

Region IX Convention: July 4 Concerts of Musical Fireworks

By Mary Lou Simmermacher

Majestic musical fireworks from organists Robert Huw Morgan followed by Alison Luedecke and the Millennia Consort earned standing ovations July 4 at the Memorial Church at Stanford University in Palo Alto, California. The San Francisco Chapter of the American Guild of Organists offered the free public concerts as part of its 2011 Region IX AGO Convention. The church echoed and hummed as enthusiastic organ fans surged through the doors, flashing their cameras at the floor to ceiling spectacular views: stained-glass angels shining in front above glittering gold mosaics to decorous ranks of silver-grey pipes in rich redwood casings in back.

Robert Huw Morgan

Morgan opened on the Hupalo & Repasky Tudor organ in front with two 16th century antiphons. Crisp bright sounds of *Lucem tuam* by Richard Wynslate raced responsively above soft mid-range colors that echoed around the sanctuary. The contrasting bright and dark intertwining melodies of *Beatus laurentius* by Thomas Preston alternated at a stately tempo.

Morgan then jogged down the center aisle and climbed to the Fisk/Nanney organ high above the pews at the back of the church. Although his profile seemed tiny at the organ bench in the midst of pipes spanning the width of the church, his music filled the space as the first low notes of Louis Marchand's *Dialogue* boomed for six long seconds before brighter notes joined the long chord. Melodies alternated conversationally back and forth, bright and stately, loud and soft, and echoed under sunlight streaming through the huge, circular window at the top of the sanctuary. Then loud dark tones held constant while bright melodies played over them followed by contrasting bright notes held over darker, dancing melodies. The piece built to a climax, ending with deep loud pedals supporting magnificent joyful chords. The thrilling, booming music vibrated around the church, as exciting to hear as the loudest fireworks.

Morgan playfully featured a myriad of colors with Bach's *Sei gegrüßet, Jesu gütig* (BWV 768), ten variations on the chorale. After beginning with basic moderate tones, dark melodies alternated separately and together with shining bright tones. Stately and detached dark voices blended and alternated with racing shining colors above; then high bright melodies skipped above lower accompaniments. Joyful voices alternated and came together as the piece ended with a crashing major chord that rattled walls. Morgan's final piece, Dieterich Buxtehude's *Praeludium in G minor* (BuxWV 148), began loud, dark and full, moving to racing melodies and answering voices, also stately in bright and dark colors, building to a full, deep crescendo at the end.

Alison Luedecke and the Millennia Consort

The Millennia Consort performed music of the 19th through 21st centuries with Alison Luedecke on the Murray Harris organ; Beverly Reese Dorcy, percussion; Presidio Brass members Bill Owens and Ray Nowak, trumpet; Sean Reusch, trombone; Mike McCoy, French horn; and Scott Sutherland, tuba. Soft atmospheric waves of organ sounds opened "Jupiter" -- a movement of Gustav Holst's suite *The Planets* -- and continued as horns built more mysterious sounds with later dark tuba and deep organ-pedal emphasis. "Jupiter" ended with a rich, mellow blending of organ and brass.

Prelude and Exultation by Craig Phillips began with long, stately notes of the organ blending and building louder as the brass joined in and extended the melody. Bright organ notes skipped over

accompaniment of deep horns and organ pedals. Sounds turned majestic, loud and joyful as brass called and organ joined with varying colors. Soft, soothing drums become louder in celebration as the horns announced exploding good news. The audience rose with cheers and applause.

Tribute: A Lullaby for Organ by Craig Phillips and *America the Beautiful* (Materna) by Calvin Hampton provided soft contrast. The lullaby's gentle melody seamlessly blended organ and brass, with one or the other taking the lead. It ended with crisp accents and melody above the soothing sounds. The thoughtful and contemplative *America* was a pleasing contrast to traditional patriotic songs.

Pinot: A Suite in Three Tastings by John Karl Hirten grew out of a playful Millennia rehearsal. Would it be possible for organ and brass to play a piece about wine? Intrigued by the idea and after drinking an entire bottle of Pinot Noir – according to the program notes – Hirten composed a group's jaunt into wine country of Pinot grapes. Dark organ and brass colors joined high, bright, twinkling notes. Humorous burps from the tuba suggested disagreement or perhaps too much wine too fast. Grunts resolved into soft melodies of organ and brass. Gorgeous ending harmonies with suggestions of chirping and flying made hearts soar, likely the effects of Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris and Pinot Noir.

Millennia Consort ended with selections from *Pictures at an Exhibition*, written by Modest Mussorgsky and arranged by Scott Sutherland. After the death of painter and architect Victor Hartmann, Mussorgsky in 1874 composed a musical walk through an exhibition of his friend's work. The steady step-by-step beat of "Promenade" set the pace as horns alternated and then combined with organ. "Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle" began dark and frightening followed by high trills. A stealthy, loud conclusion felt like an ogre jumping out to scare you. Then trumpets and horns raced and raced in "The Hut on Fowl's Legs" (Baby-Yaga) as though this witch-like folklore character (thought to live in a hut on chicken legs) was running after us. "The Great Gate of Kiev" ended the concert in safety with majestic, fireworks of sound exploding and alternating with twinkling bells, variations of the "Promenade" theme and passages of solemnity.

As the audience rose to cheer and applaud, their colorful red, white and blue clothing added suitable harmony to the concerts of many colors.

Mary Lou Simmermacher is a freelance writer and music enthusiast who volunteered to write about the Region IX Convention concerts at Stanford Memorial Church on July 4. We thank her for contributing in this way!