

KAMIL MIKA

ORGAN RECITAL FOR CHRISTMAS

St James Episcopal Church, Holburn Junction, Aberdeen
Saturday 23rd December 2023, 5pm

PROGRAMME:

J. S. Bach (1685 – 1750)

Toccata in F Major BWV 540

Georg Böhm (1661 – 1733)

Vom Himmel hoch da komm ich her

Max Reger (1873 – 1916)

Weihnachten Op. 145 No. 3

Marco Enrico Bossi (1861 – 1925)

Christmas Pastorate

Feliks Nowowiejski (1877 – 1946)

Polish Fantasia: *Christmas Midnight Mass at the Wawel Cathedral in Cracow* Op. 9 No. 1

Marian Sawa (1937 – 2005)

Christmas Carol Suite

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840 – 1893)

The Nutcracker Suite Op. 71

March – Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy – Trepak (Russian Dance)

Charles-Marie Widor (1844 – 1937)

Symphony No. 5 in f minor Op. 42

Adagio – Toccata in F Major

REVIEW:

Saturday's very special Organ Recital by Kamil Mika in St. James Church was a marvellous curtain raiser for the celebrations of Christmas itself, on the day before Christmas Eve. The opening piece in the recital, J. S. Bach's *Toccata in F Major* does not seem to have any direct relationship to Christmas, but the sheer sense of exhilaration that runs throughout the entire piece certainly gives it the right to be there. The final piece in the programme the *Toccata in F Major* (the same key and also a famous organ Toccata) as well as being related to weddings, is also said to be a piece that celebrates the Christmas season. I don't think that the composer Widor intended it to be such, but many organ performers since then have used it as part of the Christmas season. Both pieces are similar in that both require virtuoso performances for hands and for feet. Both therefore demand a performer of the calibre of Kamil Mika, and that is exactly what we got on Saturday evening. These

two glorious organ pieces enveloped another six items, all of which were directly related to the Christmas season.

Bach's *Toccata in F Major BWV 540* is a real thriller of a work. Counterpoints and harmonies are exuberantly on display. The organist, while his fingers are busily employed on the keys gets a rest for his foot at the beginning of the work, just resting on one note. Bach however has a shock in store for him. Twice, the busy theme from the fingers has to be played unaccompanied on the pedals. The feet have to move over the pedals looking, dare I say, almost like those of an Irish step dancer. I did see one performance on the internet where the player linked the pedal sounds precisely to the stops he had played with his fingers. Kamil Mika made the pedals sound quite different. That sounded absolutely brilliant. Kamil's playing was wonderfully firm and steady, something that Bach's music absolutely demands. He made the music sound like a carillon of cathedral bells. In fact he made the relatively small St. James's organ sound remarkably like a great cathedral organ. His playing lit up the whole church. What a glorious start to the recital.

The second piece was *Vom Himmel hoch da komm ich her* by Georg Böhm whom Bach certainly heard play, and may possibly have taken lessons from? I am going to say something now about Kamil Mika's performance which relates to all the pieces that were to follow. I will say it once so that I do not have to keep on repeating it. This relates to the choice and sheer variety of stops which he used in all the Christmas pieces. The result was that he made the carol tunes sing out magnificently. This was certainly true of the lovely sound he had chosen for Böhm's melody.

The German organist Max Reger wrote his *Weihnachten Op. 145 No. 3* when the First World War was still raging. An internet performance shows German Christmas Cards of the period which are quite astonishing, troops in the trenches with guns and above them angels in the sky singing. Reger did not live to see the end of the war. It was not that which finished him off. It was a heart attack brought on by overindulgence in food, wine and tobacco apparently. The piece opens with a rather dark introit, but then come the German carol tunes, two of which are unfamiliar to us, *Es kommt ein Schiff, geladen* (A ship is coming, laden) and *Ach, was soll ich Sunder machen?* (O what shall I, a sinner, do?). The music grows in power and brightness and then we hear tunes we will all know, *Vom Himmel hoch* and *Stille Nacht*, the latter with lovely flute sounds. I was impressed by how Reger and of course Kamil wove these two tunes together at the end of the piece.

Marco Enrico Bossi's *Christmas Pastoral* used contrasting reed and flute stops in a rather delicious way. Did the composer use an Italian carol tune for the *Pastoral* or was it entirely his own composition? The music certainly sounded carol-like. Perhaps some Italian poet could supply words? It was certainly a delightful piece.

There followed two marvellous Polish Christmas pieces. The first was by Feliks Nowowiejski, *Polish Fantasia* subtitled *Christmas Midnight Mass at the Wawel Cathedral in Cracow Op. 9 No. 1*. The composer uses two Polish carol tunes *Aniol pasterzom mówił* (The Angel spoke to the Shepherds) and *Gdy się Chrystus rodzi* (When Christ is born). In Kamil's performance this was a wonderfully atmospheric piece. I felt it took the listener to the very Cathedral to hear music throughout a special service with flute sounds, bagpipe drones and so much more. It was a very filmic performance. Feliks and Kamil took us right there.

Marian Sawa's *Christmas Carol Suite* was exactly that, based on popular Polish carols. *Gdy śliczna Panna* (When the beautiful Virgin rocked her Son), *Przybieżeli do Betlejem* (Shepherds came to Bethlehem), *Nie było miejsca dla Ciebie w Betlejem* (There was no place for you in Bethlehem), *Wśród nocnej ciszy* (In the stillness of the night) and *Bóg się rodzi* (God is born). I enjoyed attractive reed stops, some darker sounds and more than one joyful rollicking carol tune. Kamil made all these attractive carol tunes sing out magnificently. I was glad he gave us the names of the carols. I looked for them on the net but could not find the names. I did find a Polish choir in traditional dress singing them and I recognised the tunes. The girls had lovely garlands of colourful flowers in their hair and Kamil's playing certainly matched those bright colours in his playing.

There followed three pieces from Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker Suite: March – Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy – and Trepak* (Russian dance). I have already mentioned Kamil's brilliant work with organ stops, but this went far beyond anything we had heard up to this point. Kamil made the organ

sound exactly like a full orchestra. The Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy was absolutely amazing, and with what is actually quite a small instrument. On Saturday it became a full symphony orchestra. The final item in the recital was the last two movements of Widor's five movement *Symphony No. 5 in f minor Op. 42. Adagio* and *Toccata in F Major*. The *Adagio* starts darkly but leads towards light and warmth with a marvellous crescendo. The lines of music were nicely intertwined. The *Toccata* in many ways matched Bach's music which opened the recital. Kamil gave a magnificent performance, but of course the little St. James organ is no Cavaillé-Coll. What would Kamil have sounded like armed with one of those. I, when a student had a record with the recording of Widor himself playing the piece. It was rather slow and irregular. He was suffering from arthritis at the time. I lent the record to someone at the time and never got it back. It is a wonderful piece of music. One of two pieces for organ which people who do not like or know about organ music are familiar with. The other is Bach's *Toccata and Fugue in d minor*. I remember the comedian Jo Brand having a go at that on television. Actually, she was not that bad! You can go on You Tube and type in Kamil Mika. You will get a concert he gave in St Andrews. It is of Polish music and is rather splendid. Meantime, here is a Christmas message from me to Kamil and to his family. Can you guess what it says?

Wesołych Świąt i Szczęśliwego Nowego Roku,

ALAN COOPER