

# Christopher Houlihan Vierne Marathon

## A review of the New York recital

Jonathan B. Hall

### Vierne 2012

June 2, Church of the Ascension, New York City

June 15–16, St. John's Cathedral, Denver

July 6–7, Rockefeller Chapel, Chicago

July 19–20, Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, Los Angeles

August 3–4, Church of the Gesù, Montreal

August 18, Church of the Incarnation, Dallas

On Saturday, June 2, Christopher Houlihan kicked off his six-city tour of the six Vierne symphonies with two recitals at the Church of the Ascension on Fifth Avenue in New York City. This church has been since 2010 the home to a large and very successful Pascal Quoirin organ. There is no doubt that the program performed on it that day will stand as one of the greatest of his career.

There were two recitals with three symphonies apiece. First, we heard the odd-numbered symphonies. After a leisurely dinner break, the even-numbered were offered. In addition, a shorter intermission was inserted before the final symphony on each program. The programming design is astute, as it balances early, middle, and late works; the recitals were well matched in terms of sheer musical heft.

A native of Somers, Connecticut, Houlihan earned a bachelor's degree at Trinity College in Hartford, where he studied with John Rose, and a master's degree at the Juilliard School, studying with Paul Jacobs. He is Artist-in-Residence at St. Ignatius of Antioch Episcopal Church in New York. During concert season 2010–2011 he performed at two AGO regional conventions, made a European tour, and inaugurated the new pipe organ at the Sondheim Performing Arts Center in Iowa. His first recording, made after his sophomore year in college, was reviewed by David Wagner (*THE DIAPASON*, January 2009, pp. 19–20). An interview with Houlihan was published in the November 2011 issue of *THE DIAPASON* ("A Conversation with Christopher Houlihan," by Joyce Johnson Robinson). Christopher Houlihan is represented by Phillip Truckenbrod Concert Artists.

To play all six Vierne symphonies is a formidable undertaking, as anyone who has learned even one of them will understand. The sheer audacity of the project—all the greater, as it comes from a man not yet twenty-five years old—is enough to elicit several bravos. The recitals themselves elicited quite a few more.

I arrived at Ascension about fifteen minutes early. It was a warm day, and I soon shed my blazer. I'd chosen a seat discreetly removed from the bulk of the audience, in order to write uninhibitedly without raising curiosity or causing distraction. Dennis Keene, the gracious music director of Ascension, politely remanded me to an acoustically ideal seat in the center of the nave. Before the recital began, Keene was visible in the narthex and aisles, warmly greeting audience members. He was clearly relishing his role as host, and was a most gracious and friendly presence.

There was an attractive *Vierne 2012* booklet, listing the entire tour itinerary, the ordering of the recitals, and biographical information on both Vierne and Houlihan. Also, a smaller printed program gave the history and specifications of the Manton Memorial Organ, as the Quoirin at Ascension is officially called. (See *THE DIAPASON*, November 2011, pp. 1, 30–32.) Finally, I was also given a button to wear, with the same



Christopher Houlihan (photo credit: Ali Winberry)

tour logo as on the booklet. Others in the audience were wearing another pin, with the words HOULI FAN in large letters. I was struck at the forthrightness and cleverness of the marketing side of the tour, which extends to a very savvy Internet presence as well. Many friends and well-wishers of Mr. Houlihan were in attendance.

It was just a minute or two after three o'clock—on the very day when, seventy-five years before, Louis Vierne had died at the console—that Dr. Keene announced the artist, and Christopher Houlihan emerged to warm applause. He began without spoken preliminaries, and launched into the First Symphony.

### First Symphony

From the first notes, on the Swell, I was impressed. The opening movement was played with the dignity and restraint called for. The registrations were expert: silky-smooth crescendi and decrescendi, complete mastery of the swell-boxes. The mutual chemistry of organist, composer, and instrument was apparent from the start.

It must be acknowledged that not everything was perfect in subsequent movements. In particular, I think we may envision Vierne's characteristic chromaticism as carrying the emotional content of the music; but the form of the movements, and in particular the rhythmic aspect of the music, provide a vital intellectual balance. One of the most important functions of Vierne's characteristic ornamented *ostinati*, for example, is precisely to provide relief and emotional distance, while building up positive energy. Absent these, we are apt to find ourselves in a sea of existential chromatic anxiety.

At certain moments, this rhythmic element was not yet as completely well-controlled as it might have been. Even in a lighter and lyrical movement, such as the *pastorale*—where the singing line was exquisite, and the registrations both authentic and really beautiful—I missed the rhythmic shaping that would have strengthened what is otherwise, honestly, a rather light movement. Something similar came up in the scherzo-like fourth movement, marked *allegro vivace*. Here, the common performance issue (at least for organists) of cramping smaller note values caused some problems in the upward arpeggios. (I have always found the scherzo in the *Twenty-Four Pieces* to have more musical depth than this movement. There is scant room here for even the smallest drop in fluency.)

