

STATIONS OF THE CROSS

ORGAN IMPROVISATIONS

BY MCNEIL ROBINSON



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IMPROVISATIONS ON THE FOURTEEN STATIONS OF THE CROSS

— BASED ON THEMES PROVIDED BY NED ROREM

MCNEIL ROBINSON, ORGAN

Total playing time: 73:03

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| 1. Jesus is condemned to death | (6:00) |
| 2. Jesus takes up his Cross | (5:44) |
| 3. Jesus falls the first time | (4:11) |
| 4. Jesus meets his afflicted mother | (4:23) |
| 5. The Cross is laid on Simon of Cyrene | (5:18) |
| 6. Veronica wipes the face of Jesus | (4:25) |
| 7. Jesus falls the second time | (4:37) |
| 8. Jesus meets the Women of Jerusalem | (5:21) |
| 9. Jesus falls the third time | (4:40) |
| 10. Jesus is stripped of his garments | (4:22) |
| 11. Jesus is nailed to the Cross | (4:44) |
| 12. Jesus dies on the Cross | (7:31) |
| 13. Jesus' body is placed in the arms of his mother | (4:43) |
| 14. Jesus is laid in the tomb | (7:03) |

Total Playing Time: 73:04

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM:

Throughout the history of music there have been notable masters of the art who were equally proficient in not one or two, but all four musical disciplines: performance, composition, pedagogy and improvisation. Bach and Mozart certainly fall into this category; and during the late twentieth century, one such “complete” musician was McNeil Robinson (1943–2015). Robinson enjoyed a distinguished career as a performing organist and composer, and was celebrated as one of the finest organ teachers in the world. Perhaps most striking was his skill as an improviser. Robinson was lauded by the European masters of improvisation and rose to the heights of—and even surpassing—many of the greats. Robinson is also credited with bringing the art of extemporization to American organists on a much wider scale, as very few in the previous generations were masterful in improvisation.

I first met McNeil Robinson on March 21, 2006, when my undergraduate organ improvisation class traveled from Princeton to New York to hear the master improvise an entire recital encompassing the fourteen Stations of the Cross based on themes submitted by revered American composer Ned Rorem. This recital—one of Robinson’s last formal public concerts before retiring from performing in the last decade of his life—would turn out to be the genesis of a major undertaking after the performer’s death to preserve the legacy of his unique improvisational art. It is fitting that the performance took place at New York’s Church of St. Mary the Virgin, where Robinson’s storied tenure from 1964 to 1982 transformed him into a legend in organist circles.

Regarding Robinson’s use of improvisational themes in this recording as furnished by distinguished composer Ned Rorem: I found a reference to another instance of Rorem having provided themes for a recital, and one of Rorem’s diaries mentions yet another such instance. One can thus infer that Rorem, apparently Robinson’s friend and colleague, may well have provided themes to Robinson for other events as well. Other notable indications of their association are apparent from Robinson’s mention that Rorem was an influence on his own compositional style, as well as the fact that Robinson taught Rorem’s organ works to his students.

But Rorem was hardly the only well-known composer who provided themes for Robinson, whose reputation as a master of improvisation began to flourish fairly early in his career. I found references to several instances of other composers (including Marcel Dupré, Vincent Persichetti, Dominick Argento, Lukas Foss, Charles Wuorinen and Vladimir Ussachevsky) having provided him with thematic materials: proof positive that Robinson was held in highest esteem by many of the most distinguished composers of his day.

The Stations of the Cross, as performed by Robinson, is a cyclical work of fourteen movements in a modern harmonic style. While the structural uniformity and Neoclassically-inspired clarity found in all of Robinson’s compositions are present, the manner of these improvisations is reminiscent of an eclectic blend of the harmonic language of Olivier Messiaen and the virtuoso style of Marcel Dupré, who composed his own *Chemin de la Croix*, Op. 29, seventy-five years earlier, although the extravagant imaginings of Robinson show little of the measured restraint em-

played by Dupré in his composition. The absence of a composer's assiduous editorial review gives these improvisations a sense of liberty that makes them far more effective in the musical illustration of the events surrounding the crucifixion of Jesus.

