
ORGAN SENSATION
FELIX HELL
LISZT
VIERNE
GUILMANT
RHEINBERGER
REFERENCE RECORDINGS®
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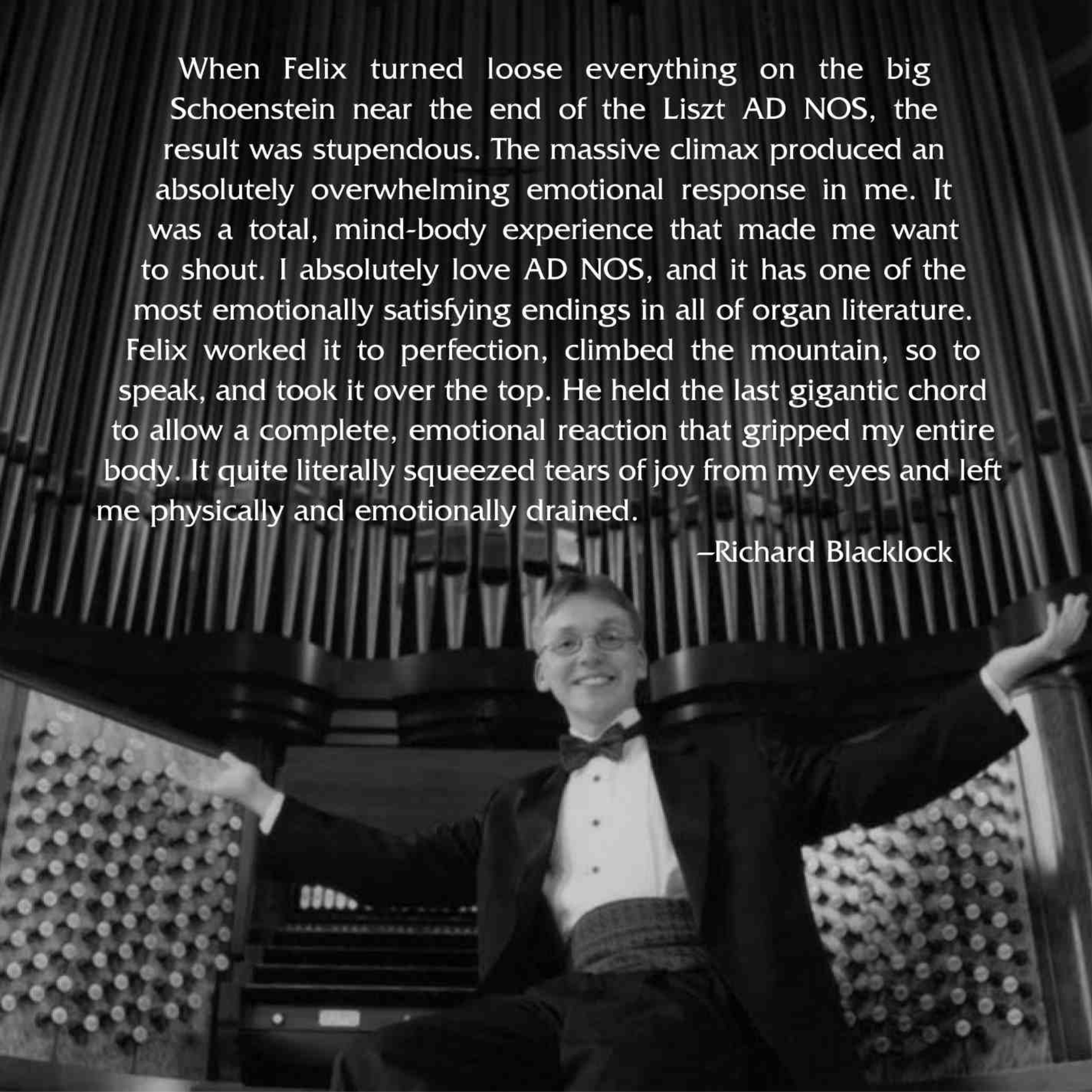
When Felix turned loose everything on the big Schoenstein near the end of the Liszt AD NOS, the result was stupendous. The massive climax produced an absolutely overwhelming emotional response in me. It was a total, mind-body experience that made me want to shout. I absolutely love AD NOS, and it has one of the most emotionally satisfying endings in all of organ literature. Felix worked it to perfection, climbed the mountain, so to speak, and took it over the top. He held the last gigantic chord to allow a complete, emotional reaction that gripped my entire body. It quite literally squeezed tears of joy from my eyes and left me physically and emotionally drained.

