

The Genius of Saint-Sulpice

RJ Stove on Widor: a Life Beyond the Toccata



Widor: a Life Beyond the Toccata, John R Near, Eastman Studies in Music, University of Rochester Press, Rochester, New York State, 2011, £47.50

John R Near not only knows more about Charles-Marie Widor than any of his readers ever did. He probably knows more about Widor than Widor himself ever did.

That which H C Robbins Landon achieved on Haydn's behalf, David Cairns on Berlioz's, Jerrold Northrop Moore on Elgar's, and more recently John Tyrrell on Janáček's, Near has now achieved on Widor's. He has honoured his subject by combining powerfully muscular English prose with research so staggeringly comprehensive as to be what fashionable circles would call 'a game-changer.' Some of us have been studying musical activity during France's Third Republic for the better part of two decades. Yet even we will find that the present volume has new insights aplenty about the man who served as 'temporary' organist at the Parisian church of Saint-Sulpice for no fewer than sixty-three years.

Near loses no time in reminding us how recently Widor's creative talents were first done justice in the Anglophone world. Two generations ago the *Gramophone Classical Catalogue* included half a dozen recordings of the Toccata and very little else from Widor's pen. In a 1941 textbook, Columbia University musicologist Paul Henry Lang trashed the Widor organ symphonies (the only Widor works which any American of 1941 could possibly have heard, or seen in print) as 'contrapuntally belaboured products of a flat and scant musical imagination, the bastard nature of which is evident from the title alone.' The following bizarre assertion appeared, not in Norman Lebrecht's latest gossip-column, but in a 1975 number of the American Guild of Organists' house magazine: 'Sludge is an apt word to describe [Alexandre] Guilmant, Widor and the others'. Near himself, auditioning as an organ student in New England with an extract from Widor's Sixth Symphony, was primly told: 'We don't play Widor here; you know, he really didn't write good music.' That some among Widor's compatriots long remained equally sceptical about his artistic value is

confirmed by a 1965 remark from Versailles organist Georges Robert: 'Widor? Certainly he introduced innovations on the plane of instrumental technique, but his works mark too much his time period and he was wrong to make the organ a veritable symphonic instrument.' One wonders what more Widor would have needed to do in order to be taken seriously: jump off Saint-Sulpice's bell-tower, perhaps? Thanks to Near – who has been scrutinising Widor's life since the 1980s – wondering can now cease, while the esteem in which musicians as diverse as Puccini and Edgard Varèse held Widor's gifts becomes eminently understandable. *Widor: A Life Beyond the Toccata* will make readers want to blitz academic libraries in search of CDs devoted to Widor's oeuvre. (The absence both of a discography and of printed musical examples from Near's pages prompts regret.)

All the surviving information about Widor's emergence is here: his musical ancestry – 'I was born in an organ pipe,' he once jested – and the errors consistently perpetrated regarding his year of birth (1844, not his tombstone's 1845); his lessons in Belgium from virtuoso J N Lemmens; his friendly dealings with Liszt, the great organ-builder Aristide Cavaillé-Coll, and the aged Rossini; his enduring alliance with Albert Schweitzer; his Paris Conservatoire appointment in succession to César Franck. By 1920 Widor had become not only a universally respected teacher (of Darius Milhaud, Artur Honegger, Olivier Messiaen, Marcel Dupré, Louis Vierne, and Charles Tournemire, among others), but almost as venerated a historical monument as was Saint-Sulpice itself. A Legion of Honour member, he served as perpetual secretary of the Académie des Beaux-Arts, first director of the Fontainebleau Conservatoire Américain (whence the brilliant pedagogue Nadia Boulanger exercised so much of her influence), founder of Madrid's Casa Velasquez for young artists (the griefs of his old age included this building's destruction during the Spanish Civil War), and so on through line after line of eventual death-notices. One particularly charming photograph reproduced by Near shows Widor in company with French President Alexandre Millerand and Queen Marie of Romania; another depicts him receiving

congratulations in 1931 from Paris's Archbishop, Cardinal Verdier. Cornelia Otis Skinner, the poet and actress, visited Widor in his organ loft on her first journey to France, and unforgettably described the experience in her 1942 minor classic *Our Hearts Were Young And Gay*.

