

## The Solo Organ Music of Gunther Schuller (b. 1925)

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“Dr. [Tertius] Noble was not only my first musical mentor---besides my father---but, by choosing me to turn pages for him for his weekly Sunday afternoon organ recitals, he introduced me at a tender age to the wonders of the literature of the “King of Instruments,” not only the great masterpieces of Bach, Handel, Couperin, Frescobaldi, but the “moderns” as well, such as Messiaen (then a virtually unknown composer in America), Duruflé, Peeters, Maleingreau, Sowerby, Hindemith, etc.”

-Gunther Schuller, from Preface to Triptych, 1976

### Works

#### *solo*

Triptych (1976) ca. 23', premiere Yuko Hayashi, AGO Convention Boston 1976, Old West Church.

Organ Symphony (1981), premiere of four movements by Clyde Holloway, House of Hope Presbyterian, St. Paul, 1981. Scherzo has yet to be performed.

Orgelwalzer (published 1986) ca. 14', premiere David Shuler, Church of the Ascension, New York, 1985.

#### *ensemble*

Organ Concerto (1994), premiere James Diaz, Calgary Philharmonic.

Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis (1994) (SATB+organ)

Sacred Cantata, Psalm 98 (1966) SATB, strings, percussion, & organ, premiere AGO Convention Atlanta, 1966.

## Musical Language

### Melody

-Schuller's compositional style is strongly conditioned by traditional, tonal conceptions of melody and harmony.

Figure 1. *Meditation* (mvt. 1) from *Symphony for Organ*, mm. 1-4.

The musical score for Figure 1 shows the first four measures of the 'Meditation' movement. It is written for organ. The top staff is the right hand, and the bottom staff is the left hand. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4. The right hand part begins with a melodic line marked 'p' (piano) and 'Gen. Tremulant'. There are some handwritten annotations: 'Sw.' above the first measure, a '3' above a triplet in the second measure, and 'open' and 'closed' with arrows below the left hand staff indicating pedal positions.

Figure 2. *Valse Noble* from *Orgelwalzer*, mm. 45-61.

The musical score for Figure 2 shows measures 45 through 61 of the 'Valse Noble' movement. It is written for organ. The top staff is the right hand, and the bottom staff is the left hand. The key signature has one flat (Bb) and the time signature is 3/4. The right hand part begins with a melodic line marked 'p' (piano) and 'Gen. Tremulant'. There are several handwritten annotations: 'a Tempo' above measure 45, 'Pos.' above measure 46, 'ma poco meno (allegro - 132)' above measure 48, and circled measure numbers 50, 55, and 60. The left hand part features a complex accompaniment with many chords and moving lines. There are also some handwritten annotations in the left hand part, including 'p.' and '2'.

## Harmony

Figure 3. *Valse Diabolique* from *Orgelwalzer*, mm. 1-2.

*Vivace*  $d. = 58$  (keep a strong three feeling)

The musical score for Figure 3 consists of three staves. The top staff is a grand staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). It contains handwritten annotations: "Vivace  $d. = 58$ " and "(keep a strong three feeling)". The middle staff is the piano part, starting with a fortissimo (*ff*) dynamic. The bottom staff is the bass line. The music is in 4/4 time and features a complex harmonic structure with many accidentals and slurs.

Figure 4. *Triptych*, Part II, mm. 113-118

Tempo I° Sostenuto, solenne

Gt.: - Bourdon, + Spirefl.  
 Ch.: Chimney Fl. only  
 Ped.: (Sw. to Ped.) - Tpt., + CHtby

The musical score for Figure 4 consists of three staves. The top staff is a grand staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). It contains handwritten annotations: "Tempo I° Sostenuto, solenne", "Gt.: - Bourdon, + Spirefl.", "Ch.: Chimney Fl. only", "Ped.: (Sw. to Ped.) - Tpt., + CHtby", and "rit." at the end of the piece. The middle staff is the piano part, starting with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The bottom staff is the bass line. The music is in 4/4 time and features a complex harmonic structure with many accidentals and slurs.

## The Row and its Employment

-Schuller has used the same twelve-tone row in every piece since the 1976 *Violin Concerto*.

Figure 5. Prime form of Schuller's "magic row"



### Some Important Tonal Components of the Row

"...the retention of tonal elements, either subtly or overtly, either harmonically or melodically, can be a composer's choice. And perhaps that is the most fundamental, most personal choice that a composer can make." –Gunther Schuller

Figure 6. Characteristic "Tonal" Sonorities



### Inversional Combinatoriality

Figure 7. Triptych, Part I, mm. 1-2

Allegro scorrevole ♩ = 84

P4 ctd. 8 9 10 12 11

P4

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 1 2 3 4 5 6 9 7 8 10 11 12

P4 4 5 10 1 7 8 | 0 2 11 9 6 3  
 I3 3 2 9 6 0 11 | 7 5 8 10 1 4

Figure 8. Triptych, Part II, mm. 13-17

The musical score for Figure 8, Triptych, Part II, mm. 13-17, consists of two systems. The first system shows a piano part with a triplet of eighth notes in the right hand and a subbass line in the left hand. The second system shows a guitar part with a triplet of eighth notes in the right hand and a P7 chord in the left hand. The tempo is marked *Tempo I°* (♩ = 56) and the location is *- Cremona*. The piece concludes with a *pochiss. rit.* marking.

