

REVIEW OF NORDIC JOURNEY

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“Disk Shelf”

Nordic Journey, James Hicks

Pro Organo CD 7239

It is exhilarating to find out that foreign organists' repertoires and discs occasionally include Finnish organ music too. It is interesting to hear interpretations that come from a completely different setting than our tradition. The American James Hicks is fascinated by the Nordic countries and has given concerts especially in Sweden. His double album *Nordic Journey* contains a discerning collection of Nordic organ compositions from a period of over 150 years. A Finnish listener's attention is of course drawn to the three Finn's organ works.

The first disc has two major organ sonatas. The Danish J.P.E. Hartmann's *Sonata in G minor* from 1855 is a work showcasing High Romantic German composition style, which may not be as inspiring as the entirely magnificent *Sonata in G minor* by Oskar Lindberg, showcasing the summit of Swedish national romanticism at the end of the disc. I have often intended to rehearse it, and the realization of that intention is again one major step closer after hearing this disc.

Ludvig Nielsen's *The Bells of Nidaros Cathedral* (1976), Thorkell Sigurbjörnsson's chorale prelude *Lofid Gud* (1988), Thomas Åberg's *In the Garden: Frosty Morning*, (1999) and Lars Egebjer's *Nenia Wermlandica* (1977) are all pleasant atmospheric pieces which deserve to be played in our country too.

The second CD opens with Jarmo Parviainen's *Toccata*. Many must be familiar with Tauno Äikää's exuberant performance of the work. Hicks' interpretation is interestingly different. Hicks takes, like Äikää, certain liberties with the rhythm and tempo, but in a different manner, maybe romanticizing the work. This may also be due to the fact that in the disc Äikää plays on the Church of St. John's "reformed" rather "onset-heavy" organ that incarnates the ideology of the organ reform movement, while Hicks plays on the grandiose Setterquist organ from 1929, restored in 2007 with 61 organ stops in Linköping Cathedral. Joonas Kokkonen's *Lux aeterna* gets a splendid interpretation from Hicks' fingers. The third Finnish work in the collection is the frequently recorded Taneli Kuusisto's *Pastorale*. It has been composed for the organ of this era and plays splendidly.

The disc closes with three works by the well-known Swedish church music composer Fredrik Sixten. *Prelude et Fugue* (1986) has been composed in memory of Maurice Durufle, who died that same year, and it has echoes of Durufle's *Prelude et Fugue*, and even the style is reminiscent of Durufle. *Messa misteriosa* (2008) is an eight-part work, clearly modern in its musical language and may not be as enthralling as concert music as Sixten's third work, *Variations For Organ* on the folk melody *Visa fra Ah* (2008) commissioned by Hicks. This work of less than a quarter

of an hour in length is interesting, containing diverse music which echoes French tradition and could very well secure its place in the concert repertoire.

The recording of the disc is terrific and the organ adjusts itself to the entire spectrum of compositional styles. And by the way, do non-Finns know how to play Finnish organ music? In light of this disc the answer is yes—very well!

Ville Urponen