

Brilliant organist's concert puts restored Skinner to test

By CHRISTOPHER HYDE

The Kotzschmar is not the only fine pipe organ in Portland. The 1928 Skinner at St. Luke's Cathedral is also a gem recently restored to all of its former glory. If any demonstration was needed, Randall Mullin, a concert organist from St. David's in Baltimore, provided it on Saturday night with a highly unusual and demanding program of French, English and American works.

He began with the tremendous "Crown Imperial" march written in 1937 for the coronation of George VI by William Walton. One could not see the pipes of the

Skinner, but the overwhelming sound seemed to come from all sides of the cathedral at once. Mullin is a brilliant organist and not afraid to emphasize important chords with long preparatory rests, making them all the more satisfying.

The United States was represented by William Bolcom's take on "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." The only other hymn tune that approaches it in public recognition is "Jesus Loves Me." The familiarity of the melody enables Bolton to dispense with it entirely, presenting it backward, upside-down and sideways but

REVIEW

Randall Mullin, Organist

WHERE: St. Luke's Cathedral

WHEN: June 11

never straight, until identifying its simple progressions becomes an erudite game. The 1984 piece, from "Three Gospel Preludes," is in blues style, and the organ imitates gospel shouts with uncanny accuracy.

Skinner organs are noted for their flute and other woodwind voices, which were employed beautifully in an Impromptu by

Louis Vierne, accompanied by what sounded like violins.

The first half of the program also included a melodic "Homage to Fritz Kreisler," based on his violin transcription of "Londonderry Air," a.k.a. "Danny Boy," and an amazing Gigue, transcribed from a recorded improvisation by organist Pierre Couchereau.

After intermission, Mullin played the piece de resistance of the evening, the great Suite, Opus 5, of Maurice Durufle, consisting of a lengthy Prelude, a Sicilienne, and a Toccata that would have made J.S. Bach

envious. Mullin, in preliminary remarks, called it "one of the most challenging and rewarding pieces ever written for the organ," and he was understating its value. It shows what a combination of Debussy and Ravel could do with the organ on an inspired day.

It begins with a single note, held for what seems like an eternity, while themes build around and embroider it like fractal patterns generated by a mathematical formula. Its initially somber tones gradually soften, becoming more calm and reflective until they merge with the delicate

impressionistic pastorale of the Sicilienne.

The final Toccata, as interpreted by Mullin, is breathtaking in its bravura. Its passage-work would be enough in itself, like the final movement of Chopin's "Funeral March" sonata, but suddenly, and incredibly, it becomes ornament for an ironic theme in the bass. I can find only one CD of this work, by Todd Wilson on the Schudi organ of St. Thomas Aquinas in Dallas, (Delos Dig. D/CD 3047), but it would be well worth acquiring.

Christopher Hyde's Classical Beat column appears in the Maine Sunday Telegram.