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A Revealing Collection of Rare Polish Organ Music and a Concert for Peace by Gail Archer

by delarue

Organist Gail Archer gets around. She has an unbounded curiosity for repertoire from around the globe and likes to explore it thematically, country by country. This makes sense especially in light of the vast and sometimes confounding variation in the design of pipe organs from various cultures...meaning that just about every individual instrument presents its own unique challenges.

One of Archer's most colorful albums, drolly titled An American Idyll, is a salute to the composer-performers who were stars of the organ demimonde in the Eastern United States in the 19th century. Her two most recent albums have focused on rare organ works from Russia and Ukraine, each a country where church organs are a relative rarity. Her latest album Cantius – streaming at Spotify – is a fascinating and often riveting collection of rarely heard works by Polish composers. Archer's next performance is a free concert for peace on Jan 19 at 7 PM at St. Patrick's Cathedral, featuring both Russian and Ukrainian works. She plays the cathedral's mighty Kilgen organ magnificently – if you are in New York and this is your thing, you do not want to miss this one.

Archer takes the album title from St. John Cantius Church, whose sleek, French-voiced 1926 Casavant organ she plays here. She opens with late 19th century composer Mieczyslaw Surzynski's Improvisation on a Polish Hymn, a pleasant processional which gives her the chance to pull out some juicy upper-midrange stops and engage in a little baroque minimalism. Likewise, the brief Pastorage in F# Minor, by another 19th century composer, Wincenty Rychling begins with a stern hymnal focus but becomes more of a stroll.

20th century Polish-American composer Felix Borowski is represented by his Meditation-Elegie, an attractively workmanlike take on Louis Vierne, which Archer plays with increasingly steely grace. Contemporary composer Pawel Lukaszewski contributes his Triptych for Organ, Archer having fun with the brooding, Messiaenic suspense and fugal crescendo of the fleeting first movement. She then lingers in the opaque resonance of the Offertorium and brings it full circle with mystical, steadily paced minimalism.

The real find here is a Henryk Gorecki rarity, his *Kantata for Organ*. Epic, sustained, wide-angle close-harmonied chords dominate the introduction. Then Archer wafts up from the murky lows to oddly incisive syncopation in the second movement, concluding with a rather fervent rhythmic attack that distantly echoes Jehan Alain. Did John Zorn hear this and have an epiphany which would inform his organ improvisations?

20th century composer Felix Nowowiejski's single-movement *Symphony No. 8* is more of a *grande pièce symphonique*, Archer patiently and dynamically negotiating its Widor-esque shifts from pensive resonance to a more emphatic attack and a mighty, majestic forward drive that opts for suspense over a fullscale anthem. It's a High Romantic throwback and a real treat.

Grazyna Bacewicz is another standout Polish composer who is not known for organ music, but her *Esquisse for Organ* is exquisite: first evoking Messiaen in the gloomy introductory pavane and then Vierne in the coyly ebullient water nymphet ballet afterward. Archer winds up the album with a final 20th century work, Tadeusz Paciorkiewicz's *Tryptychon for Organ*. The steady quasi-march of an introduction reminds of Naji Hakim's more energetic material, while the *Meditation* has more of an allusive early 20th century feel – and is considerably more emphatic than you would expect. Archer delivers the concluding *Toccata* with eerily puffing staccato but also a warm, triumphant pace in its more majestic moments.