

**Programme notes for Langlais *Suite Médiévale*, Gigout *Grand Chœur Dialogué*,  
Vierne *Messe Solennelle, Op.16* and Chilcott *Salisbury Vespers***

**Suite Médiévale**

**Jean Langlais (1907-1991)**

Blind since the age of two, Langlais worked in sacred music throughout his life. His music is steeped in Gregorian chant, which he regarded as his personal domain. The *Suite Médiévale* is a low Mass composed in 1947; it invites the listener into the heart of the liturgy, the various movements corresponding to moments when the organist would traditionally play alone. The *Prélude*, majestic and solemn, is to be played during the procession, and states the Gregorian theme 'Asperges me' three times. The *Tiento* is based upon the Gregorian 'Kyrie Fons bonitatis', and the piece is clearly influenced by vocal polyphony, using imitation, and a short form of Spanish origin.

**Grand Chœur Dialogué**

**Eugène Gigout (1844-1925)**

Gigout wrote nearly 500 pieces of organ music during his long career, although only a handful, including this *Grand chœur dialogué*, are widely played today. Despite its rather anachronistic title, the *Grand chœur* was originally written for interplay between two separate organs. Musicians have been eager to seize on the potential of its sonorities and modulations, and a number of arrangements exist for organ, brass and percussion.

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**Messe Solennelle, Op.16**

**Louis Vierne (1870-1937)**

Although perhaps not quite so completely as in Italy, music in France for most of the 19th century was centred on the opera house. After the opera house, the church was the second most important institution, but up to the middle years of the century, musical standards were often abysmal and much of the music written for church performance (for example by Louis Lefébure-Wély, Widor's predecessor at Saint Sulpice) was virtually indistinguishable from *opéra comique*. There was a radical improvement in standards during the last quarter of the century, largely instigated by one of the greatest of all organ builders, Aristide Cavallé-Coll, and illustrated by the work in tonight's concert.

Born in Poitiers in 1870, Louis Vierne had to contend from birth with a disability which, given the attitudes to disability at the time, makes his subsequent eminence all the more remarkable. As a result of congenital cataracts, he was almost blind from birth, though an experimental operation when he was six allowed him to read oversize text. After beginning his education at home, his precocious musical talent necessitated a move to the Institution National des Jeunes Aveugles (National Institute for Blind Youth) in Paris in 1880. The move to Paris turned out to be most fortunate as it allowed him exposure to the organ playing of César Franck, who was *Titulaire du Grand Orgue* (principal organist) at Sainte Clothilde and Charles-Marie Widor, *titulaire* at Saint Sulpice, both of whose playing made a profound effect on him.

As well as his position at Sainte Clothilde, Franck was also Professor of Organ at the Paris Conservatoire. Coming across Vierne at the Institution, Franck steered him away from the piano to the organ, and from 1886 gave him private harmony lessons and allowed him to

attend his organ classes at the Conservatoire. This continued until Franck's death in 1890, the year in which Vierne formally entered the Conservatoire. On Franck's death, Widor became Professor of Organ and immediately recognised Vierne's abilities, so much so, in fact, that in 1892 Vierne began assisting him at Saint Sulpice. The two became great friends and Widor played the organ at Vierne's wedding at Saint Sulpice in 1899. Upon winning the *premier prix* for organ at the Conservatoire in 1894, Vierne joined Widor officially at Saint Sulpice. In 1900, Vierne won the competition for the post of *titulaire* at Notre Dame, where he remained until he died from a heart attack at the keyboard during a recital on 2 June 1937. Almost like a scene from a Hollywood film, at the moment of his death he was about to begin an improvisation on a theme just submitted to him, when he suddenly slumped forward. His foot struck an E pedal, the single note echoing through the cathedral until his body was removed from the bench. His assistant during this final recital, incidentally, was Maurice Duruflé.

Vierne had written some pieces during the preceding years, but only at the end of the 1890s did he feel able to compose substantial works. In 1898 he completed his First Organ Symphony and in the following year he began tonight's work, the *Messe Solennelle*. Vierne had originally intended to set it for chorus and orchestra, but was persuaded by Widor that two organs would give a higher likelihood of performance. Tonight's performance uses an arrangement for organ and brass. Its title is a little perplexing; "Messe Solennelle" usually indicates that all sections of the Ordinary of the Mass are set, but here the Credo is omitted (this would usually be indicated by using the title "Missa Brevis"). The fact that the opening words of the Gloria are not set would indicate that they should be intoned by the celebrant, indicating that Vierne intended it for liturgical rather than concert performance. It was first performed in Saint Sulpice in 1901 with Vierne playing one organ and, unsurprisingly, his old friend Widor playing the other.

## Salisbury Vespers

**Bob Chilcott (b. 1955)**

Bob Chilcott was born in Plymouth and entered musical life at an early age. He sang in the choir of King's College Cambridge as a boy treble (and was the soloist in the world famous recording of the Fauré *Requiem* made in 1967 under Sir David Wilcocks) and as a tenor after his voice broke. In 1985 he joined the King's Singers, performing with them for 12 years. He left them to concentrate on composing in 1997, becoming one of the most prolific and best-loved choral composers of the present day. His compositions have enjoyed a wide popularity, particularly in this country and the USA, where he has a longstanding association with the New Orleans Crescent City Festival.

The *Salisbury Vespers* was first performed in 2009 in Salisbury Cathedral by a choir of more than 500 singers from seven different city-based choirs. Chilcott has said that the organisers of the Salisbury Festival "realised they had a huge number of choirs who never had the chance to come together. At the premiere, the choirs were situated at separate points in the Cathedral - it was a difficult concept to make work, but it was very successful. The main thrust of the work was a number of large-scale psalm settings, and I interspersed these with four motets." The different choirs were placed in different parts of the Cathedral so that the whole, huge space was utilised and the audience surrounded. Although based on the service of Vespers, unlike Vierne's *Messe Solennelle*, Chilcott's work is not intended for liturgical use but as a concert piece.

Salisbury Cathedral is dedicated to St. Mary the Virgin, so Chilcott has chosen texts which meditate on different aspects of the Mother of God and which are appropriate for different times of the year which he has interspersed with the Latin texts of the Vesper service. The four motets follow the Virgin's life chronologically from the birth of Christ to her status after the Assumption as an intercessor for suffering, sinful humanity.

The first motet "I sing of a mayden" is a setting of a mediæval Christmas text which reflects in wonder on the perfection of the maiden chosen by God and the silence of Christ's coming. The second motet "When to the temple Mary went" considers the presentation of Christ at the Temple, and is a translation by the Victorian clergyman John Troutbeck of a poem by the 16th century German poet Johannes Eccard. Although the poem is a simple narrative ending with a prayer of untroubled expectation, Chilcott's music is much more unsettled and seems to look forward to the end of Christ's life which will be so different to the "gentle fall asleep" which the prayer requests.

The text of the third motet "Lovely tear of lovely eye" addresses more directly the anguish of the Virgin at the death of Christ on the cross, but from the viewpoint of the devout watcher rather than the Virgin herself. The feeling is of a simple but profound pity and sadness for what she undergoes.

The final motet "Hail, star of the sea most radiant" is a song of praise taken from the Sarum Primer, hailing Mary's position as Star of the Sea and asking for her help to free prisoners, cure the sick, and deliver us from those who wish us harm that we may attain the grace to be with her in heaven.

The work ends with a large-scale setting of the Magnificat.

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