

# Organ Vesper Series

Presents

**Christopher Marks, organ**

**ALL-AMERICAN MUSIC FOR**

**AN ALL-AMERICAN ORGAN**

September 21, 2008

3:00 PM

## PROGRAM

Overture to "William Tell" Transcription by Dudley Buck, Op. 37 (1896)	Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868)
Third Sonata (1924) Intermezzo Andante	Felix Borowski (1872-1956)
Première Suite pour Grand-Orgue (1900) Toccatà	Felix Borowski
Six Pieces for the Organ (1883) Andante Andante	George F. Bristow (1825-1898)
Variations on "Beach Spring" (2006) Festive Prelude Hymn Chanty Ostinato Finale	Alfred V. Fedak (b. 1953)
Five Sketches, Op. 32 (1893) Vision Scherzo	Horatio Parker (1863-1919)
Concert Variations on "The Star Spangled Banner", Op. 23 (1868)	Dudley Buck (1839-1909)

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## PROGRAM NOTES

In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, performing orchestral transcriptions on the organ became something of an American obsession, in large part because of virtuosic performances by the likes of Edwin H. Lemare. We therefore tend to associate transcriptions with that era, and with the large, symphonic organs that proliferated at that time. However, the art of transcribing music for the organ goes back to the beginning of the organ repertory, in the medieval period. J. S. Bach wrote several outstanding examples of organ transcriptions. DUDLEY BUCK (1839-1909) was one of the first great American organ virtuosos, and often performed transcriptions on his recitals. This very interesting transcription of the *William Tell* overture suggests that Buck (and many other transcribers) was more interested in making the music into a real work for organ, rather than simply trying to imitate the exact sounds and textures of the orchestra. Buck made some significant changes: the key moved from E minor to D minor (likely because of the upper limits of the organ keyboards) and part of the "storm" section was shortened. In addition, many textural changes were necessarily made, leaving a work that allows the organist to show off many colors of the organ without having to be concerned about exact imitation of the orchestra. Rather unexpectedly, this makes it possible to play the piece effectively on smaller, less orchestrally conceived instruments. The familiar piece then takes on a new life in this context.

FELIX BOROWSKI (1872-1956) was an English-born American of Polish descent who spent most of his life in Chicago. He was a composer, critic, and program annotator for the fledgling Chicago Symphony Orchestra. He is perhaps best known for his piano and violin piece "Adoration", He also co-wrote the *Standard Opera Guide* with George Upton. He wrote three sonatas and one suite for organ, all of which exhibit a conservative, tonal, post-romantic language with the occasional hint of French impressionism. They are frequently charming, without venturing into the groundbreaking or experimental sounds coming from the "major" composers of his era. The second movement of the *Third Sonata*, entitled "Intermezzo", is in a very clear ABA format. The lushly romantic third movement is also in a fairly simple ABA form. Both movements of this sonata verge on Impressionism and rely frequently on more jazz-influenced harmonies. The toccata, from the suite written in 1900, is essentially a rondo, with 16<sup>th</sup>-note figuration that stays mainly in the right hand. Borowski was not an organist, so this toccata in particular shows a more pianistic approach to the writing.

GEORGE F. BRISTOW (1825-1898) was a violinist with the New York Philharmonic Society, which later became the Philharmonic Orchestra. Bristow, like many composers of his time, wrote for many different instruments and ensembles, and was interested in developing a true American style of classical music, derived from but independent of the European styles that tended to dominate concerts. Bristow was acknowledged as one of the first such composers to receive all his training in the US. The *Six Pieces* for organ owe a great deal to Mendelssohn, but have their own naïve charm. The two selections on today's program represent an early generation of American composers working to find a national voice.

ALFRED V. FEDAK (b. 1953) is an active composer and church musician, with many organ pieces in his catalog. The *Variations on "Beach Spring"* was commissioned for the 50<sup>th</sup> convention of the Organ Historical Society. It was specifically written for a two-manual organ built by Giles Beach in Schaghticoke, NY, in 1865, and was premiered there by Christopher Marks in 2006. Although the piece is intended to utilize the sounds of a small 19<sup>th</sup>-century American organ, it is very versatile and works very well on organs of any size and style. These are creative and often humorous variations on a familiar hymn tune.

HORATIO PARKER (1863-1919) was one of the most prominent American composers of his generation, as well as a skilled organist. He taught at Yale University for many years and held prominent church music positions in New York and Boston during his lifetime. His *Sketches*, Op. 32, are five short character pieces. "Vision" is a very lyrical piece that shows Parker's tendency towards harmonic exploration, which frequently resulted in passages that now seem somewhat antiquated, sentimental, or just downright unusual. "Scherzo" is a bit more conventional, with a middle trio that makes a quick return in the coda. This enjoyable piece also explores the entire range of the organ keyboard, frequently in very short passages. Both of these pieces are quite typical of Parker, being short character pieces using a late romantic vocabulary, and offer a glimpse at another composer working to synthesize European elements into a strong, unique American style.

Dudley Buck is perhaps best remembered for writing several variation sets on popular American themes. Aside from the "Star Spangled Banner", Buck also composed variations on such parlor tunes as "Annie Laurie", "The Last Rose of Summer", and "Old Folks at Home". This type of variation set became a cliché, eventually driving Charles Ives to write his famous *Variations on "America"*, which poke fun at the earlier pieces. Although there was not a set "formula", the variations almost inevitably contained a right-hand virtuoso movement, a pedal solo, a minor variation, and a fugue, all of which can be heard in the "Star Spangled Banner" variations. This quintessentially American piece seems a fitting conclusion to a program of all American music.

## THE ARTIST

**Christopher Marks** is Assistant Professor of organ at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. From 1999 to 2006, he taught organ and served as University Organist at Syracuse University. An active proponent of new music, Marks has premiered a number of commissioned organ works. His diverse stylistic interests also steer him towards a variety of other repertoire, especially that of the German Baroque period. Equally comfortable with solo and collaborative playing, he performs frequently with ensembles such as the Boston Brass. He holds degrees from University of Richmond (B.M., piano), University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (M.M., piano and M.M., organ), and the Eastman School of Music (D.M.A., organ), where he studied with Michael Farris. His performances have garnered him top prizes in competitions, including the Arthur Poister Competition, the San Marino Competition, the Fort Wayne Competition, and the Mader Competition.

Marks' recording entitled *Discoveries* was made on the historic Walter Holtkamp organ at Syracuse University and represents his varied musical interests, featuring music spanning four centuries that is rarely performed and recorded. His latest recording is *Organ Works of Seth Bingham, Vol. 1 "Unto the Hills"*. The recording is the first of a projected 3-disc set and is the first to be devoted solely to the organ music of Bingham, who was a prominent New York composer and organist. Both recordings are available from the Raven label at [www.RavenCD.com](http://www.RavenCD.com)

His recent professional activities have included acclaimed performances at national conventions of the Organ Historical Society, a performance at the 2007 Region II convention of the American Guild of Organists in New York, performances with Boston Brass and Ethos Percussion Group, and participation in five Pipe Organ Encounters. He is organizing the first ever Pipe Organ Encounter Advanced in Lincoln, for July 6-11, 2008.