

Louis Vierne (1870 - 1937) - 24 Pièces en style libre

Almost completely blind from birth, Louis Vierne was, if not quite an infant prodigy, extremely gifted. His uncle, Charles Colin, introduced him to the church of St. Clotilde and the music of César Franck. In his own words, this was '*un révélation profonde*'. At the age of 19 Vierne entered Franck's organ class at the Paris Conservatoire but sadly Franck died suddenly a few months later. He continued his studies with Charles-Marie Widor and was appointed assistant at the Conservatoire and also at the church of Saint-Sulpice.

At the age of 30 he was appointed *Organiste Titulaire* at Notre-Dame and remained here until his death. His life was beset with tragedy, ranging from the death of his beloved César Franck, the adultery of his wife with his close friend Charles Mutin, the dedicatee of the 2nd Symphonie and his subsequent divorce, the death in 1911 of both his mother and his great colleague and friend Alexandre Guilmant, the death of his gifted brother René in 1918 at the front, the complete loss of his remaining sight in 1918, a four-year absence of leave from Notre-Dame during prolonged illness, and finally, the massive rift with his pupil Marcel Dupré who stood in for Vierne during his absence. In addition, his relations with the clergy and church authorities at Notre-Dame were anything but cordial and worsened with the passing years.

It's hardly surprising, then, that Aubrey de Brisay, writing in the Musical Times in 1935 after a visit to the great man in Notre-Dame should feel moved to say "*There is much pain, both physical and moral in Vierne's face, and the hard and sometimes wilful chromaticism of much of his music is symptomatic of this inner struggle.*" This reaches its most extreme expression in the 6th Symphonie.

24 Pièces en style libre

The 24 Pièces en style libre use in all the major and minor keys, were published in 1914 and are, therefore, from his mature middle period. His major organ works comprise:

1st Symphonie (1898/9)
2nd Symphonie (1902)
3rd Symphonie (1911)
4th Symphonie (1914)
24 Pièces en style libre (1914)
5th Symphonie (1924)
24 Pièces de fantaisie (1924-27)
6th Symphonie (1930)

The 24 Pièces are *pour Orgue ou Harmonium* and Vierne makes clear in the preface that he has in mind either a two-manual and pedal organ of 18 - 20 stops or a single-manual harmonium with four stops and a half. He gives registrations for both.

Harmonium registration.

A typical French harmonium (by Alexandre or Mustel) has a single keyboard which divides at c1. There are four stops for the bass and four for the treble and Vierne refers to these by number. In addition, there is a *Céleste*, *Expression à la main*, *Grand jeux* and two *forté* controls. In addition, stops no. 1 include a percussion effect produced by striking the reed tongues with small hammers. (E) is the *Expression à la main*, a device which bypasses the reservoir and therefore allows the player to control the volume and expression directly from the foot pedals supplying the wind. The *Céleste* brings a second row of reeds into play which are tuned slightly sharp, producing an undulating effect. The *Grand Jeux* (GJ) sounds all the available reeds apart from the undulating rank.

Such a harmonium would contain the following stops (using Vierne's numbering scheme):

Bass

- (1) Cor anglais 8' (Perc.)
- (2) Bourdon 16'
- (3) Clairon 4'
- (4) Basson 8'

Treble

- (1) Flute 8' (Perc.)
- (2) Clarinette 16'
- (3) Fifre 4'
- (4) Hautbois 8'

Céleste

(E) Expression à la main

(GJ) Grand jeux

Forté 1

Forté 2

(This all sounds quite exotic until you remember that harmonium ranks mostly sound the same as each other!)

Organ registration

Vierne writes for a two-manual organ:

G (Grand orgue) roughly corresponds to the British Great organ

R (Récit) roughly equals the British Swell organ

G = play on the Great uncoupled to the Swell

R = play on the Swell

GR = play on the Great coupled to the Swell

Glossary of stop-names and instructions:

French

Fonds

Claviers accouplés

Tirasses

Anches

Fonds doux

Tirasse G

Tirasse R

Octavin

Cornet

Montre

English

Foundation stops

manuals coupled together

manual to pedal coupler(s)

reed stops

quiet foundation stops

Great to Pedal

Swell to Pedal

Fifteenth 2'

Sesquialtera (12:17)

No exact equivalent - these are the 'display' pipes. Open Diapason is the closest

Anches préparés	‘Reeds prepared for’: on the French organ the reeds can be drawn ready for use, but will not sound until a ‘ventil’ pedal is pressed
Claviers séparés	Great uncoupled to Swell
Solo	Only the named stop is used

The other terms are probably self-explanatory.

The pedal is not *obligé*, but there will be some pretty big LH stretches without them!

Key-scheme

Most composers who write a set of 24 pieces in all major and minor keys generally opt for one of two schemes:

Chopin/Shostakovitch: C maj - A min - G maj - E min - D maj - B min etc. (circle of fifths)

Bach: C maj - C min - C sharp maj - C sharp min - D maj - D min. etc. (chromatic)

Vierne uses the second of these, meaning that he begins in C major and finishes in B minor. In a sense, the actual key-signatures of each of the pieces is not hugely significant because of the extreme chromaticism of much of Vierne’s harmony.

