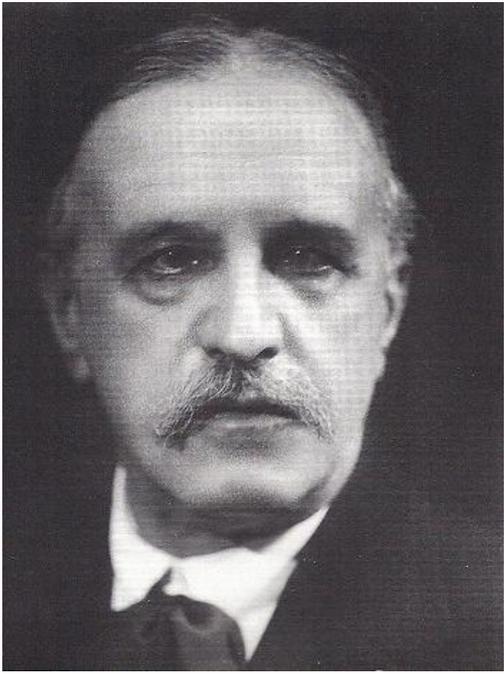
Canzona

Divertissement

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**Louis Victor Jules Vierne** was born on October 8, 1870 in the ancient city of Poitiers in central France. *I came into the world almost blind on account of which my parents felt a very keen chagrin: because of this fact, I was surrounded by a warm and continual tenderness which very early predisposed me to an almost unhealthy sensitivity... This was also to follow me all my life, and was to become the cause of intense joys and inexpressible sufferings.* (Louis Vierne: “Journals”) Vierne’s musical talents were soon recognized by his maternal uncle, Charles Colin, a professor of oboe at the Paris Conservatoire, and an accomplished organist as well. Colin undertook the boy’s first instruction in music, and instilled in him the dream of one day studying with the revered César Franck at the Paris Conservatoire.

Having undergone several operations which restored some sight to the young boy, it was nonetheless decided that he should learn to read braille. In 1881, Vierne became a student at the *Institut National des Jeunes Aveugles* (National Institute for Blind Youths) in Paris. Music instruction formed a central part of the famous school’s curriculum – each student was required to learn to play the piano and an additional orchestral instrument (Vierne was assigned the viola), and to sing in a choir. Instruction was provided by some of the finest professional musicians in the country, in effect turning the Institute into a preparatory conservatory with a rigorous yet effective course of study. Vierne achieved his early dream of becoming a student at the Paris Conservatoire upon his graduation in 1890. Alas, only a few short weeks later, César Franck died.



Fresh from the immense success of the second set of four symphonies, Charles-Marie Widor was appointed as Franck's successor, where he inherited a class of students still grieving the recent death of their beloved maître César Franck. The reservation the class held for their new master soon dissipated with their realization of Widor's mastery of the organ, and the high demands, strict but always tempered with kindness, that he placed on his students. He became much like a father-figure to Vierne, and was soon giving him private lessons in composition in addition to organ.

Through the 1890s, Widor did much to encourage Vierne's budding career. He commissioned and published Vierne's opus 1, a charming Allegretto for organ, and soon had Vierne assisting him with the preparatory students in his organ class as well as duties at the great organ at St. Sulpice. The year 1900 brought the death of Eugène Sergent, organist of the Cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris for fifty-one years, and the latest of a long string of strikingly mediocre musicians that had served the cathedral since the late 18th century. With the strong encouragement of Widor, Vierne

became one of ninety-eight candidates for the position, and after a long and exhaustive competition emerged as the unanimous choice of the committee comprised of the greatest musicians of the day. Upon assuming his new position, Vierne found intense inspiration not only in his surroundings, but especially in the magnificence of the organ, which had been completely rebuilt by Aristide Cavallé-Coll during 1863–68 and, along with St. Sulpice, numbered amongst the famous builder's most significant masterpieces. Vierne remained in service at Notre-Dame literally to the end of his life, suffering a fatal stroke at the console during his 1,750th recital on June 2, 1937.

— Joseph Adam

Vierne composed his 24 Pieces in Free Style, op. 31, in the summer of 1913. By this point, he had been organist of Notre-Dame for over 10 years, inaugurated a number of important organs, and published his first three organ symphonies. Having risen to the first echelon of French organists, his contemporaries must have been clamoring for compositions less punishing than his monumental symphonies, which he obliged with these "free pieces," smaller in stature and less technically imposing. Vierne dedicated each of these works to one of his students, with the exception of the sentimental *Berceuse* ("lullaby") in the second volume, meant for his daughter Colette.

More modest than his previous works for organ, and the *Pièces de fantaisie* that would come later, opus 31 can be played either on organ or the harmonium. These instruments, built by French manufacturers such as Mustel and the like, were more robust than their American cousin, and could commonly be found in parishes that could not afford the grandeur of a great organ. These works, slight of scale they may appear, however, seem to cry out with a profundity of character that demands a colorful instrument of some size. With the disappearance of the harmonium from both the church and home, today these pieces are most often played on church organs, which may have been what Vierne truly intended all along.

Tonight's program features the first book—comprised of twelve pieces—of the collection.

*Préambule* opens the volume with great dignity. Less chromatic than most pieces in the set, it betrays Vierne's interest in modern harmonies. Alternating with diatonic sections, brief interludes introduce Wagner's famous "Tristan chord"—named for the eponymous hero of his opera *Tristan und Isolde*. *Cortège* maintains the solemn character, but injects a strong degree of pomp, as well as a dash of Wagnerian harmony and Vierne's chromatic flair.

