

CHELSEA CHEN

(Review posted on *All Alabama* of November 24, 2013 concert
at Independent Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL)

CHELSEA CHEN BREAKS THE MOLD OF ORGAN RECITALS AT IPC 2013 FINALE

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama – Organ recitals tend to fall into predictable patterns – a Bach prelude and fugue, something French, something English or American, some more French, an improvisation if you're lucky, and a French barn burner to close.

There's nothing wrong, of course, with including the French romantics, post-romantics and modernists. Music by Vierne, Widor, Duruflé, Franck et al. can be powerful and magnificent, especially on a suitable instrument with a virtuoso performer. On Sunday at Independent Presbyterian Church, New York organist Chelsea Chen proved as much with the urgency, precision and coloration she displayed in Marcel Dupré's *Prelude and Fugue in B major*, the closing work on her recital.

But what came before the Dupré broke the mold. Although there was certainly a French presence, it was subdued – Debussy transcriptions, short works by the lesser known moderns Gaston Litaize and Henri Mulet – but music by the Norwegian-American Ola Gjeilo, Dutch composer Ad Wammes, and Chen herself gave this recital rare distinction.

Gjeilo's grandly cinematic "Sinfonietta" opened, Chen immediately filling the IPC sanctuary with color and volume. The organist's transcription of the Claude Debussy six-movement piano staple, "Children's Corner Suite," was a palpable realization of pictorial sonorities that pianists can only dream of producing. "Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum" was fluid and flighty, "Serenade of the Doll" animated in playful dialogues. The ragtime evocations of "Golliwog's Cakewalk" spoke more orchestrally than pianistically.

Chen took folk songs she heard as a child and fashioned them into the three-movement "Taiwanese Suite," which she composed in 2003. Reflections of landscape scenes – hills, moonlight, mountains – were beautifully portrayed in gentle harmonies and pentatonic scales, and colorfully rendered on the IPC's Dobson instrument.

The organist's verbal program notes were engaging as well, as she outlined the cat-and-mouse humor of Litaize's "Prélude et Dance Fuguée," Wammes' minimalist-influenced "Miroir," and her introduction to Mulet's reverent "Meditation religieuse" while a student at Yale.

Dupré's *Prelude and Fugue in B major* demands technical precision as well as probing exploration of the instrument at hand. Both were abundantly delivered through manuals, pedals and registration choices in the final work of the 2013 series. The encore, an enchanting reading of Debussy's "Girl with the Flaxen Hair," had the pews subtly vibrating to the pianissimo low E flat and G flat. Chen rightfully acknowledged the Dobson-built, Joseph W. Schreiber Memorial Organ's contribution to her fine performance.

Michael Huebner, AL.com, Nov 2013