Other harmonium collections:

The most obvious one is the two-volume set by César Franck *L’Organiste* (Published 1896-1900 but actually written much earlier). This is a curious collection and whilst the first volume is reasonable enough (although you need very large hands to play some of the pieces successfully), the second, published strangely enough by Enoch in Glasgow, is a hotchpotch of bits and pieces and much less satisfactory. Plenty of composers wrote for the harmonium, including Guilmant, Dubois, Lemmens, Merkel, Lefébure-Wély, Karg-Elert and Reger, but there is nothing either on the scale or of the quality of Vierne 24 Pièces. Perhaps the most successful is Karg-Elert, who wrote some extremely delicate and impressionistic miniatures for the instrument. There are any number of books of two-stave ‘voluntaries’ by some very awful composers!

Vierne’s language

By turns naive (*Berceuse*), dreamy (*Arabesque*), heroic (*Marche funèbre*, *Cortège*), impish (*Scherzetto*, *Divertissement*), tragic (*Elégie*), triumphant (*Carillon*) and anguished (*Canzona*) Vierne runs through the entire emotional gamut. Far from being little ‘pot-boilers’ composed to make some easy money, these wonderful miniatures occupy much of the same ground in Vierne’s *oeuvre* as does the *Orgelbüchlein* in Bach’s: they are sublime examples of concision and compression by a composer who has already proved that he is more than capable of handling the big forms of musical composition.

Vierne’s harmonic language derives primarily from his idol César Franck although he avoids the occasionally cloying chromaticism of his mentor. There are hints of Wagner and even, in places, Debussy (the *Arabesque* is the most obvious example). Sometimes we can hear the clear influence of his teacher, Widor, but Vierne’s sound-world is a long way from the neo-classicist Widor. Widor’s effect is, perhaps, heard most clearly in the limpid slow pieces such as the *Pastorale*, and the more stentorian movements, such as the *Cortège* where it is possible to hear echoes of the first movement of Widor’s 6th *Symphonie*.

Given the brevity of most of the pieces it's not surprising that Vierne makes frequent recourse to ostinati (most obviously in the Carillon and the Marche funèbre, but elsewhere as well) or the use of a simple rhythmic motif to propel a movement forward (Légende, Complainte). Some of the pieces feature a change of mood mid-movement (such as the Pastorale and the Scherzetto), but his favoured technique is to set out his musical stall in the opening two or three bars and to maintain the same train of thought throughout a movement (the Berceuse is an obvious instance).

You would never think from the sheer bravado of some of these pieces that the harmonium was ever thought to be an instrument of limited capabilities! For quality of invention and depth of emotion they are unequalled in the harmonium repertoire and organists have 24 reasons to be grateful that Vierne managed to put some of his best music into pieces which are not only for the virtuoso.

The Pieces:

BOOK 1

1. Prélude (C major *Moderato*)

Form: A-B-A-B-Coda where A is mostly diatonic and B chromatic. The shift to Eb for the reprise of A is quite unexpected. A notable feature is the use of the sharpened subdominant in the Coda (F sharp) which is prefigured in the second chord of B. Notice, too, the imitative entries in A and the extended plagal cadence at bars 8/9 and 21/22. Was Vierne aware of the 'Tristan' chord in bar 31? Like Wagner, he responds to the tension produced by this highly unstable chord with a string of unresolved harmonies. It's hard to believe that this is NOT at least a subconscious reflection of Wagner!

2. Cortège (C minor *Allegro maestoso*)

Rarely can four pages of music have contained so much energy and intensity. The wedge shape of the first two bars is rhythmically and harmonically intensified in bars 3 and 4 and these four bars contain the seeds for all that follows. Bars 9-12 are driven forward by a chromatic development and compression of the opening idea, over a LH ostinato which, in turn, gives the rhythmic material for a new idea in bar 13. By this point we have heard all the material and the remainder of the piece is a development (or, if you prefer, a 'cut-and-paste' job) of what has already been stated. Notice the masterly way in which the opening idea is transferred to the LH in bars 35 - 38, before the reprise of the opening over LH ostinato in bar 39. Bars 45 - 46 have the pedal climbing chromatically from B to G over a restatement of the idea from the opening before a final plagal cadence: A-MEN!! Although it's possible to analyse almost every note and relate it something else, I would see this as such an outburst of fury that it's probably best thought of as being through-composed and monothematic, since virtually everything can trace its roots back to the first four bars.

3. Complainte (Db major *Andante moderato*)

This is really monothematic: the 'new' tune on the second page is really just an inversion of the only theme in the piece. The use of dominant pedals characterise the first page, with a tonic pedal in F minor at the beginning of the second page, before another dominant pedal under which we hear an inversion of the tune. The last two lines form a coda, with the inverted form of the tune over a series of 1st inversion chords. The piece as a whole is rather too formulaic to work successfully: one has the impression that it might have been written to 'fill in the gaps'! It bears a remarkable resemblance to the *Prélude* from César Franck's *L'Organiste* with which it shares the characteristic two-part writing doubled at the octave.