–Richard Blacklock



Very little escapes the notice of the Internet, and it was through that medium, in November of 1999, that I first began to hear about Felix Hell, a young man of 14 who was beginning to create a stir amongst organ recital audiences throughout the country. I was soon to have an opportunity to hear for myself, as he was playing a recital in a town quite near me.

Within moments of the program's beginning, I realized I was not hearing a 14-year-old organist, not a young organist, but rather just an organist, a musician of considerable skill and understanding. The first piece was a Buxtehude Prelude in D Major, and in an internet review after the concert, I wrote that "the playing was beautifully controlled, accurate, and sensitive, with registrations of interest and clarity." This high level of performance continued undiminished throughout the program, which included the Bach "Little" G Minor Fugue and the Mendelssohn First Sonata in F Minor. I met Felix briefly after the concert, not knowing quite what to expect – perhaps a seriously swollen ego, perhaps an artistic introvert. I found neither of the above, but a friendly and cheerful young man, having a great time playing the instrument he loves, and bringing that love to others.

It all began when Felix was about seven years old, living in Frankenthal/Pfaltz in Germany, where he was born in 1985. With remarkable sensitivity at a very early age, he was clearly responding to keyboard music – not only responding, but also learning with rapidly increasing skill to reproduce what he heard. He was particularly inspired by hearing the Bach C Major Prelude from Book I of the *Well Tempered Clavier,* and having heard it, and having watched a pianist play it, he soon (this at the age of 7!), was able to play the piece himself. This led to piano lessons, and soon after, to organ lessons.

At the age of 8, Felix was pressed into service to play for Easter Sunday1994 at a Roman Catholic High Mass at St. Laurentiuskirche, Dirmstein/Pfalz, Germany, this being the very first church service of many for which he has since played. This quasi-public appearance perhaps was the beginning of a taste for performance. In March of 1994, Felix appeared in a short recital at the Johanneskirche in the city of Speyer, and on a trip to Russia in August 1994, he made his first public performance outside of Germany, in the Great Hall of the State Conservatory in Saratov. Also, in what was clearly an important and seminal year (1994), Felix participated for

the first time in the Federal German competition for young musicians "Jugend Musiziert," and received two first prizes in Organ playing. He entered this competition again in 1996, 1997, and 1999, winning each time first prizes in either piano or organ playing. He continued his organ studies at the Evangelical Academy of Church Music in Heidelberg, with Johannes Michel, also studying improvisation with Christiane Michel.

At the German State University of Music in Mannheim, he was a student of Professor Siegbert Panzer in piano, and this was the beginning of the building of the powerful and sure technique so apparent in Felix's organ playing. In the years up until his arrival in the U.S., Felix had additional coaching with Martin Luecker in Frankfurt, Peter van Dijk in Amsterdam, Oleg Yantschenko in Moscow, Wolfgang Ruebsam in Chicago, Leo Kraemer in Speyer, Franz Lehrndorfer in Munich, and Robert Griffeth in Delaware, Ohio.

