

2020 VIERNE COMPLETE ORGAN WORKS

SAMUEL LIBRA

Associate Cathedral Organist

24 Pièces en style libre, op. 31

Louis Vierne

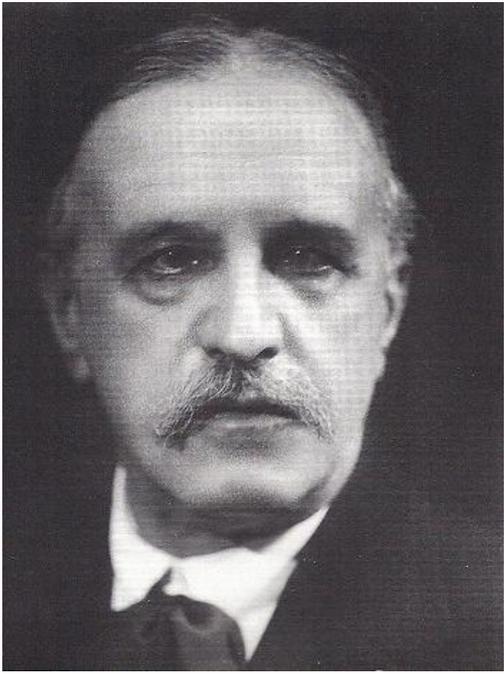
Livre II

1870–1937

Légende
Scherzetto
Arabesque
Choral
Lied
Marche Funèbre
Berceuse
Pastorale
Carillon
Élegie
Epithalame
Postlude

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 second book—comprised of twelve pieces—of the collection.

Légende depicts some sort of ancient fable, but does not tell us which one. Alternating between two simple themes, it creates the illusion of a forgotten folk-song. Schumann used a similar title for the central section of his Fantasy for Piano, op. 17, which sets an equally simple, pure melody. The *Scherzetto* turns the table, diverting from the lyricism of the opening piece to crisp timbres and pithy rhythms. Full of pianistic figurations, it requires an agile technique. Its dedicatee, Alexandre Cellier, went on to become a famous performer, and was

particularly noted for his transcriptions of orchestral works for the organ.

Arabesque is dedicated to a similarly famous pupil, Emile Bourdon. The piece, however, is something of a novelty in Vierne's corpus. Perhaps inspired by the two arabesques of Debussy, it is steeped in the harmonic language that would—somewhat infamously—come to be known as impressionism. Full of whole-tone scales and chordal planing, it is perhaps Vierne's only to commit so wholeheartedly to this style, especially so early in his career. Many of the Pieces in Fantasy Style (opp. 51–53, 55) would hearken back to this compositional language, but rarely in such a plainly audible manner.

French organists of the 19th- and 20th-centuries often used the *Choral* to refer a work in many-voiced, generally homophonic, counterpoint. Vierne's mentor—Charles-Marie Widor—peppered his organ symphonies with such pieces. His other teacher, César Franck, wrote three much more expansive “chorals,” embracing a variety of textures and styles, leading one to wonder exactly what was meant by that particular title. Vierne's piece seems to fall into the former category, but only in part. His sets a pair of themes in various key areas, building in the middle of the piece with added figuration and stops.

Lied is German for “song,” and there is a robust repertoire of *lieder* from the romantic composers such as Schubert, Schumann, and Brahms. Vierne imitates their style, setting a rather simple melody against a rocking accompaniment. By contrast, *Marche funèbre* shows none of this tunefulness, following instead in the French tradition of improvisation and the grand liturgical marches of the Second Empire style.

Berceuse is perhaps the most popular work of the whole collection. Based on the words to the classic French lullaby “*Do do, l'enfant do,*” it is dedicated to his daughter Colette, who was a young child when these pieces were composed. Its gentle swaying rhythm evokes the composer rocking his daughter to sleep. The following *Pastorale* is similarly pictorial, duetting between the flute and oboe in a bucolic scene. The sprightly middle section could be a sort of peasant dance, which returns at the conclusion of the piece.

Carillon is another favorite from this collection, fantastical variations on a bell peal. Its subject comes from the Longpont Abbey in Aisne, France, which has belonged to the famous Montesquiou family—different members being immortalized in the novels of Alexandre Dumas and Marcel Proust—since the early 19th-century. Avid patrons of the arts, they often cultivated relationships with notable authors, artists, and musicians. As a guest of the family, Vierne heard the distinctive peal of the abbey's bell tower. After he set it to music, the tower was lost in the First World War, as was his piece's dedicatee, his beloved brother, René.