4. Epitaphe (C# minor *Lento*)

There's a Beethovenian feel to the measured tread of the first eight bars although it actually sounds very much like the Chopin C minor Prelude - so much so that one is forced to wonder whether it was conscious. This miniature is dedicated *à la mémoire de mon ami Alphonse Schmitt* and clearly carries a

weight of sorrow. The defining progression is the tonic/flattened sub-median/tonic of the opening - a progression which is at the same time both earth-bound (inasmuch as it immediately returns home) and reaching out to a remote tonality. This simple eight-bar 'kontakion' (A) is answered by four bars of apparent harmonic simplicity (B1) and four bars of much greater harmonic intensity (B2). The reprise, in the dominant (bar 17) is not an exact transposition and Vierne replaces bars 5-8 of the 'kontakion' with a three intense musical keenings before a reprise of (B).

On the harmonium Vierne requests that the second half of the piece be played an octave higher on the Céleste which gives a poignancy which may be missing on the organ. The first half of (A) is heard twice, this time as a melody accompanied by pianistic figuration. The final bar is repeated a third lower leading to another statement of (A), over a dominant pedal. As the texture thins, Vierne asks for both *cresc.* and *cresc. molto* until in bar 53 just the melody remains. The final two lines are a bleak restatement of fragments of (A) and the music comes to a solemn close on a deep C sharp minor chord.

The form is simple: a theme (A/B/A/B), a variation (A) and a coda (fragments of (A)).

5. Prélude (D major *Andante sostenuto*)

(Why the Prelude should be the fifth number is a mystery!) After six bars of an innocence worthy of Bizet (A1) (it sounds a bit like a pinch from *Jeux d'enfants*) the music takes an unexpected journey into C sharp major (A2) and a nifty circle of fifths in bar 10 (C sharp/F sharp/B/E/A7) brings us back to a reprise of the opening although this time the music takes a 'wrong turning' to migrate firstly to Bb, then Eb before becoming harmonically unstable in bars 21 *et seq.* At this point the compound pulse gives way to the simple pulse of 3/4, adding to the feeling of transience and accelerating the rate of harmonic change. Bars 28 - 33 represent halting attempts to regain both the tonic key and the compound pulse. Bar 34 brings repose with a restatement of the opening tune, although the LH ostinato of bars 1 - 6 has been replaced by a bass melody. The original 7-bar RH melody is extended to 10 bars by a shift into Eb at bar 40. The coda (bars 41 - end) is built largely on material from (A2).

A fascinating miniature which exhibits several aspects of Vierne's inventiveness:

Although basically monothematic (A1 and A2 are really continuous), Vierne only actually repeats four bars verbatim (bars 1-4 and 11-14), yet the piece derives entirely from use of the material of A1 and A2.

The overall structure could hardly be simpler: Stasis (bars 1-14)/Instability (bars 15-33)/Stasis (bar 34-end). The third section revisits the simple tune of the opening in the light of the instability of the middle section.

The final six bars which make up the coda hark back to the harmonic instability of the middle section.

In other words, he modifies his basically very simple material to create the tensions and relaxations which propel the music forward. It's an amazing piece of compositional 'cutting and pasting.'

6. Canon (D minor *Molto moderato*)

The dedicatee, Henri Mulet, was *Titulaire* at Sacré Coeur so maybe Vierne was trying to impress him by writing a canon! The first sixteen and a half bars are a canon at the octave over a tonic pedal taking the music, at bar 17, into the unlikely key of Eb minor. Note how the first two bars are an inversion of the opening. (Note, too, the misprint in bar 20: the first LH note should be Ab). Bar 23 marks the start of a shift into C minor. Notice how Vierne makes use of sequence to make key-changes (bars 18 - 23, 29 - 34). By bar 36 we are in G minor, but not for long, as bars 39 - 54 take the music through a dazzling kaleidoscope of keys before we return to the opening canon, this time over a dominant pedal.

In a sense, a canon effectively writes itself and is self-perpetuating. Whilst not being in quite the same league as, for instance, Bach's canonic variations on *Vom Himmel hoch*, Vierne covers a large amount of territory here, avoiding all the obvious key-relationships and taking the music through some very remote keys (Eb minor, C minor, Ab minor, E major and G sharp have very little to do with the tonic D minor). It's almost as though he has set himself the task of venturing as far as possible from his starting-point in order to prove that he is equal to the business of finding his way home again.

The piece is in three sections: A-B-A where A is bars 1-16, B is 17 - 54 and A is 55 - end. Within that crude overview, section B is where the 'inverted' theme wanders through distant territory before coming 'home' again at A.