Embedding V-I in the Row

Figure 8. *Valse Diabolique* from Orgelwalzer, mm. 25-30

The musical score for Figure 8, *Valse Diabolique* from Orgelwalzer, mm. 25-30, shows a piano part with a G Major DOM7 chord and a C Major (add fifth) chord. The piece concludes with a *lunga* marking and a *Fine* marking. The tempo is marked *2. time only*.

## Form

- Often traditional, typically very clear forms with extensive repetition, either literal or varied.
- Through composed movements figure prominently (Triptych I, *Finale-Toccata* from Symphony). Influence of jazz on formal structures.
- Every organ piece has a waltz.
- Organic developments culminate in brassy climaxes.

### Traditional Formal Types in the Solo Organ Music

Strophic song forms with varied reprises (*Valse noble*, *Valse triste*, Triptych II)

Ternary forms (*Valse diabolique*, *Scherzo* from Symphony)

Five-part rondo (Triptych III)

## Rhythm

- Varied use of polyrhythm, but less extensive than other composers of his generation
- Syncopations (sometimes humorous), meter play, unusual hypermetrical organization
- Subset division of row sometimes reflected also in rhythmic organization

Figures 9-10. *Valse Noble* mm. 1-28, *Finale-Toccata* from *Symphony* mm. 1-27 (see attached).

### Jazz Influences in the Solo Organ Music

Syncopation, harmony, texture/orchestration, fast tempi, through-composed movements, improvisatory types of variation, ornamentation

## Reference and Quotation

- Fully aware of the rich tradition of organ composition and of typical types of organ figuration
- Schuller's vast knowledge of orchestral repertoire manifests itself in a multitude of ways.

Figure 11. from Dupré: *Preludio* from *Symphony II*; Schuller: *Finale-Toccata* from *Symphony*, mm. 58-65.

The image displays two musical excerpts. The top excerpt is from Dupré's *Preludio* from *Symphony II*, featuring a treble and bass staff with a key signature of two sharps (D major) and a 2/4 time signature. The bottom excerpt is from Schuller's *Finale-Toccata* from *Symphony*, mm. 58-65. It shows a piano part with a key signature of two sharps and a 2/4 time signature. The score includes performance instructions such as "stacc.", "p", "closed", and "Rp. to Ped. Sw. to Ped.". A circled number "60" is present above the piano staff. A list of instruments is written above the staff: "-Fl., Tourn., Clarinet, Horn #, Oboe, Bassoon, Trumpet #, Trombone #".

Figure 12. from Ravel: *La valse*; Schuller: *Valse Diabolique*, mm. 73-79

The image displays two musical excerpts. The top excerpt is from Ravel's *La valse*, showing a bass staff with a key signature of two sharps and a 3/4 time signature. The bottom excerpt is from Schuller's *Valse Diabolique*, mm. 73-79. It shows a piano part with a key signature of two sharps and a 3/4 time signature. The score includes performance instructions such as "p", "with a relaxed waltz feeling", "d. = 52-54", "Sw. Chim. Fl. 8' only", and "(Sw. to Ped.)".

## Use of the organ

- Highly orchestral in conception: very much interested in organ color.
- Frequent stop changes indicated by composer and based on the instruments that each piece was premiered on.
- Often 8' pedal (no 16').

Figure 13. *Meditation* from *Symphony*, mm. 59-70.

The image shows a handwritten musical score for the piece "Meditation" from a Symphony, measures 59-70. The score is written on multiple staves with various annotations and performance instructions.

**Measure 59:** Includes markings such as *Ch. F. 8'*, *incalzando*, *mf*, *molto legato*, *poco a poco cresc.*, and *Tremb. doux*. There are also handwritten notes like *open* and *mf*.

**Measure 65:** Includes markings such as *Clarin. 4'*, *mf*, *cresc.*, and *mf*. There are also handwritten notes like *close to key* and *2*.

**Measure 70:** Includes markings such as *agitato*, *ff marc.*, *cresc.*, *70*, *Cornet, Clarinet*, *Fr. Trp. + Orlans*, *Bar. to Gt.*, *+ Oct. 8', Cornet*, *- Oct. 8', Cornet*, *+ Oct. 8', Cornet*, and *Bar. to Ped.*

The score is heavily annotated with performance instructions and markings, including dynamic levels (*mf*, *ff marc.*), articulation (*molto legato*), and tempo/character markings (*agitato*, *incalzando*). There are also numerous handwritten notes and corrections throughout the score.



-Exploits separation of divisions in space and explores antiphonal possibilities.

Figure 14. Triptych, Part II, mm. 41-44

a tempo (♩ = 56)

Sw. + Vln. Diap. L. H. mp

Gt. Spirefl. only R. H. - Spirefl. + Clarion R. H. p

Ch. (Chim. Fl.) L. H. + Cremona mf L. H. pp

Ped. + Octave 8' - Ch. to Ped.

## Selected Bibliography

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