Also, Vierne is very fond of what I like to call his "cello solos": brief transitional bridges in the pedal. There were times when I missed the point of these. They

were always accurate, never fear: Houlihan has formidable pedal technique, as he would often demonstrate. But they didn't always take on the full rhythmic shape, and structural import, that they might have.

I suspect that all of these issues, whatever their cause, will settle out during the remainder of the tour. Taken all together, they are light in the balance next to the positives.

### Third Symphony

In the Third Symphony, after a somewhat more aggressive take on the first movement than I would personally choose, there was a beautiful and convincing *cantilène*. Here, Houlihan's real affinity for this music shone, with elegant shapings of the phrases, a loving and lingering touch on the solo voices, and other signs of great art. The penultimate movement in this symphony was simply gorgeously done, on all levels, and the familiar finale was just right.

### Fifth Symphony

After a brief intermission, we heard the Fifth Symphony. I'd taken advantage of the break to re-seat myself in a more secluded spot. I was rather closer to the Swell and farther from the rest of the organ, but found I could compensate without much trouble. In addition, I was by now convinced of how deeply Houlihan "got" this organ. The first movement was masterful—in terms of its spacious breadth and harmonic language, clearly later and reminiscent (to me) of Sowerby. By this point in the recital, Houlihan seemed to be "in the zone." Gone were the minor uncertainties, the feints at too much aggression or too much reserve. The scarifying last movement, in particular, he handled with both musical depth and technical insouciance—making one of Vierne's most devilish moments look easy.

After a well-earned standing ovation, there was a substantial dinner break; perhaps even longer than necessary. I walked with a colleague to a favorite nearby diner, and then a post-prandial coffee. The evening recital began right on time, and again I seated myself in a new location, this time on the left side, nearer the Great. Here, the combination action was surprisingly noisy at times, but it was a nice vantage point overall.

### Second Symphony

The recital opened with the Second Symphony, which Houlihan played from memory. He made a good, strong start of it, which he carried through to the end; despite, again, a little rhythmic "crowding" in a few spots. In this movement, the transitional passages and contrasting materials were handled perfectly.

The second movement—one of the most extraordinary and affirmative things Vierne ever composed—contained some wonderful registrational and interpretive moments. The second *largo* section is represented in my notes as "bell-like . . . luscious . . . dreamy." The *agitato* sections presented almost too great a contrast to these; a study in emotional struggle, though on the fast side. The scherzo showed great insight into the paths hidden inside Vierne's merriment. The cantabile gave us altogether new sounds, not heard before in this recital; the use of supercouplers and tremulant was fascinating. The left-hand melody, on a reed, was exquisitely musical. Finally, the finale took off very convincingly and thrillingly after a strikingly *rubato* opening. There was no doubt that, again, Houlihan can cut to the emotional heart of a piece and communicate it to an audience; witness the tremendous applause this piece met at its conclusion.

### Fourth Symphony

The brooding Fourth Symphony, so unlike anything heard previously, came off very well indeed from start to finish. The first movement brought out the crepuscular mood perfectly, as did the subsequent "allegro to nowhere" (my nickname for it). The menuet was played flawlessly if a little quickly; my notes read "a diamond, but Vierne is an opal." But overall, the emotional content of this symphony came across in all its complex darkness. Houlihan's vision led him to a strong, almost rough, reading of the final movement—technically perfect, and an honest and believable interpretation of the psychology of the work.

### Sixth Symphony

Finally, after the briefest of technical problems in the organ, the Sixth Symphony crowned the day. Here, rhythmic precision and control were the order of the day, without any detriment to the emotional element. The second movement was shaped beautifully; and the scherzo was masterfully controlled, and came out in all its Halloween glory. The penultimate movement ended with simply gorgeous registrations: shimmering and ghostly, fear yielding to a moonrise.

As for the final movement, I wonder if a new tradition is in the wings? Several of us who were seated near the back found ourselves standing during the final pages, watching the entire *gestalt* of the performance, especially the pedal passages. These were pulled off as well as they ever have been before, ever. The fact that we were standing helped us to see, and also saved us the trouble of jumping up as the music concluded. Needless to say, the whole house was on its feet in a second.

This ambitious program of all six Vierne symphonies is a musical event that should be experienced if at all possible. It will long be remembered, I am sure, as one of New York's all-time great organ recitals. I daresay the same will be said, or has already been said, in the remaining cities on the itinerary. Bravo to Christopher Houlihan for taking on such a massive project, and for carrying it off with so much intelligence, artistry, and communicative power. Houlihan has a bright future indeed, and it was a joy to witness this milestone in his career. ■

Jonathan B. Hall is music director of Central Presbyterian Church in Montclair, New Jersey. His first book, *Calvin Hampton: A Musician Without Borders*, is available from Wayne Leupold Editions. He is past dean of the Brooklyn AGO Chapter.

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