

ADAM BRAKEL - ALBUM REVIEWS

“We are in the golden age of organ audio recordings. Here is an interestingly planned and beautifully executed recording with varied literature and superb CD booklet. The Six Etudes were performed by Demessieux in her debut recital and remain some of the most technically difficult pieces in the entire organ repertoire. Brakel plays these pieces not with shallow virtuosity but with total musical understanding of these pieces, which constantly make equal technical demands of both hands and feet. A “serious recording” does not, however, preclude “a fun recording.”

The real gems here include the Adagio from Herbert Nanney’s Sonata in E Minor. An important teacher who studied with Dupre, Nanney organized and directed the doctoral program in organ performance at Stanford University. By the time he retired in 1985 he had taught a generation of organists who went on to hold significant teaching positions and performance careers at American universities. Another gem on this recording is Joseph Bonnet’s Etude de Concert, op. 7, no. 2, published in 1910. This is a piece in the French symphonic tradition that bears a striking resemblance to the Gigout Scherzo in E-flat Major, played with lightness and clarity. Also included is Andrew Fletcher’s Cantilena from Five Miniatures for Organ (listed on the composer’s website as Five Meditations), where the signature soft registrations in which Austin always excelled are on full pp-p-mp display. Buy this CD! You will not be disappointed.” David Wagner – The Diapason

Sitting and listening to this new CD recording from Adam Brakel, reading the program notes, and listening to the quality of both the recorded sound and the playing, this reviewer could not help but think of the famous quotation from Dicken’s, A Tale of Two Cities: “*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief...*” In the last few months there have been rumors of the demise of the audio CD, reports that major record labels have been making plans for the all downloadable universe of the future, free of concept discs and unfettered by program notes. Yet to this reviewer’s perspective, we are in the golden age of organ audio recordings. Here is just another example of the interestingly planned and beautifully executed recording with varied literature coupled with both a performer and an instrument that are totally up to the demands of the project at hand.

The instrument is the enormous Austin Op. 2777 which dates from 1999. The 109 rank instrument is divided between a large chancel instrument of 67 ranks and a gallery organ of some 42 ranks. All stops appear on each of two identical four-manual consoles. It is a delight to have the full specification of each organ complete with “mechanicals”, included with this superb CD booklet. The booklet also has insightful and complete program notes. For any organist, it is fun to imagine making music on an instrument such as this, and also recreating the possible registrations while listening to the recording.

Many audio and recording engineers know of the challenges of recording the “King of Instruments,” and have been challenged with capturing the sound of a pipe organ and getting just the correct and optimal balance between room acoustics and the “presence” of the instrument. Recording engineer Ed Kelly (who is also the photographer for the booklet) should get an individual mention here for being able to achieve this delicate and often frustrating balance to perfection.

A “serious recording” does not however, preclude “a fun recording”. Real gems here Herbert Nanney’s Adagio from The Sonata in E Minor. An important teacher who studied with Dupré, Nanney organized and directed the doctoral program in organ performance at Stanford University. By the time he retired in 1985,

he had taught a generation of organists who went on to hold significant teaching positions and performance careers at American Universities and Adam Brakel's first mentor was John Walker at Duquesne University and one of Nanney's many students.

Another gem on this recording is Joseph Bonnet's Etude de Concert Op. 7 No.2, a work that is the second in his opus 7 published in 1910. This is a piece in the French symphonic tradition that bears a striking resemblance to the Gigout Scherzo in E Flat Major, played with lightness and clarity. Also included as music by Andrew Fletcher and his Cantilena from Five Miniatures for Organ (listed on the composer's website as Five Meditations), where the signature soft combinations in which Austin always excelled are on full pp-p-mp display.

The real gem of this recording is the Six Etudes by the brilliant French organist and protégé of Marcel Dupre, Jeanne Demessieux. It was of Demessieux that Duruflé said "...all organists play the pedals like elephants next to Demessieux". Dupré mentored her above all others until there was a break in the relationship that has remained shrouded in mystery to this very day. No one really knows the true reasons, but Dupré refused to speak with her for the rest of her life, although Demessieux continued to maintain a devotion to her teacher.

The Six Etudes were performed by Demessieux in her debut recital and remain some of the most technically difficult pieces in the entire organ repertoire. Brakel plays these pieces not just with shallow virtuosity but with total musical understanding of these demanding pieces that constantly make equal technical demands simultaneously between both hands and feet.

This is a superb recording and another fine presentation from Raven. One of the most important aspects of an organ recording is hearing repertoire that fits well with the instrument. This is a challenge for all organists and it works beautifully in this situation.