I. Jesus is condemned to death: The first movement sets the stage for Jesus' appearance before the Sanhedrin court, where the bound and beaten Christ is condemned to execution by crucifixion by Pontius Pilate. The reading suggests that the agitation of the Jewish audience during this scene is a manifestation of their fear of the freedom which Christ brings. The improvisation depicts this bubbling agitation with a persistent staccato rhythm beneath an angular theme. There is never a sense of reconciliation or closure throughout the entire piece. Rather, there is a gradual diminuendo that signals the consensus reached by the court. At the very end, Robinson plays the final chord three times, the third time after a marked pause. The number 3 can arguably be a nod to the Trinity, or perhaps the three days of the religious observance known as the Triduum. But these three ending chords are significant in any case, because Robinson chooses to end several movements in this manner.

II. Jesus takes up his Cross: As Jesus takes up the instrument of his own demise, Robinson paints a picture of death that is filled with hope. Christ's sacrifice is meant to be a path to redemption for sinners—a fact known only to Christ himself as he takes the soft, yet sure footsteps represented by the detached notes in the organ's pedal stops. The rich, resonant string and flute stops of the organ at St. Mary the Virgin fill the listener with that same sense of hope.

III. Jesus falls the first time: In the reading as in the musical interpretation, there are a number of metaphorical references to the significance of "falling." The influence of Messiaen on Robinson's harmonic language is quite evident here. At the onset, Robinson uses descending arabesques to symbolize falling, while dissonant chords strike here and there to represent the haphazard way in which Jesus takes each step. The main theme, ornamented by the same arabesques, is accompanied by a march-like rhythm in the bass, which signifies the inevitability that Jesus must pick himself up and continue the long walk to his death. The entire movement is, in all senses, a cumbersome march.

IV. Jesus meets his afflicted mother: The profound sadness of Mary's broken heart is reflected in the movement's meditative and reserved atmosphere. String stops accompany introspective melodic material played on a harmonic flute. Later, the oboe enters in duet with the flute: a musical dialogue between Jesus and Mary.

V. The Cross is laid on Simon of Cyrene: There are no innocent bystanders along the Way of Sorrows. So it was when the man from Cyrene was conscripted by the Roman guards to take up the cross and follow Jesus to the place of crucifixion. The march-like feeling established earlier resumes, but the listener can discern the increasing difficulty with which Jesus continues walking. An ominous yet stately theme emerges, which is centered around a single pitch, straying to nearby notes but always returning to the "home note." As the piece slowly subsides to its ending, a new, more melodic theme representing Simon appears, punctuated by the final

three-chord repetition as heard at the end of stations I and II.

VI. Veronica wipes the face of Jesus: The sixth station teaches that compassion outweighs caution, and that even a gentle touch can comfort a tormented soul. This particular movement overflows with beauty and tenderness. Played on delicate string celestes and incorporating a soft rhythmic energy, the uplifting nature of this piece is a refreshing oasis in the overall work. Melodic material is presented by both flute stops and a combination of 8', 4' and $2^2/3$ ' stops (with tremblant) often favored by Robinson in his own compositions.

VII. Jesus falls the second time: "Even falling, He stands, and even standing we have fallen until He returns to stand before us again... Until He stands again in our sight, we are the lonely in every crowd." Bits of the "falling" arabesques from station III recur in this movement, while the babbling, agitated staccato rhythms of station I also return, representing the chattering crowd of onlookers. The ever-present detached chords reveal the increasingly laborious effort each footfall is for Jesus. Again, three repeated chords bring this movement to an abrupt close—as abrupt as Jesus losing his footing.

VIII. Jesus meets the Women of Jerusalem: Jesus' words to the women—"Do not weep for me, but for yourselves and your children"—are meant not only to console the women, but to serve as a warning that, without Christ's sacrifice, all mankind is doomed. This twofold elucidation is present in the tender yet premonitory aspect of the music. A quietly marching ostinato

bass line is contrasted by the mellifluous tones of the string celestes and various flute stops.

IX. Jesus falls the third time: This movement contrasts significantly from the previous stations at which Jesus falls. The readings tell us that Jesus falls this time due to extreme physical and emotional fatigue. The thorough disappointment Jesus feels, both in himself and in the people, is supported by the musical interpretation, which is quiet and introspective. A meandering motif employing discreet higher registers is joined by a clear, sobering 8' diapason chanting the tune of the ancient hymn "Pange Lingua" ("sing, my tongue") which extols the triumph of the Holy Cross.

