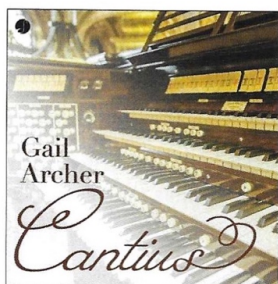


# The American Organist (TAO)

## March 2023

### Reviews

#### RECORDINGS



**CANTIUS.** Gail Archer, organist. Organ of St. John Cantius Church, Chicago. Meyer Media MM22051, 2022. Gail Archer should be commended for her commitment to recording music from beyond the well-worn path. Her newest release, *Cantius*, features Polish organ works and completes a triptych of recent recordings highlighting organ music of Eastern Europe (*Chernivtsi: Contemporary Ukrainian Organ Music* and *A Russian Journey* were both released in 2020). *Cantius* grew out of Archer's experiences concertizing in Poland, where she describes an open and inviting atmosphere and knowledgeable audiences. This collection by an experienced and prolific recording artist deepens our understanding of Polish music and will hopefully inspire further engagement with these works.

The album opens with a set of pieces in the late Romantic style. Mieczysław Surzyński's *Improvisations on a Polish Hymn* presents a theme and variations culminating in a brooding funeral march. Wincenty Rychling's lovely Pastorate in F-sharp Minor, featuring the foundation stops, follows. Next comes "Meditation-Elegy" by Felix Borowski, a musician of Polish and British descent who settled in Chicago in the late 1890s. "Meditation-Elegy" is the lyrical movement of Borowski's *First Suite for Organ*, written in 1900 and dedicated to another member of the Chicago musical elite, Clarence Eddy.

The remainder of the album features music composed in the last 100 years. *Triptych for Organ*, published in 2012, is a collection of pieces by Paweł Łukaszewski, a distinguished living composer of sacred music. The first movement, "Souvenir," commences with a slow-moving alternation of

open fifths and sevenths that pushes to a crescendo in rhythm and dynamics. The overall effect of the set is of timelessness and monumentality. The next piece is the sole organ work by the modernist composer Henryk Mikołaj Górecki, *Kantata*, composed in 1968. The long low-pitched clusters call to mind György Ligeti's *Volumina*, written just two years prior. Feliks Nowowiejski's Symphony No. 8 is an interesting example of a single-movement symphonic work from the period between the wars. Dense and dramatic, it offers an interesting mix of quartal and late Romantic harmonic language (and another brooding funeral march!). *Esquisse* (1966) is another important example of modernist writing, this time by the female composer Grażyna Bacewicz, a student of Nadia Boulanger. Arresting and full of contrasts, the piece is versatile enough to be effective on a variety of organs. The album closes with another three-movement work, *Triptychon* by Tadeusz Paciorkiewicz. Its final Toccata is a brilliant tour de force, highlighting the virtuosity of the performer.

Archer chose to record at St. John Cantius in Chicago, a gorgeous Roman Catholic church founded by Polish immigrants in the 1890s. The four-manual organ, originally built by Casavant Frères for Chicago's St. James Methodist Church in 1926, was restored by Casavant and J.L. Weiler and installed at St. John Cantius in 2013. A solid example of early 20th-century North American organbuilding, it has a disposition of 56 stops and favors a preponderance of 8' sound. Listeners who would like more information on the organ should explore the church's attractive website, as Archer's notes in the slim CD booklet focus on the composers and repertoire.

As a set, the works tend to favor thick textures and a fair bit of dissonance. Registrations seemed rather monochromatic and heavy, and I wished for more variety in timbre in a number of pieces. Listeners may want to digest the recording in small doses. Overall, this album offers a polished introduction to a body of repertoire that deserves more listeners.

ANNE LÄVER