7. Méditation (Eb major *Adagio*)

Although notionally in Eb, this is one of the most chromatic movements of the set and the debt to César Franck is writ large in every bar (although bars 16-17 could be straight out of *Tristan!*). Interestingly, the melodic interest is not invariably in the soprano part: in bars 23 (bt.4) - 31 and 44 - 51 it is in the bass part and from 51-56 there is actually a duet between the soprano and bass parts.

There's not much to be gained from trying to unpick the many chromatic shifts which propel the music in so many directions unrelated to the home key; rather, it is worth pointing out the technique which Vierne uses to stop the music from constantly coming to a full stop. He hasn't arrived at the Debussyian trick of using chords for their own sake - all the harmony is functional and never merely decorative - but he develops the idea of following one unresolved chord with another unresolved chord. There are countless instances of a dominant (sometimes seventh, sometimes ninth) being 'resolved' into another dominant. Look at bars 9-12 for an instance of this: Bb7/A7/Bb7/E7/C7/F7/Bb7 - he might use enharmonic equivalents, added notes and accented passing notes, but the effect is the same.

The (mostly) four-part harmony of the first page is replete with chromatic passing notes and it is notable that there are only TWO simple triads on the page! The texture thins at the start of the second page when the melody passes to the bass, but, if anything, the level of chromaticism is even greater.

The third page brings a reprise of the opening soprano melody (although reharmonized), firstly in the bass and then in the soprano, before a brief coda over a tonic pedal.

Although at first sight this movement could be dismissed as the kind of aimless meandering organists like to play when they haven't had time to practise properly, it's actually very tightly wrought. The basic A-B-A-Coda shape gives it cohesion and there is a thematic unity, with the bass tune B reappearing in the second A section, where it accompanies the soprano melody. Maybe, though, it's a bit too saccharine for regular church use!

8. Idylle mélancolique (Eb minor *Andantino*)

Another A-B-A-Coda movement and, again, an instance where Vierne inverts the opening idea later in the movement (bars 27 - 30, pedal). The theme is worth examining in some detail: A sequential 'sigh' is answered by a rising and falling motif in bars 3 & 4. The sequential 'sighs' are reprised in 5 & 6, and bars 7 - 10 bring the tune to rest on the dominant, leaving the melody 'open' rather than 'closed'. This allows the tune to be extended in the following bars, which Vierne does, initially in the tenor and, in the last two bars of the first page, in the soprano. This is skilful writing as, at no point, does the music arrive at anything more final than a colon. The weakness which pervades so much music of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is both the regularity of its phrase-lengths (usually in even-numbered bar-lengths) and its propensity to keep coming to a close. Vierne is well-appraised of this and manages to construct his melodic lines in such a way as to make them fluid and capable of extension and development.

On the second page we are back into the chromatic bass-slipping of which he is fond (first 5 bars of page 2 and also bars 13 and 14) and it has to be said that his use of this technique to get from Gb to the dominant of Db (bars 12 - 15 on the second page) is not particularly subtle! The inversion of the first two bars appears in the tenor part of the final bar of the second page and the first three bars of page 3 and a neat bridge passage leads back into a reprise of the opening over a dominant pedal. A brief coda built initially from bars 9 and 10 of the opening and then a restatement of the first four bars in the tenor part bring the movement to a peaceful close.

9. Madrigal (E major *Moderato*)

Despite its title, this piece bears scant resemblance to the English madrigal with its subtle interplay between the voices and panoply of clever rhythmic devices. In fact, it's very earth-bound and almost entirely conceived in one-bar phrases. The pattern of the first bar permeates almost every bar in the movement and becomes tiresome. Harmonic movement is frequently either by chromatically-sliding bass (bars 5-7 for instance) or circle of fifths (bars 3 and 4). Not only is the piece monothematic, it is built more or less entirely from the idea in bar one. Of its forty bars, just four (10%!) are not either mildly or extremely chromatic, although it is worth noting that Vierne does make quite extensive use of the whole-tone scale (bars 15, 17, 25 & 27).

10. Reverie (E minor *Moderato*)

This is the fourth slow, highly chromatic movement in a row and, if the pieces are played in order, represents a weakness in the collection as a whole. Too many of the adjacent movements are similar in style and tempo. The Reverie starts off like a breath of fresh air but by bar five we have returned to the chromatically-sliding bass line of the previous movements. There are really three themes: bars 1 - 8 (A), bars 17 - 24 (B) and bars 33 - 43 (C). This gives a structure of:

A/A/B/B/C/C/C/C&A/A&C/A/A/B/B/A. (Vierne combines C and A in the first three and half lines of the third page).

The number of pedal points is notable.

11. Divertissement (F major *Allegro*)

Some light relief at last! This delightful movement is dedicated to Joseph Bonnet, the virtuoso *Titulaire* of St. Eustache in Paris. The registration (foundations and reeds at 8' & 4' pitches) remind us that this is not a delicate divertissement and just look at the fiendish pedal part of the penultimate line, culminating in a crashing final cadence. (Bonnet was renowned for his prodigious pedal technique.) This is the first of three *moto perpetuo* movements for which Vierne is famous, the others being the *Impromptu* and *Naiades* from the *Pièces de Fantaisie*. All share rapid RH figurations over a light LH and pedal accompaniment of one or two chords per bar. Although by no means easy, Vierne's patterns lie well under the hand and the piece is extremely effective.

