

Joseph Gabriel Rheinberger (1839 - 1901)

Joseph Gabriel Rheinberger was born in Liechtenstein, where his father held the post of Treasurer to the Prince of Vaduz, the capital city. Rheinberger had his first organ lessons at the age of five and a mere two years later, he was serving as organist at Vaduz; shortly after that, his first compositions were performed. From 1851-1854 he studied at the Munich Conservatory, which appointed him professor of theory and organ in 1859. He held that position until a few months before his death. In his long tenure at the conservatory, he was a great influence on many of the gifted musicians of Europe and America.

Although Rheinberger's name is unfamiliar to most, organists know his extensive organ compositions--especially his twenty organ sonatas. As a church musician, he also wrote many choral works: oratorios, cantatas, masses, motets and other liturgical compositions. In recent years these choral works have begun to come to prominence and more frequent performance.

Rheinberger's musical style is one that champions the classical tradition within the framework of a harmonic richness of the late 19th century. There are few dramatic surprises but rather a deceptive sounding simplicity, enhanced harmonic fullness, clarity, and liturgical appropriateness. His mass was intended for the worship service.

Franz Liszt (1811- 1886)

The name Franz Liszt arouses in many people the grand romantic images of his success with women, his virtuosic displays at the keyboard and his orchestral poems, which were to have such a vast influence on many orchestral composers. The dichotomy between the celebrity—the charismatic, 'revolutionary' Liszt--with the Liszt who (in later life) studied for the priesthood has always been puzzling. Regardless of the dramatic excesses of his lifestyle, Liszt's compositional mission was to transform church music, which he considered sadly degenerated to a semi operetta style, its foundation of polyphony and plainchant largely abandoned.

"Missa Choralis," was written just after Liszt took minor orders in the church in 1865. The music reflects Liszt's admiration for Palestrina, maintaining an 18th century sense of structure and balance, and a close adherence to the mood and meaning of the text. The work is one of compressed simplicity and impassioned mysticism. The organ is used for its color and dynamic support rather than for its dramatic effect. The text is carefully declaimed in expressive dialogue without the excesses of larger scale Romantic works. It is perhaps this restraint and simplicity that makes "Missa Choralis" a truly powerful and moving work.

Louis Vierne (1870-1937)

Louis Vierne was one of the most admired and celebrated organists of his time. Born nearly blind as a result of congenital cataracts, he nonetheless received a thorough musical education. He studied at the Institute for Blind Children in Paris from 1880-1888. While a student there he attracted the attention of César Franck, who included him in his conservatory organ classes and gave him private harmony lessons. He entered the Paris Conservatoire as a fulltime student in 1890 and, following Franck's death, became the student and protégé of Franck's replacement, Charles-Marie Widor. By 1892 he was serving as Widor's assistant at the church of Saint-Sulpice; by 1894 he had won the Conservatoire's first prize for organ. Vierne was appointed principle organist at the cathedral of Notre Dame de Paris in 1900, a position he held until his death (at the keyboard, in the midst of a concert!) in 1937.

Vierne's *Messe Solennelle* (Opus 16 for two organs and chorus) premiered at St. Sulpice on the feast of the Immaculate Conception in 1901, with Widor and Vierne playing the two organs. We perform a 1979 edition arranged for one organ. Vierne's mass, unlike such "concert" works as Bach's *Mass in B Minor* and Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, was clearly intended as a liturgical work, although it contains no 'Credo' section. It is a work of grand proportions, demanding both a great organ and a great organist for its presentation. Much of the work is a dialogue between choir and organ and involves many chromatic sections and great dynamic variations. Vierne treats liturgy as theater, alternating the forceful thunder of the 'Kyrie' with a more calm and gentle 'Christe'. The joyful majesty of the 'Gloria' contrasts with introspective 'Benedictus' and the 'Dona nobis pacem.'