In September 1999, Felix settled in the United States, in order to accept a full tuition, merit-based, scholarship from the Juilliard School of Music, for study with Dr. John Weaver. At that time, he also became Organ Scholar at St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Manhattan, under Kantor Thomas Schmidt. Here he played, and was able to practice regularly on the lovely Klais Organ in that church. In September, 2001, Felix enrolled at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, where his teachers are Dr. John Weaver and Alan Morrison. The demands of the rigorous academic program at Curtis are fully met, even as Felix travels almost every weekend, often great distances, to play at least one program, sometimes two. Since coming to the U.S.A., Felix's recital schedule has become increasingly busy, and by the end of 2002, he had performed more than 280 recitals in Germany, Canada, Australia, Russia, Korea, Spain, France, Italy, Latvia, Iceland, Jamaica, and the U. S., with more than 150 recitals in 32 American states.

I believe he is possibly unique in maintaining such an extensive schedule of recital appearances, and as I write this in early 2003, I know he is already booked through the rest of this year, with a number of recitals already scheduled in 2004. When school is in session, he is strictly "in residence" at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, and goes out only on weekends to

play, often crossing the continent. He has boundless energy which one might say is natural to one of his age, but my sense is that he will maintain this energy throughout his career.

I have thought a great deal about just what it is that keeps audiences at full attention whenever and wherever Felix plays, and found myself musing about this question while attending a recital in Our Lady of Mercy Church, Plainville, CT, on September 16th, 2001. This was, to be sure, a time of musing and contemplation for us all, in the wake of September 11th of that year. I was prompted by those horrific events to think rather generally about the role of the arts in healing and comprehending. In Plainville, I saw the wonder of a young man of 16 playing brilliantly a long and totally uncompromising program of complex and sophisticated works for organ, with a very large audience of parishioners sitting quietly, giving their full attention to the music. Applause was full and sustained. How does one explain this phenomenon, beautiful to behold? Certainly the quality of the instrument helps, as does the excellent acoustic. The back of the organist is visible, so there is some visual contact. But some of the "bonding" occurred before a note was played. Upbeat and purposeful, clearly confident, cheerful and friendly, Felix walked the long walk to the center of the church, smiled warmly in response to loud applause, and proceeded to the organ loft. The battle was won at that moment, and the victory was confirmed throughout by the sparkle and solidity of the performances. The slight movement of Felix jogging along gently and happily at the console helped to define the rhythms, stresses and releases in the music. It all goes under the heading of charisma, which is a kind of overlay, over and above the details of the venue and performance. It is something difficult to define, but very real.

While I commend to you the entire program on this CD, all pieces I have heard Felix play live, I think in the Guilmant and in the Liszt Fantasy and Fugue, both works that only a consummate artist dares to touch, you will, without benefit of any visual stimuli, hear the charisma of this wonderful young artist.

You can learn more about Felix Hell, including where he has played, andwhere he will be playing, through his website: www.felix-hell.com.

– Malcolm Wechsler

Sonata No. 1 in D minor, Op. 14 – Felix Alexandre Guilmant

Born March 12, 1837 in Boulogne, France; died March 29, 1911 in Meudon, near Paris

The French composer Alexandre Guilmant, one of the most famous organists in history, performed at St. Sulpice and Notre Dame in Paris, where he became honorary organist at the instigation of the composer, Louis Vierne. As professor of organ at the Paris Conservatory, Guilmant's students included Nadia Boulanger, who became a renowned teacher of the 20th century. Guilmant wrote eight sonatas and two symphonies for organ as well as many masses, psalms and motets. German Classical and Romantic composers as well as Handel and Bach, whose pedal technique was considered revolutionary in France in the 19th century, inspired Guilmant significantly. The piano styles of Chopin and Liszt also had a formative influence on him.