Throughout Vierne's music, one finds occasional influences of the Russian music that was imported to France throughout the nineteenth century. The one instance in this collection is *Complainte*, which pits a theme in doubled octaves against a pedal point in the manuals—a technique he would employ to great effect again in *Hymne au soleil* from the 24 Pieces in Fantastic Style.

*Épithaphe* eulogizes Alphonse Schmitt, who had been Vierne's first student to assist him at Notre-Dame. *Prélude* is dedicated to an even more famous pupil of Vierne, although not known principally as an organist: the famous pedagogue and teacher of Aaron Copland, Nadia Boulanger. The work's graceful tune is reminiscent of her own three pieces for organ, which showed her to be a master of simple, effortless elegance. Another famed organist, Henri Mulet, is the dedicatee of *Canon*, a straightforward work with two imitative voices.

*Méditation* shows Vierne's mastery of chromatic melody, with winding half-steps that often lead to unexpected resolutions. In a similar vein, *Idylle mélancolique* incorporates a singing diatonic melody with chromatic accompaniment. It is dedicated to another of Vierne's assistants at Notre-Dame, Louis Andlauer. Unbeknownst to Vierne, it seems to foreshadow the dedicatee's death, which would come just a few short years later as a soldier in the First World War.

*Madrigal*, an uncommon title for instrumental works—let alone in the twentieth century—is a charming, but petite work. Its initial naiveté is quickly erased by augmented chords and chromatic sequences, but returns to its easy charm, ending much as it began. In total contrast is *Rêverie*—more brooding than dreamy—which wanders through a number of themes, each with their own character. The commanding central section yields to earlier tunes in the last portion, unexpectedly concluding with an optimistic major chord.

*Canzona* stands apart from the other works of the collection with its unique trio texture. As such, it is perhaps the only work of the book that is impossible to satisfactorily render on a harmonium. Its central theme is first presented on a trumpet stop against contrasting accompaniment, which is later inverted in the second section, before returning to the original orientation in the finale.

*Divertissement* is the most brilliant piece in this book, just as its dedicatee, Joseph Bonnet, was one of the shining stars of his generation of organists. A brief, but thrilling, scherzo, it rushes along in a flurry of perpetual scales. Even its climax, growing as the reed stops are added, never slacks in tempo, careening into the final, thunderous cadence.

— Samuel Libra

**SAMUEL LIBRA** is Associate Cathedral Organist at St. James Cathedral in Seattle, and a doctoral candidate in Organ Performance at the University of Washington as a student of Dr. Carole Terry. His research focuses on symphonic and keyboard music of 19th-century France and Belgium. In addition to his graduate studies, he has undertaken additional training on a grant from the UW with Jean-Baptiste Robin at the Royaumont Foundation and at the McGill Summer Organ Academy.

Samuel has given performances at a number of churches throughout the Puget Sound region and frequently enjoys collaborative performances, playing harpsichord and organ in choral, orchestral, and chamber works with a variety of Pacific Northwest ensembles. Such performances have included the St. James Cathedral Chamber Orchestra and Cantorei, ChoralSounds Northwest, reSound: A Northwest Chamber Ensemble, the Sammamish Symphony, Seattle Bach Choir, the Seattle Metropolitan Chamber Orchestra, and the Seattle Youth Symphony Orchestra.

Samuel is an active member of the American Guild of Organists and the Organ Historical Society, having been a Biggs Fellow at the latter's 2017 convention. For the AGO, he served on the Seattle Chapter board and presented several programs on various topics at their events. He was a faculty member of the 2019 Pipe Organ Encounter in Seattle, and Chair of the West Region of the AGO's Young Organists for the 2018–19 season. He is also Deputy Convention Coordinator for the 2022 AGO national convention in Seattle.

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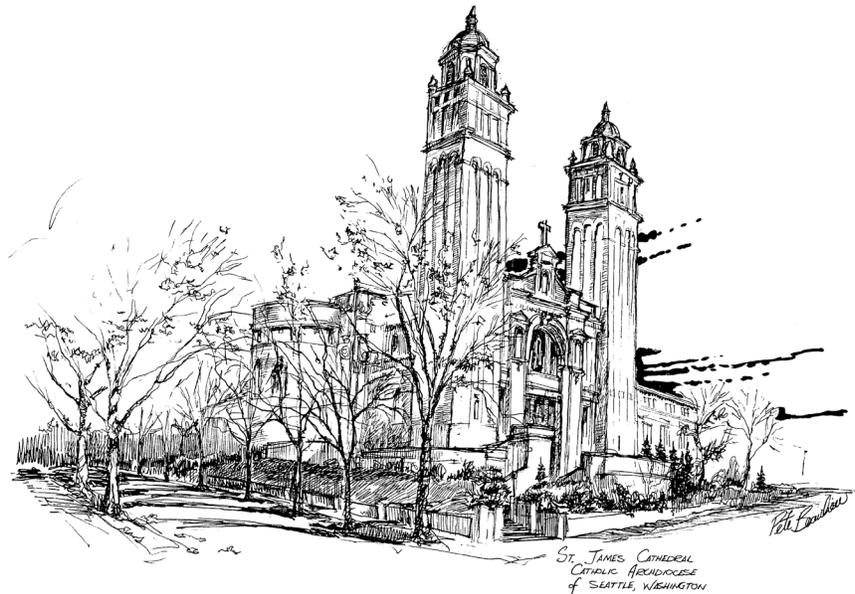
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Friday, July 31, 2020 at 6:30pm • Musical Prayer: Anne Sokol Philpott, *violin*; Samuel Libra, *organ*

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