

# Organ Recital

**Dr Nicole Marane**

St Patrick's Catholic Church,  
Mentone

10 July 2011

Reviewed by RJ Stove



On Sunday 10 July, an enthusiastic and large audience, including numerous organists, braved the miseries of Melbourne's nastiest winter afternoon thus far in 2011 – so cold, so rainy, and above all so windy that only King Lear could have loved it – to congregate at St Patrick's Catholic Church in the south-eastern suburb of Mentone. Drawing them thither was the Canberra-born Nicole Marane, who demonstrated the mettle and musicianship which have already earned her a doctorate from the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, upstate New York. Dr Marane, now Associate Director of Music at Atlanta's Peachtree Road United Methodist Church, provided some of the most flamboyant and gripping organ artistry to have been heard hereabouts for ages.

In a programme that stuck largely to post-1918 repertoire (the only exceptions being Bach's BWV550 *Prelude and Fugue in G*, beguiling arrangements of 'The Elephant' and 'The Cuckoo' from Saint-Saëns's *Carnival of the Animals*, and the 'Allegro Maestoso' from Vierne's

*Third Organ Symphony*), Dr Marane coaxed from the church's English-manufactured 1862 instrument so staggering an array of colours that one would have sworn she was using a French Romantic organ. Moreover, for sheer inspired unconventionality her choice of pieces matched her registrations.

We are almost never allowed to hear American works at Australian recitals, but Dr Marane hinted at the depths of our ignorance by including no fewer than four composers from the States: Powell Weaver and Joseph Clokey (both active between the wars), Pamela Decker (Arizona-domiciled professor), and William Bolcom. All except Bolcom had been hitherto unknown to this listener even by name, but all proved delightful novelties. Wheeler and Clokey showed a zoological turn of mind, the former being represented by a miniature called *The Squirrel*, the latter by a most onomatopoeic depiction of a purring and meowing cat. Both matched the animal magic of the Saint-Saëns extracts that immediately followed them.

The three Pamela Decker items, all based to some degree on tango rhythms, turned out to be if anything an even greater artistic success. From comments afterwards it became clear that they had made a popular hit too. Perhaps the best of them was the last: a voluptuous yet edgy *Tango for Tucson*, dating from 2002, and thus mercifully unrelated to the massacre which made world headlines in that city during January 2011. Bolcom's contribution put the hymn tune *Jesus Loves Me* through dissonant yet always mysterious and usually quiet paces.

Opening her recital with the desolate Vierne excerpt, through which she strode exuberantly like a petite blonde Transformer traversing downtown Chicago, Dr Marane proclaimed her panache from the first bars and never lost it. Towards the end of her hour-long concert, she included an ambitious

and fascinating 'Allegro Giocoso' from the *Organ Sonata in E Flat* by Sir Edward Bairstow, York Minster's master of music for more than three decades until his death in 1946. To anyone who has encountered Bairstow solely through a few gentle and refined Anglican anthems of his, this sonata extract will have come not only as a revelation but as rather a shock: the work of an English Vierne, lush chromatic and whole-tone harmonies everywhere, with a truly Gallic relish for succulent flutes and mixtures. As a grand finale, we were afforded the 'Allegro Deciso' from Dupré's *Evocation*. It sounded terrifyingly difficult, not least in the polyphonic soft sections which made delicious contrasts with the thudding, somewhat Brucknerian *Ländler* rhythms of the outer and central portions. Still, neither these nor anything else on the day presented Dr Marane with any discernible trouble.

It would be an injustice to conclude this review without complimenting the performer on her verbal as well as on her instrumental skills. Despite the disadvantages of her location – in a choir-loft at the church's rear, with her back to altar and audience alike – Dr Marane supplied comments both engaging and succinct about the music she played, in an accent that hovered pleasingly between Australian and American. Even when her microphone selfishly went on strike in mid-sentence (it later resumed proper functioning), she did not appear more than momentarily incommoded; and she continued, unflappable, like the veteran trouper she clearly is. On occasion a concert occurs which defies any hearer, however peevish, to fault it. Such a concert Dr Marane gave.