Thematic material is replaced here by figuration, but I think that it's still possible to detect a definite form by looking at the shape of the figurations:

(A) Bars 1 - 8

(B) Bars 25 - 32

Of course there are other shapes (the top of the third page and much of the fourth, for instance) but they are related in one way or another to either (A) or (B) and the way in which the music breaks down (mostly) into convenient eight-bar phrases makes it fairly transparent:

A/A/A(LH)/B/B/var. of B/A/A(LH)/chromatic middle section based on B/A(LH then RH) - Coda.

The piece works so well partly because Vierne invents memorable ideas and also because of the satisfying overall structure with what amounts to a miniature ‘development’ section on the penultimate page followed by a condensed recapitulation, giving it something of the feel of a sonata-form movement in microcosm. The chromaticism seems to serve a purpose in driving the music forward and creating genuine periods of tension (which are subsequently relaxed) rather than merely becoming self-indulgent.

12. Canzona (F minor *Andante cantabile*)

Vierne concludes the first book with a favourite device of French composers from Franck onwards: a reed solo, in this case a trompette. The typical French trompette is a delicately-voiced stop, under expression and it can work well as both a RH or a LH solo. The indication GR over the LH at the beginning is a misprint as Vierne clearly states that the *claviers* are *séparés*. The Canzona owes a considerable debt to Franck both in its melodic shape and in its harmonic language. In simple ABA form where B (bars 20 to 43) and the material of B is actually closely related to that of A (notice how the LH melody at bar 20 uses the same note-values as A).

Here, the chromaticism is frequently functional, producing some anguished discords which often resolve onto a further dissonance (bar 4, for instance, or the beginning of bar 8) and, interestingly, the fact that we are not faced with endless chromatic sideslips suggests that this is chromatic writing with a purpose, rather than the all-too easy ‘finger-wanderings’ which mar some of the earlier movements in this volume.

The melody of A is wide-ranging and, despite its aspiring contour, invariably falls back on itself: a prefiguration of the kind of heart-rending despair we encounter in the later symphonies. Notice, too, how the characteristic seventh of the opening expands to a tenth in bars 14 & 15. As if to emphasise the point, Vierne rachets up the emotional yearning of this theme by the addition of ornaments on its reprise on the final page. The final statement in the LH (page four, line 3) extends the upward seventh of the theme to a minor ninth before collapsing in the last four bars of the piece.

The plodding pedal part which constantly seeks to rise, but is always forced chromatically back down again, is the final piece of the jigsaw in this despairing miniature.

BOOK 2

13. Légende (F# major *Andantino moderato*)

Although at first sight the notion of basing three pages of music on the same quaver/crotchet looks a bit unpromising, this is an attractive movement built from the simple pentatonic theme heard in bars 1 - 3. The pentatonic scale carries its own harmonic implications of neutrality and Vierne is, unusually, free of chromatic excess for large parts of the piece. It's hard to think of the movement being anything other than monothematic, so all-pervading is the rhythmic pattern, but there is a feeling of ‘call-and-response’ which is set out clearly in the first twelve bars (notice that the compound triple metre imposes a three-bar phrase structure on the first page - Vierne is obviously sensitive to the monotony which continued use of this would produce and the phrase-lengths are reduced to two bars in the middle section).

Form is A/B/A with the recapitulation A over a dominant pedal before the briefest of chromatic codas.

14. Scherzetto (F# minor *Scherzando*)

This is one of the treasures of the collection and Vierne is at his wittiest. The chromaticism is of the essential (as opposed to the gooey) kind and even the second theme is gorgeously warm and not particularly serious. There is real feeling of musical repartee with some lovely cadential touches in particular (look at bars 8, 16) and some really effective use of silence (bars 8 and 9 on the fourth page;

bars 6 and 10 on the sixth page). There are also quite a few references to the whole-tone scale (second page, bars 4 and 8; third page, bars 11 and 12 and elsewhere).

The piquant registration adds to the overall lightheartedness (flutes at 8' & 4' pitches with Nazard and Octavin). The form is A/B/A/B (shortened)/Coda, where B is the more chromatic, mock-wistful theme which starts in the last bar of the second page). The throwaway coda is a masterstroke, with the scuttling chromatics coming to rest on a third-inversion D7 chord before making the final cadence with witty economy.

