



Reaping the rewards of varied repertoire

By [Lee Hartman](#) Wed, Jun 05, 2013

Gail Archer's Sunday afternoon recital for the Dome and Spire Series plumbed the vast repertory of organ works to find hidden gems by composers Johanna Senfter, Nadia Boulanger, and Alla Borzova.



The gracious Gail Archer gave a commanding performance on the Community of Christ Temple organ on Sunday afternoon. Her program touched the baroque and then jumped to the late romantic and modern eras with ease. Because her modern works featured common hymn-tunes, the modest but enthralled

audience was able to track her logical progression as the works became more esoteric.

A striking feature of Archer's playing is that she does not shy away from employing the full complement of bass registrations. This choice gives her interpretations weight and a visceral quality. Hers isn't polite, reserved playing; it's muscular and deep without being ponderous. These characters served the second half of her program especially well.

Archer opened with Buxtehude's Praeludium in D minor, BuxWV 140. In four continuous sections (prelude, fugato, a florid fantasia, and a toccata) the piece showcased her wonderful clarity of counterpoint and a rock steady rhythmic pulse that strangely was lost in Bach's *Allein Gott in der Höh sei Ehr*, BWV 662. Bach's *Komm, heiliger Geist*, BWV 651 was stronger. The latter work was more fluid and convincingly registered.

Johanna Senfter (1879–1961) was previously unknown to me. After hearing her *Fantasie und Fugue*, Op. 30 based on the tune "Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern," I feel her music is worth a deeper look. (She also wrote 9 symphonies and concertos for piano, violin, viola, and cello, among approximately 134 other works). The piece was dense and chromatic—not surprising since she studied with Max Reger. Archer eked out lovely sighs and inflections from the Temple organ. The subject is a long one and through Archer's tone colors, it was easy to follow.

Another delight was hearing Nadia Boulanger's works performed live. Far more so known as *the* composition pedagogue of the twentieth century, her pieces are rarely heard in recital. Archer is a champion of these compositions, and presented *Prélude*, *Petit Canon*, and *Improvisation*. *Prélude* was chromatic like the Senfter, but it highlighted ascending motions whereas the *Fantasie und Fugue* focused on the downward. They paired well back-to-back. The *Improvisation* was my favorite of the unfamiliar works on the program. Rhythms were purposefully obscured in a hazy dreamlike state that took on a mystic quality in quasi-minimalist fashion.

Alla Borzova's *And the greatest of these is love* is a *Pictures at an Exhibition* for organ. Taking inspiration from the Chagall and Matisse windows at Union Church, the piece is a continuous journey as if one walked by these vibrant pieces of art and became awash in light. Hymn-tunes appeared and evaporated to be replaced by massive cyclonic flurries and blazing trumpets. Archer was all over the organ maximizing the instrument's color and capabilities. The piece was compelling, programmatic, and a dazzling virtuoso display, all of which Archer navigated with musicality and sensitivity.

Archer's [Messiaen recording](#) is one for every audiophile and thankfully she ended her recital with two movements of *L'Ascension*. I would have been devastated had she not. The "Alléluias sereins" was an astounding mix of timbres; this work is pure aural color from one of composition's synesthetes. Messiaen's music can be the simplest of forms or ultra-complex, and it takes a gifted performer to take the audience by the ear and lead them through the more difficult ones. Archer dwelled and reveled in the Messiaen's prescribed sonics, unleashing the organ's full potential for the rapturous and thunderous, concluding "Transports de joie."



REVIEW: Dome and Spire Series Gail Archer

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Community of Christ Temple

1001 W. Walnut, Independence, MO

For more information, visit https://www.cofchrist.org/dome_spire/

Top Photo: Gail Archer