X. Jesus is stripped of his garments: Like hungry vultures, the people ravenously cast lots for Jesus' clothing as it was stripped and torn from his weary body. "What is left when we are stripped of our possessions? We appear as we did when we were born: naked." This image is illustrated musically through crisp, piercing chords that imply the tearing of garments. Following its violent introduction, a fast-paced musical scherzo ensues, which recalls similar movements in Louis Vierne's organ symphonies. "Pange Lingua" is again quoted amid the whirling flurry. And again, three repeated chords conclude the movement.

XI. Jesus is nailed to the Cross: The musical depictions of hammering (*sforzando* attacks and pounding tone clusters in the pedal) and the sharpness of the nails (piercing figurations in the manuals) are conspicuously perceptible in this movement. The music descends into a sinister and

grotesque dance, in which the listener hears the plainchant tone sung with the Passion on Good Friday corrupted by its macabre surroundings.

XII. Jesus dies on the Cross: Robinson's interpretation of the twelfth station is somewhat dichotomous. He uses the strings to typify an inauspicious mood, but amid this ghostlike haze a reverently triumphant theme emerges on the harmonic flute, which reaches ever higher into the upper registers. Everything about the music directs the listener upward, evoking a sense of rising toward heaven and recalling similar methods employed by Messiaen in the final movement of his *L'Ascension*. Suddenly, everything dissipates into a single flute stop, faint and in a high register, which begins to shimmer and sparkle like distant stars, as the same plainchant Passion melody from the previous station enters in dialogue between an 8' diapason and the vox humana.

XIII. Jesus' body is placed in the arms of his mother: Warm, reverberant foundation stops and the solo oboe with tremblant merge seamlessly to sing a doleful air in this forlorn musical setting. The effect of this movement is as varied as the mixed emotions the image conjures, being both despairing and buoyant.

XIV. Jesus is laid in the tomb: In the final movement, Robinson chooses to convey the sense of coolness and tranquility the tomb represents. The theme that enters amid the sumptuous foundation stops of the St. Mary's organ is vaguely suggestive of the theme of the first station, bringing a sense of continuity to the entire work. Increasing amounts of vitality and fervent energy are introduced to the music, elucidating the miraculous

Resurrection to come, in which Christ's dead body is brought back to life. The crescendo subsides into a place of absolute serenity, from which Robinson quotes the tune of the ancient Eucharistic hymn "Adoro te devote" as if sung sweetly by a nearby lark. In this moment of rest and reflection, the fifth verse of this great hymn of St. Thomas Aquinas speaks clearly to the listener:

"O memorial of Our Lord's death—Living Bread that gives life to man: Grant my soul to live on You, and always to savor your sweetness."

—Andrew H. Yeargin

Dr. Andrew H. Yeargin is Director of Music & Organist at the Church of the Holy Trinity in New York, where he succeeded McNeil Robinson in 2014. Yeargin is a graduate of the Manhattan School of Music, where he studied with Robinson for nearly a decade and made his late mentor the subject of his doctoral dissertation, entitled McNeil Robinson (1943—2015): The Complete Musician.

McNeil Robinson was born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1943. He was a child prodigy who excelled at the piano. At the age of 17 he performed as a soloist with the Birmingham Symphony. After studies at Birmingham Southern University, Robinson moved to New York to study piano at the Mannes College of Music, and in 1966 he entered the Juilliard School where he began organ studies with Vernon de Tar and Anthony Newman. He graduated from Juilliard in 1970, having received the coveted Juilliard Faculty Award.

Although best known as an organist and improviser, Robinson also excelled as a composer of organ, choral and orchestral music. His Concerto for Organ and Orchestra was premiered by the San Francisco Symphony. He was a much sought-after teacher, having taught at Manhattan School of Music, where he served as chair of the department, as well as Mannes College and Yale University.

Mr. Robinson was organist and choirmaster at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Park Avenue Synagogue, Park Avenue Christian Church and Church of the Holy Trinity in New York City.

Mr. Robinson died on May 9, 2015. He believed his improvisations of the *Stations of the Cross* was among his finest performances ever. His final wish was that this extraordinary recording of that event would be made available to the musical public.



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