Guilmant's classic-romantic Sonata No. 1, in D minor, Op. 42, (1874), although composed for the symphonic organ and subtitled *Symphonie*, has an intimate chamber music feel that contrasts with the organ symphonies of his contemporaries. The work, much influenced by Beethoven, has a stately beginning to its sonata form first movement, *Introduction and Allegro*, before the pedals introduce the first subject. The second theme has an expressive long line. The second movement, a charming Pastorale, *Andante quasi Allegretto*, starts with a simple, rustic first subject, and in the movement's center has a chorale-like theme. Guilmant remarked that this movement depicts the peaceful, quiet French countryside, interrupted only by monks singing in a monastery. The third movement, *Allegro,* takes the form of a rondo with an intense, brisk and turbulent main subject. The second theme, a romantic chorale, recalls Mendelssohn's organ sonatas. The coda, a majestic march, makes a reference to the movement's first theme.

Abendfriede ("Evening Peace") – Joseph (Gabriel) Rheinberger

Born March 17, 1839 in Vaduz, Lichtenstein; died November 25, 1901 in Munich

Joseph Rheinberger, known primarily for his organ compositions, was a child prodigy who entered the Munich Royal Conservatory at eleven and studied composition with Franz Lachner, a friend of Schubert. Much of his lasting fame resulted from his teaching; among his students were Humperdinck, Wolf-Ferrari and Furtwängler. He consciously avoided the new currents developing in the mid-19th century, and his traditional music never enjoyed universal acceptance. Its strength comes from his mastery and coherence of style, delicate part-writing, and use of polyphony. Rheinberger explained his compositional aim: "There is no justification for music without melodiousness and beauty of sound . . . music never ought to sound brooding, for, basically, it is the outpouring of joy and even in pain knows no pessimism." The brief *Abendfriede* ("*Evening Peace*") is from *Twelve Character Pieces, Opus 156*.

Symphony No. 1 in D minor, Finale – Louis Vierne

Born October 8, 1870 in Poitiers, France; died June 2, 1937 in Paris

Louis Vierne, a near-blind French organist and composer, studied with César Franck and Charles-Marie Widor at the Paris Conservatory. In 1900 he was appointed organist at Notre Dame, and continued there until he died while playing organ at a service. A colleague and friend of Guilmant, Vierne taught organ at the Schola Cantorum, and included among his students Nadia Boulanger and Maurice Duruflé. His works include six organ symphonies, an orchestral symphony and numerous works for chamber instruments and voice.

In late 19th century France, organs were developed that could fill the role of symphony orchestras. Until then, the organ had been generally associated with sacred music, but by the late 18th century, it was used less because of the anti-clerical mood of the time. When, in the 19th century, new organs were built with "symphonic" sound that appealed to masses of people, composers began to write secular organ symphonies for these instruments, most of which were, because of size, still located in great cathedrals.

Vierne's work for organ includes this Symphony No. 1 which, with its romantic, orchestral-sounding themes, classical developments, recapitulations, and stirring resolutions, sounds much like an orchestral symphony. Composed in 1898-1899, as his first major work, it continues the new pattern of large-scale works for organ that his mentors, Franck and Widor, composed.

The finale has virile power and bravura that bring the symphony to an exhilarating close. During Vierne's life, the finale became very popular by itself and Vierne referred to it as "my *Marseillaise*."

Prelude and Fugue on B-A-C-H – Franz Liszt

Born October 22, 1811, in Raiding, Hungary; died July 31, 1886, in Bayreuth, Germany

Although mostly known for his virtuosic piano compositions and innovative symphonic poems, Liszt wrote almost as much sacred music as secular. He was a deeply religious man who produced two major organ works: the *Prelude and Fugue on the Name B-A-C-H* and the *Fantasy and Fugue on "Ad nos, ad salutarem undam*." Neither is sacred in content, yet each results from Liszt's interest in church music and his attraction to the music of J.S. Bach. While Liszt lived in Weimar, he visited many of the organs of Bach's time and gained an intimate understanding of the instrument.

Liszt originally composed the remarkable and striking *Prelude and Fugue on the Name B-A-C-H* in 1855, although he did not give it its final form until 1870. It is based on the motive B-A-C-H in German nomenclature, using the notes B-flat, A, C, and B-natural. His most thoroughly chromatic music until that time, it points in the direction that he and his contemporaries were to go in the future.