15. Arabesque (G major *Adagio*)

This is often rated as the finest movement in the set - a curious amalgam of Wagnerian (and occasionally Debussyian) harmony supporting an almost unbroken outpouring of melody. Rhythmically, the music has the freedom of improvisation and there is an inspired juxtaposition of diatonicism and whole-tonality (just look at the first page where a bar of one is answered with a bar of the other). Unusually, the reprise of the opening melody is considerably extended (the second A section begins with the LH melody in the final bar of the second page). The harmonically richer B section (second page, apart from the last bar) breaks the pattern by answering two bars of whole-tone harmony with two bars of intensely chromatic harmony. The return of the melody to the RH on page 3 is stunning: the indeterminate preparatory harmony of line four, bar one, is such that we are actually surprised to discover that the RH F sharp is actually the *leading note* of G major!

This is the kind of music which defies detailed analysis: to use a well-worn cliché, Vierne gives us pure poetry and rises to the same sort of status as Debussy in *Syrinx*.

16. Choral (G minor *Andante*)

We don't know the order in which Vierne actually composed these pieces, but it's not difficult to imagine that, with the Scherzetto and Arabesque down on his oversized manuscript paper, he is now well into his stride and the music is flowing, because the high level of inspiration continues with this, and the following pieces. Indeed, he scarcely sets a foot wrong in this second set of pieces. This dark-hued choral shows little sunshine until the final bars and the growling reed tone specified for the bare two-part writing of the opening sets the mood quite starkly. The choral itself is interspersed with the growlings - an unusual technique. The intensely-harmonized version, with triplets in the inner parts, over a dominant pedal (third page, line 3) is actually quite disturbing.

The form (where A is the bare two-part 'growling' and B is the choral itself) is:

A/B/A/B/A/B/A/B/B(in the bass)/B(over dom. ped.)/A/B (in major key). Notice how Vierne racks up the tension in lines 3-5 of the second page by shortening the statements of both A and B.

A most unusual and inventive concept.

17. Lied (Ab Major *Cantabile*)

This, along with the Carillon and Berceuse, is probably the most often performed movement in the set and it's not hard to see why: the warm, flowing theme which appears in both the soprano and bass parts, is memorable and immediately appealing. This is really a 'song without words' in the Mendelssohn tradition, complete with pianistic broken-chord accompaniment, although the harmonic language owes a great deal more to Franck than Mendelssohn. (It also owes more than a passing debt to the Saint-Saëns of 'The Swan'). It is virtually one unbroken melody and monotony is cleverly avoided by some striking enharmonic key-shifts taking the music into quite remote keys.

A particularly effective touch is the way in which the final phrase of the melody (LH bars 10 & 11) is used to develop the modulatory bridge passage on the second page (third line) and a similar technique is applied to the second phrase of the melody (LH bars 3 bt. 4 - 5) which forms the lovely extended cadence on line two of the last page. The piece stands as a model of melodic development and extension. The melody itself is interesting inasmuch as it comprises five short phrases, the second, fourth and fifth of which are anacrusic. The fifth 'limb' is absent from the reprise in the soprano. How easy it would have been, having produced such a tune, to merely repeat it and how skilful is Vierne's use of his material!

Essentially monothematic, there is a kind of miniature 'development' in the third, fourth and fifth lines of the second page.

18. Marche Funèbre (G# minor *Maestoso*)

This movement, of symphonic proportions, is the longest and, perhaps, most impressive in the set. The use of reed tone throughout (and, apart, from the *Poco più vivo* section, with Récit reeds at 16' 8' & 4' pitches) and the pedal 32' gives a richness and depth even beyond the complexity of the big chords as seen from the printed page. This is clearly a piece which Vierne meant to be taken seriously and is certainly no 'trifle'. It's not hard to imagine this piece orchestrally, with *G and Ped.anches* signalling the arrival of the orchestral brass.

The piece is dedicated to Vierne's friend Jules Bouval, a fellow pupil in Franck's class at the Conservatoire. Bouval (1867-1914) received honourable mention in the 1893 Prix de Rome and went on to become organist at the church of St-Pierre-de-Chaillot. He sat next to Vierne and comforted him at Franck's funeral service at which Vierne was moved deeply by the performance of the *Marche Funèbre* from *Irlande* by Augusta Holmès (dedicatee of Franck's great A minor organ Choral), hence the title of this tribute on Bouval's own death in 1914. This, then, is an expression of grief not only for the loss of Bouval, but of his adored master, Franck, as well. As Vierne said at the time, when he received the news of Franck's death, it was as though he was losing his beloved father a second time. This goes some way towards explaining the power and anguish of this movement.

The main theme (A) is heard in octaves in the soprano and tenor parts over an ostinato suggestive of the rolling of the funeral drum. Characteristic, too, is the inexorable rise and fall of the music, both in pitch and in dynamic. The use of canon (both melodic and rhythmic) and the 'wedge' shape produced by soprano and bass lines moving in contrary motion (bars 17-34) add to the claustrophobic feel of the music. At the reprise of the theme (bar 35) the G and Ped. reeds are added, creating an overwhelming massiveness, particularly as the LH remains so low in its register.

The enharmonic shift into Ab at the *poco più vivo* brings a welcome relief from the ostinato, but the feeling is not so much of calm as of aimless daze as the music seems to range without direction.