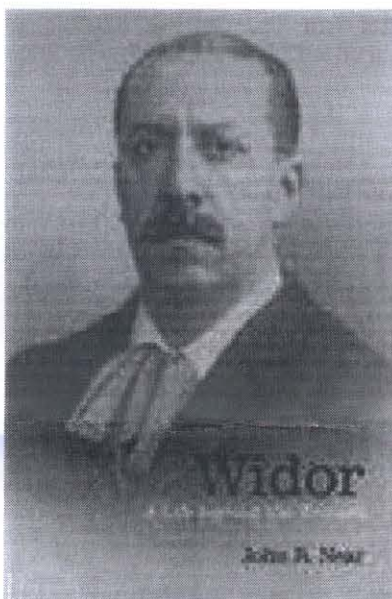
Despite his tireless dealings with the great and the good, Widor retained a predominantly down-to-earth and civil temperament, preferring wherever possible to show towards his antagonists sweet reason, rather than the habitual dyspepsia of a Saint-Saëns. Withal, he could administer a cat-scratch with the best of them, notably his swipe at Vincent d'Indy's expense: 'What a shame that such a man is not musical!' Unfailingly *mondain*, accustomed to associating alike with prime ministers (including Jules Ferry) and street-sweepers, he silenced a sugar merchant's aristocratic and truculent daughter with the mildly voiced query: 'Madame, may I dare to ask you to mingle in your conversation a little of that sugar which Monsieur votre père manufactures so well?'

Near also memorably recounts Widor's disputations with the Solesmes monks, leaving beholders to marvel afresh at the peculiar *ad hominem* dirtiness which fights over plainchant always seem to inspire (Widor likened the Solesmes chant edition's later stages to 'a water-colour course taught by the blind'). Subsequently Widor joined that small and happy band of men who live to see their own obituaries published: a Stockholm newspaper of 1905 insisted that he had been 'dead since 1887.' Actually he survived till 1937, physically weakened during his nineties by partial paralysis, but mentally impervious to time, and correcting sheet-music galleys until almost the end.

Of Franck, Debussy said, 'He did not know what it was to be bored'; of Widor, with his quenchless enthusiasm for all the arts, we can say the same. Unlike most Gallic musicians he visited Bayreuth for its opening season in 1876. Afterwards he publicly spoke of Wagner's achievements with admiration. In practical terms, though, he did what d'Indy, Emmanuel Chabrier, and Ernest Chausson all did: absorbed those elements of Wagner's style which looked inspirational, while jettisoning the rest. The tenacious myth of Wagner having turned an entire generation of Frenchmen into idolatrous zombies – whose brains could be restored only by prompt emergency action from Erik Satie and

Francis Poulenc – is long overdue for pensioning off. Few traces of Wagnerism mark the organ symphonies, which, notwithstanding the occasional Debussyan turn of phrase, come decidedly closer to Mendelssohn and Brahms in their convincing fusion of classical and romantic elements.

Already Near has given us the definitive printed edition of these symphonies (the versions that publishers issued in Widor's lifetime must now be regarded as hopelessly obsolete) and he explains at length in his book the composer's mania for revising. This mania he likens to the work methods of Bruckner and Stravinsky, though it had different origins from theirs. Neither Bruckner's profound fear of hostile critics, nor Stravinsky's concern for copyright renewals, governed Widor. Rather, a desire to tinker for tinkering's sake seems to have been uppermost in his mind. After 1914 he composed little in any medium, and much of what he did compose met a cool response, whether because it genuinely marked a decline in his powers or merely because (like his last stage work, *Nerto*, from 1924) it lacked the shock-value which Les Six and suchlike iconoclasts had led audiences to expect. Will we ever encounter again his 1895 opera *Les Pêcheurs de Saint-Jean*, which within a few years of its première had been staged in Marseilles, Rouen, Lyon, Nice, Avignon, Grenoble, Geneva, Antwerp, and Algiers as



well as Paris? Will we encounter anything else from his vast non-organ output, other than the few chamber compositions that now and then are revived?

If we do, much gratitude will be owed to Near's investigations. This biography is a pleasure to read and to own. Any organist who ignores it needs, in the immortal words of an American politician from long ago, 'not only his head but every part of his anatomy examined.'

R J Stove's book Cesar Franck: His Life and Times is scheduled for release by Scarecrow Press (Maryland) in November. A slightly different version of this article appeared in the Spring 2011 issue of The Organ (East Sussex).

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