

# Organist brings character to music

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Music Critic

Mary Ellen Sutton's organ recital at All Faiths Chapel on Tuesday evening provided an opportunity for a study in contrasts with regards to variations on hymn tunes. On the one hand there were three examples by Bach in the form of two chorale preludes, and a fugue seemingly based on the hymn, *O God, Our Help in Ages Past*, while on the other hand there was Virgil Thomson's variations on *Will There Be Any Stars in My Crown?*

Part of the trouble with Bach is that he was such a sober composer, and when his works are performed by dull players (which, I hasten to add, Dr. Sutton is not) the effect has all of the thrill of contemplating the lint in

one's navel and it becomes difficult to see why the man was such a popular top-forty composer and performer in his day.

By contrast, Virgil Thomson is never dull; in fact, most of the time his music is just plain fun. Such was the case with Mary Ellen Sutton's performance of the variations. This is a captivating, delightful and clever work that rightly produced a giggle or two from the audience.

Of the Bach works, the chorale prelude, *Christ unser Herr zum Jordan kam* was notable for the Moldau which flowed through it, while the *Fugue in E-flat Major* was appropriately enlivened by the touch of Virgil-Fox-live-at-the-Fillmore that Dr. Sutton brought to the concluding section.

Mary Ellen Sutton brings a clarity of expression and a sharp delineation of rhythm to all that she plays, and these characteristics were evident both in the *Concerto del Sigr. Tomaso Albinoni* by Walter and in the three short works by Jahan Alain. Added to these distinctive elements was the authority with which she communicated the flashes and sparks of tonal color that are endemic to Alain's music in general, and the *Litanies* in particular.

With regard to Walter's concerto, should the *Adagio* not be a free improvisation on the chords, as for example, appears to be the case in Bach's *Brandenburg Concerto No. 3*?

Some attractive, nasal, hurdy-gurdy registrations during the *Magnificat in A* from the *Livre d'Orgue de Montreal* could not hide the fact that the music seemed to be competent rather than distinctive, and this despite Dr. Sutton's characterful playing. Similarly, Mendelssohn's *Sonata in B-flat Major* seemed large in scale, but short on charm, except for the delightful *Allegretto* that was reminiscent of the style of the *Songs Without Words*. The music seemed to require a larger instrument and a larger volume of space within which to make its full effect.