The reprise at *Tempo Io.* (fourth page) is exact, as though Vierne feels that there is nothing new to be said. The coda is brief, harmonically ambiguous and the final *tierce de Picardie* offers resignation rather than optimism.

A large-scale A/B/A/coda form, where B is the *Poco più vivo* section.

19. Berceuse (A major *Andantino*)

Without doubt, this is Vierne's most performed work. It's a cradle song based on the French children's song "Dodo, l'enfant do" (the *paroles classiques* of the title) and is dedicated to his then seven-year old daughter Colette. Largely diatonic, the melody is coloured with a chromatic alto line on its reprise on the third page, but otherwise the clouds of the previous movement could not be further away. The delightful 'call-and-response' passage at the top of the second page is mirrored in the coda under a high dominant pedal.

It is in the customary A/B/A/coda form, where B (page 2) is essentially a miniature development section built on A, but it is well-nigh impossible to discern whether the piece is actually monothematic since all the variants of the melody use the same rhythmic figuration. It's another instance of Vierne's skilful melodic construction by extension. The final close on an A6 chord is unusual and the only use of a final added-note chord in the collection: notice the delightful and subtle way in which the A major tonality is eventually reached, via chords of F7, G, C7 and Bb.

20. Pastorale (A minor *Allegretto*)

Another miniature masterpiece, the Pastorale is a showpiece for the Récit Hautbois. There is a wistful quality about Vierne's modal melody, although the final phrase is invariably chromatic. Characterised by wide leaps over a steady bass tread and a dominant pedal in the tenor, the unbroken oboe melody is prefaced by a four-bar LH recitative on the Great flute to which reference is again made at the bottom of the first page in a brief 'call-and-response' bridge passage leading (at the top of the second page) to a passage based on the rhythmic figuration of the opening. After a halting recit. from the oboe (page 2, third line), there is an exact reprise of the oboe melody, complete with dominant pedal and treading bass.

The middle section, in the tonic major, is based on scalar movement, offering a pleasant contrast to the more angular oboe melody of the first section. The harmony is, unusually, reminiscent of Grieg.

A short flute solo leads into the reprise of the oboe melody, still underpinned by a dominant pedal in the pedal part but this time with a new bass figuration.

The final page is an extended coda in which the material from both of the previous sections is brought together. The final nine bars are remarkable for the variety of ways in which Vierne convincingly harmonizes the melody notes G sharp - C sharp.

Overall form is A/B/A/extended coda using A & B. The real skill of the piece is the way in which nothing is allowed to go to waste: Every 'new' idea is more a fresh way of looking at a previous one and the variety of texture is a triumph of construction and economy.

21. Carillon (Bb Major *Allegro*)

Vierne composed three highly popular bell-founded pieces of which this is the first. The *Carillon de Westminster* and *Les cloches de Hinckley* form part of the *Pièces de Fantaisie*. All use an ostinato to telling effect, but in neither of the later pieces is the 'bell' figuration as pervasive as here. At no point does it stop. This is not a criticism: in fact it's quite amazing just how much variety Vierne manages to achieve in his treatment of what is, on the face of it, a rather unpromising tune! The registration instructions (for the organ) give an indication of the massive effect he intends: foundations and reeds on both manuals and pedals at pitches from 32' right up to 2'. As if to leave the player in no doubt, the opening is marked triple forte. In the opening two pages Vierne revels in the challenge of harmonizing the simple Bb pedal figuration in just about every way he can think of!

Such a continuous *fortissimo* bombardment could rapidly pall, so Vierne wisely requests a move to the Récit at the beginning of the third page and, using the swell pedal, the volume is reduced to pianissimo. Pages 3 - 5 function as a kind of 'development' section as the carillon motif is tossed between the hands and between a wide variety of keys - notice the amazing harmonic slight of hand at bar 9 on the fourth page where Vierne takes the music, with no preparation, from Bb into B major. The fifth page, with much use of the tonally-neutral whole-tone scale (bars 3/4, 7/8, 11/12, 15/16) and by the technique of condensing the two-bar motif into one, convincingly leads into the 'recapitulation' on page 6. The dramatic shift into B major (over an A pedal) has of course been pre-figured with exactly the same shift on page 4. The final peroration, with the carillon in the alto part, over marcato LH and pedal chords, brings this thrilling movement to a very satisfying close.

Obviously, the piece is monothematic, but there is still a very definite A/B/A-Coda shape, where B is the central 'development' section on pages 3-5.

The piece is dedicated to Vierne's gifted brother, René, himself a talented organist and composer who was to be killed in the war in 1918.

22. Elégie (Bb Minor *Moderato espressivo*)

Georges Krieger, a first-rate musician, composer and organist and a pupil of Vierne, was an early casualty of the war, leaving to fight in 1914 and never returning, hence the depth of pain in this, one of the most intense pieces in the collection. The music seems to be constantly striving and yet always falling back in despair - notice the contour of the melody and the initial bar-by-bar rise of the bass part, both of which fall back to the bottom of the compass in bar 16. As if to make this point as clear as possible, it's worth looking at the coda (3rd page, bars 17 - end) where the melody strives to reach up before finally falling back again.