The next two pieces are based in poetic forms, the *Élégie* and *Epithalame*. The former is dedicated to George Krieger, a young French organist of whom little seems to be known other than that he died in the First World War, like so many of Vierne's pupils, killed at the Battle of the Mortagne in 1914. The latter piece is dedicated to another lesser-known student, André Renoux, who went on to become organist of Notre-Dame-de-l'Assomption in Paris. The title—the French variant of the Latin word *epithalamium*—refers to a poem written for a bride on her wedding day. Why Vierne dedicated this to Renoux, a male pupil, is unclear.

The final piece in the collection is fittingly called *Postlude*. The work opens brusquely, stirring us from the gentle major-mode conclusion of the previous piece with a jarring, full B-minor chord. Rapid-fire arpeggios alternate with chordal interruptions until a new section takes over. The dynamic pulls down to *piano*, but the harmonic tension remains, especially as it is reinforced with more and more stops and the work progresses. Two final arpeggios end the piece as abruptly as it began in a beaming, bright B-major. — 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. He 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 various Cathedral and Pacific Northwest ensembles.

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St. James Cathedral ❖ Seattle

Friday Musical Prayer in the Cathedral

Join us each Friday evening at 6:30pm as our Cathedral Musicians and friends present meditative music to soothe the soul and bring a quiet end to a busy week.

October 2 ♦ Mark Hilliard Wilson, *guitar*

October 9 ♦ Danny Helseth, *euphonium*, with Joseph Adam, *organ*

October 16 ♦ Meaghan Guterman, *soprano*, with Joseph Adam, *organ & piano*

October 23 ♦ Paul Taub, *flute*

October 30 ♦ Eliza Woodyard, *soprano*, with Samuel Libra, *organ*

November 6 ♦ Mark Hilliard Wilson, *guitar*

November 13 ♦ John Carrington, *harp*

November 20 ♦ Alexander White, *trumpet*, with Joseph Adam, *organ*

The Cathedral Music website will have updates and additions to this schedule as it develops.

The complete organ works of Louis Vierne

The French composer Louis Vierne, organist of the Cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris from 1900 until his death in 1937, left us an invaluable legacy in his compositions for the organ. We continue our observance of the 150th anniversary of Vierne's birth with a survey of his music written for the King of Instruments. Each program is livestreamed at 7:00pm and is approximately forty minutes in length.

Thursday, October 1 ♦ Samuel Libra, Cathedral Associate Organist ♦ *24 Pieces in Free Style, Book II*

Tuesday, October 13 ♦ Joseph Adam, Cathedral Organist ♦ *Fantasia Pieces, Book I*

Wednesday, October 21 ♦ Joseph Adam, Cathedral Organist ♦ *Symphony No. 5 in A Minor*

Thursday, November 19 ♦ Samuel Libra, Cathedral Associate Organist ♦ *Symphony No. 4 in G Minor*

Tuesday, December 1 ♦ Joseph Adam, Cathedral Organist ♦ *Symphony No. 6 in B Minor*

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Chamber Music for strings and piano by Johannes Brahms

The chamber music of Johannes Brahms is among the most treasured and beloved music composed in the late 19th century. Join us in these programs, each featuring one of the sonatas written for strings and piano, with musicians from the Seattle Symphony Orchestra. Each program is livestreamed at 7:00pm, and is approximately forty-five minutes in length.

Tuesday, October 6 ♦ Rachel Swerdlow, *viola*, with Joseph Adam, *piano* ♦ Milhaud: *Sonata No. 1* ♦ Brahms: *Sonata in E-flat Major*, op. 120, no. 2

Tuesday, October 27 ♦ Walter Gray, *violoncello*, with Joseph Adam, *piano* ♦ Herbolsheimer: *Five Elegies for solo Cello* ♦ Brahms: *Sonata in F Minor*, op. 99

Tuesday, November 10 ♦ Roberta Hansen Downey, *violoncello*, with Joseph Adam, *piano* ♦ Clarke: *Sonata* ♦ Brahms: *Sonata in E Minor*, op. 38

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