

## **ARTICLE FROM TURUN SANOMAT (Turku, Finland)**

July 23, 2013

### *THE ORGAN PLAYS IN NORTHERN TONES*

By Matti Komulainen

This year's main guest of Turku's organ festival, James D. Hicks (b. 1958) has a few surprises up his sleeve. The program of the American organist contains a selection of Nordic composers, including a rarity by Viljo Mikkola (1871-1960).

"The *Sonata for Organ* has, to my knowledge, not been heard in Finland since the composer was alive. I have performed it a few times in the United States and received positive feedback for it. When I was invited here, I definitely wanted to play the work in the hometown of the composer," James D. Hicks says excitedly in the sacristy of Turku Cathedral before a rehearsal.

### **Help From the Sibelius Museum**

Hicks says he has learned of Mikkola and other Finnish organ composers through the festival's artistic director Ville Urponen.

"Ville sent me copies of the manuscripts from the Sibelius Museum so that I could have a look. The staff at the museum was also very helpful while I was searching for unpublished compositions in their collection. In light of this experience, I believe Turku to be an important Finnish center for culture in general, and organ music in particular," Hicks thinks.

"The repertoire for my concert features not only the work of Mikkola, but, in addition, that of Fredrik Isaacsson, a little-known composer, whose *Melodia* I will be playing. I also obtained its manuscript from the Sibelius Museum. To my knowledge this work has not been performed previously as well."

The organist's program also includes music from Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Iceland. *Lamentation* a new work by Swedish composer Fredrik Sixten will receive its world premiere.

"I have been waiting for this opportunity to have a magnificent instrument and acoustical environment at my disposal so that I could give this important new work an appropriate setting for its premiere. Some of the other works on the program such as the *Introduktion Og Passacaglia* by the Icelandic composer Pall Isolfsson, are very grand and virtuosic compositions, all benefitting from the magnificent acoustics which are here."

Hicks' enthusiasm for lesser-known works has to do with his desire to introduce new music into the mainstream.

“As important as Bach, Mendelssohn and Messiaen may be, I have searched for other composers who produced works of quality, but somehow were relegated to sidelines of history, and to make this music available to the public.”

### **A Heavy Instrument**

The history of the organ goes all the way back to antiquity. It is not only old but multipurpose. In the latter half of the twentieth century, its electronic applications have made their mark under the masterful treatment of Jimmy Smith and John Lord in jazz and rock. It was this versatility that made Hicks choose playing the organ.

“Each organ has its own individuality, even if one compares instruments made by the same builder. When preparing a concert, one must have a thorough series of practice sessions in order to familiarize oneself with the instrument at hand.”

In addition to Hicks’ training in the pipe organ classics as a student, the instrument’s appeal was reinforced with his interest in rock music, and in particular, progressive trends. The music of King Crimson, Yes, Jethro Tull and Emerson Lake and Palmer showed how the electric organ could have a place in popular music.

“In my opinion, one can find transcendence in all kinds of music. I grew up listening to the smooth “Big Band” sounds of the groups with which my father was associated, and I have a great affinity for the music of Count Basie and Duke Ellington. American jazz should be considered as part of the classic expression of the twentieth century as are orchestral works such as *Le Sacre du Printemps* by Igor Stravinsky. Even more contemporary music has appeal for me as I enjoy the “grunge” styles by bands such as Soundgarden, Pearl Jam and Alice In Chains. Perhaps a future recording of American organ music may speak to some of these diverse interests.”

### **Echoes from the Highlands**

Hicks is currently preparing to make three recordings of Nordic organ music in August, all at various venues in Sweden. Much of this music is influenced by the folk traditions of Nordic countries. In this spirit, Hicks has maintained an interest in Celtic music over the years.

“I got excited by this sort of music when I was older, perhaps owing to the Scottish heritage that runs in my family,” Hicks laughs.

“A disadvantage of the organ is in its immobility,” says Hicks.

As a passionate hiker and lover of the natural world, he started thinking about how it would feel to make music in the forest, and the bagpipes seemed like the right choice.

“I started playing the Great Highland Bagpipes some twelve or thirteen years ago, and I quickly realized that it requires just as much talent and commitment as standard instruments in the orchestra.”

Since then Hicks has learned to play other kinds of bagpipes, instruments such as the Scottish Small Pipes and Border Pipes, which are more mellow in sound and can be easily played with other instruments. It is the flexibility and freedom of expression that is possible with these bellows-blown pipes that hold a particular attraction to Hicks. Combining different kinds of bagpipes with the organ in a project devoted to Scottish folk music might be a future endeavor.

---

James D. Hicks, organist, in concert, Tuesday, July 23 8:00 p.m. at the Cathedral and Thursday July 25 at the church in Naantali.