Bars 17 - 24 place the two hands close together in a kind of musical embrace, as if seeking solace. The LH melody here is a new idea (B), but clearly related to the opening RH melody, both rhythmically, and its contour, which is like an inversion. At the beginning of the second page, this 'new' melody is given to the soprano. An increase in harmonic tension (driven by the melodically chromatic bass line), and a rise in both pitch and volume, give way to a pathetic collapse in the fourth line and a reprise of the opening, this time cut short by the tenor melody which begins in the fourth bar of the third page.

Again, effectively, an A/B/A - coda form. Two aspects of Vierne's craft are particularly notable: the melodic 'extension' and 'contraction' - the melody is in a constant state of flux - and the highly effective use of chromaticism. Unlike in some of the movements from Book 1, the chromatic notes are not just decorative: they are the very essence of this tragic piece.

23. Epithalme (B major *Adagio sostenuto e molto espressivo*)

The title derives from a Greek poem written for a bride on her way to the marital chamber - traditionally it was sung outside the door of the bedroom and, by Roman times, was frequently obscene! Why Vierne should have chosen this title is a bit of a mystery although as the most Wagnerian movement in the collection it is highly sensuous, especially when played, as Vierne directs, with a rich combination of 8' stops, including the Céléste.

Two things emerge from a casual glance at the score: the sheer number of 'foreign' notes and the extreme pitch range (from low B sharp to top F sharp). The melody is built from a series of accented appoggiature resulting in a high level of dissonance, although almost invariably resolved. It's the sort of thing which a very clever person (such as Vierne or Franck) would be able to improvise and which might be written down later. It's as well to remember that for any continental organist (and especially for a French one) the art of improvisation was every bit as important as that of performing: a tradition which remains to this day. Sunday by Sunday, the *titulaire* of a large Paris church would spend a great deal more of his time improvising than playing pieces and even public recitals invariably concluded with an improvisation. The amazing thing about the two volumes of the 24 Pièces is how *unlike* improvisations most of them are.

In this piece Vierne is giving us, in miniature, the fruits of his genius as a symphonist. Of course it's possible to analyse his train of thought and see what he's doing with his material in great detail (and it might be instructive to do so), but, for now, it's enough to marvel at the skill with which he develops tiny cells into great strands of melody and, like Wagner, thinks both harmonically and contrapuntally. Look at the masterly way in which he brings back the opening theme in the tenor (2nd page, end of the third bar), or the way in which three strands of melody are combined over a pedal (2nd page, end of bar 9 *et seq.*)

As usual, the basic form is the usual A/B/A/-coda, but this is over-simplistic and disguises an intense level of organic developmental processes seen in its full fruition in the later organ symphonies.

24. Postlude (B minor *Quasi fantasia - Allegro non troppo e sostenuto*)

For the final movement Vierne returns to a traditional keyboard formula - that of the dramatic toccata. The dedicatee, Emile Poillot, was organist of Dijon Cathedral for 36 years. This is precisely the sort of piece which an organist might be expected to improvise at the end of Mass - loud enough to cover the chatter of the departing worshippers, dramatic, but not especially profound.

The opening skitters around the keyboard are the stock-in materials of the improviser: plenty of notes but no great depth. The piece proper starts at the bottom of the second page (*Allegro non troppo . . .*) Initially there is a canon of sorts between the soprano and bass, but this soon peters out and we can see that the purpose behind this figuration is to get the music from the bottom end of the keyboard to the top, over a drawn-out *crescendo*, which it does very effectively.

This is sort of piece which organists love: it sounds much more difficult than it actually is!

The 24 *Pièces en style libre* are one of the greatest treasures in any organist's library: even when Vierne's writing is, maybe, not at his best, it is still in a different league to the vast acreage of harmonium voluntaries churned out by publishers a hundred years ago. Every bar is stamped with his *imprimatur*.

Messe Basse

Vierne's other two-stave organ work is the *Messe Basse*, composed in the summer of 1912, immediately before he started work on the 24 *Pièces en style libre*. Dedicated to Albert Dupré (1860-1940), the father of Marcel and organist of St. Ouen in Rouen. The *Messe Basse* is designed to accompany the said Mass and there are six movements:

Entrée - for the entrance of the clergy procession

Introit

Offertoire - the 'offering': ie the communion elements

Elévation - the raising of the Host and its presentation to the congregation ('Behold the Lamb of God')

Communion

Sortie. This is by far the finest movement of the work and, in the words of Bernard Gavoty, Vierne's pupil and biographer, 'gives those, who never heard Vierne improvise, a very good idea of an improvisation at the end of Mass at Notre-Dame de Paris'.

The other movements of the *Messe Basse* are also improvisatory in character but the material is not as memorable or impressive as that in the 24 *Pièces*.

Adrian Self - January 2014