Liszt takes Bach's preludes and fugues for the organ as his models and uses harmonies reflecting Bach's chromatic style. In fact, it is often impossible to find a tonal center in the *Fugue*. Liszt also enlarges the structure of the fugue's form. In the *Prelude* Liszt manipulates the four-note B-A-C-H motive in imaginative ways, yet the *Fugue* contains the greatness of this work. In it, Liszt abandons strict imitation, allowing its rhapsodic character to dominate, using the full panoply of organ colors and virtuosic techniques.

Fantasy and Fugue on "Ad Nos ad Salutarem Undam" – Franz Liszt

Meyerbeer's opera *Le Prophète (1849*), based on the life of the religious fanatic John of Leyden (d. 1536) is little performed today, but was a formidable success in its day. Liszt found it especially fascinating, and produced three piano *Illustrations* of *Le Prophète*'s themes in self-contained keyboard tone poems that thoroughly rework Meyerbeer's melodies. This outstanding work was not originally issued with the *Illustrations*, yet Liszt referred to it as *Illustration No. 4*.

Unlike the other *Illustrations*, Liszt's *'Ad nos' Fantasy and Fugue* is a completely original work inspired by Meyerbeer's theme, a traditional Jewish melody Meyerbeer knew from his childhood. The *Fantasy* initially treats fragments of the theme set to the text "*Ad nos, ad salutarem undam iterum venite miseri*" ("To us, to the healing waters, come again [i.e., come to be rebaptised], ye who are in misery."). Liszt

drew all the thematic material for his work from this brief melody, changing the meter from triple to duple and raising the B-flat in the first phrase. Meyerbeer was so impressed with Liszt's work that he suggested using it as an overture to his opera.

The *Fantasy and Fugue Ad Nos*, like the *Prelude and Fugue*, received its first performance at the Merseburg Cathedral, performed by Alexander Winterberger, at the inauguration of the Ladegast organ on September 26, 1855. Liszt published it in an arrangement that could be played as either an organ solo or a piano duet, and as a result, there are often seven staves per system in order to accommodate both possibilities.

The first half of the *Fantasy* consists of an introduction and three sections that develop the first three phrases of the theme. After a massive climax and a long, slowly subsiding cadenza, the complete melody appears unaccompanied in its full form in the work's center, at the beginning of the *Adagio* section. The *Adagio* is characterized by Liszt's harmonic inspiration. Finally, after a massive climax and a long, slowly subsiding cadenza, the complete melody is heard unaccompanied. The second movement consists of a series of imaginative lyrical sections alternating with recitative-like transitions. Here, Liszt explores the many possible colors of the organ. In the last movement, after a series of powerful chords and flourishes, Meyerbeer's melody returns as a fugue subject. The fugue, a free contrapuntal fantasy, gradually builds to a climax in a magnificent statement of the harmonized theme before a *Vivace molto* section brings back the theme, as the work concludes in a blaze of glory.

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1– 3 GUILMANT: Sonata No. 1 in D minor 24:41

1 Introduction and Allegro 8:52; 2 Pastorale 8:23; 3 Final 7:25

4 RHEINBERGER: Abendfriede 4:08

5 VIERNE: Symphony No. 1 – Final 5:40

6–7 LISZT: Prelude and Fugue on B-A-C-H 12:17

6 Prelude 4:05; 7 Fugue 8:11

8–17 LISZT: Fantasy and Fugue on "Ad nos, ad salutarem undam" 28:24

8 Moderato; 9 Marziale; 10 Recitativo; 11 Adagio; 12 Andante

13 Un poco piu di moto; 14 Adagio; 15 Allegro; 16 Fugue; 17 Vivace

FELIX HELL

The Schoenstein organ at First–Plymouth Congregational Church, UCC, Lincoln, Nebraska

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