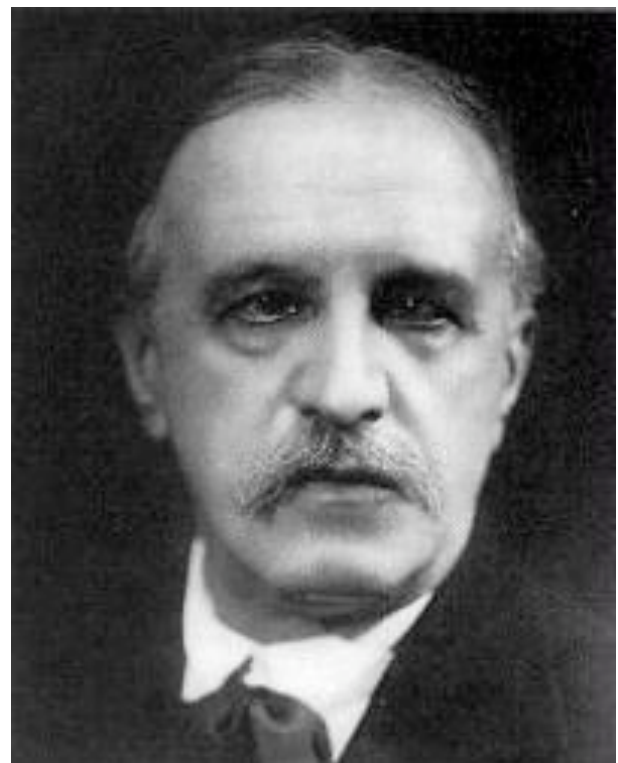

WHAT WE SING

at Saint Bartholomew's

No. 4 Messe solennelle

by Louis Vierne (1870-1937)

sung on Sunday 18 January 2009 by the boys and men



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by Lous Vierne (1870 – 1937)

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by Fr Andrew McCroskery

Louis Victor Jules Vierne was born in Poitiers in 1870. As a child he showed considerable musical flair on the piano, but later in life his attention would turn to the organ. Vierne first heard an organ at the age of five and recalled; "I had a very hard time imagining how one man alone could get from this instrument these mysterious rich sounds, both stormy and calm: it seemed like something out of a fairy-tale." In many ways it was Louis' uncle, Charles Colin, who was responsible for developing his love of the organ. When his uncle died in 1881, Louis was greatly distressed; in 1886 he was also to lose his own father.

In 1889, after graduating from the Institution Nationale des Jeunes Aveugles, Vierne entered the Paris Conservatoire at the invitation of Cesar Franck. Within a year, Franck had died, once again leaving the sensitive Louis bereft. From 1892 he held the post of assistant organist to Widor at the church of Saint-Suplice in Paris. In 1900 he became the principal organist at the Cathedral of Notre-Dame.

Louis Vierne had a difficult and tempestuous life. His divorce from his wife in 1909, on the grounds of her infidelity with a close friend, the organ-builder Charles Mutin, seemed to affect him very deeply, as did the loss of his sister at the age of six and the loss of his brother and son in World War I. He suffered from congenital cataracts which made him almost totally blind and at the age of seven his father sent him to Dr de Wecker in Paris for a painful two-stage operation which proved only temporarily successful. Marcel Dupré recalled watching Vierne scribble his music with the aid of an enormous pencil, with his face pressed up against the sheet. Later in life he was to resort almost entirely to the use of Braille. At one stage, during one of the busiest periods of his work in Notre-Dame, he suffered an accident in the street with a car, badly damaging his leg to the point that amputation was considered. It took him

almost a year to re-learn his pedal technique, and some observers noted that it caused him a great deal of pain for the rest of his life. Despite these trials, Louis Vierne was a kind, patient and encouraging teacher to his students, but his life experience of physical and spiritual hardship was to become imprinted in much of his work.

In 1910 the courtyard and crypt of Notre-Dame was filled with water when the river Seine burst its banks. The subsequent humidity was to warp and in some cases destroy the mechanisms of the organ. At the height of the 1911 heatwave, disaster struck, the organ bellows literally beginning to disintegrate and the wind chests to collapse. Added to this, his mother died in dreadful agony of kidney failure and Vierne himself noticed the onset of glaucoma. In a desperate bid to save what little remained of his sight, he opted for a ground-breaking new operation. After its completion he was required to sit in total darkness for six months, but even so the operation was unsuccessful and a neurological problem rendered his right arm almost completely useless.

Vierne then decided to travel, playing his work to audiences in the hope of raising funds to repair the organ. His 1925 concert tour of Scotland and Ireland, although critically successful, did not raise as much money as he had hoped. Two years later he embarked on a tour of the United States, playing to a total of 70,000 people. This won him widespread critical acclaim and helped to accrue much-needed funds for the restoration of the organ. This would finally be completed in 1932.

Vierne was considered to be one of the greatest musical improvisers of his generation. Surviving early phonographic recordings sound like highly polished and complete works. Although his great love was clearly for the organ, he did write a number of chamber works and a *Symphony in A minor* for orchestra. Vierne's writing style was rich and romantic, reaching points of great grandeur but also falling into melancholy. Many commentators of his work suggest that he is a man of great taste, who steers carefully away from an emotional vulgarity. The *Messe Solennelle* in C sharp minor for choir and two organs was written in 1899. It remains in a minor key throughout, only finally breaking into a major key during the final movement of the Agnus Dei ("grant us thy peace").

The Kyrie and Gloria of the mass "make extensive use of the semitones of the twelve-note chromatic scale, producing dissonances and modulations into related keys which now seem deceptively easy to the ear, but in 1900

must have been remarkable if not outrageous.” Both movements have repetitive blocks of sound tempered by quiet introspection. The Sanctus begins with a pulsating organ figure, that rises with the ever-increasing number of voices to a triumphant and uplifting conclusion. The Benedictus opens with a restrained solemnity, with the organ’s cautious and expectant descent perfectly painting the mood of this movement. There follows a recapitulation of the joyous Hosanna. The pained beauty of the Agnus Dei is made all the more powerful through the conversational writing for sopranos and tenors. The confident rise into a major key marks the final section of the work. It is a work that is infused with a profound spirituality and deep desire to add layers of meaning to liturgical action.

Louis Vierne was greatly impressed by the practical Christianity displayed by the abbot Alphonse Renault, professor at the Choir School and chapel and cathedral master from 1905 to 1925. In tough times, the abbot would try to save money by copying music manuscripts by hand, sometimes working through the whole night. He bought instruments for poor musicians who were facing hard times and donated a sizeable amount of money from his own pocket to the restoration of the organ. Vierne was deeply moved by the abbot’s immovable sense of calling, duty and charity. He was also greatly influenced by fellow organ student (and later theologian) Albert Schweitzer. Schweitzer was an accomplished organist who had made a significant contribution to the understanding of the work of Bach, under the instruction and mentoring of Widor. Vierne was intrigued by Schweitzer’s ideas and also became fascinated by mystical traditions within Christianity. Vierne’s own aims became focused in bringing splendour to the liturgy, in an attempt to come as close as possible to reaching a brilliant transcendence and lift humanity upwards, towards the absolute, the universal, and the sublime.

On the evening of 2 June 1937, Louis Vierne was giving his 1750th organ recital in Notre-Dame. After the concert there were two submitted themes for a finale of improvisations. Vierne read the themes from the Braille sheets, pulled out the stops on the organ and prepared to play. Suddenly, he slumped forward and his foot landed on the low E pedal. The note thundered throughout the cathedral; Louis Vierne had died at the organ.