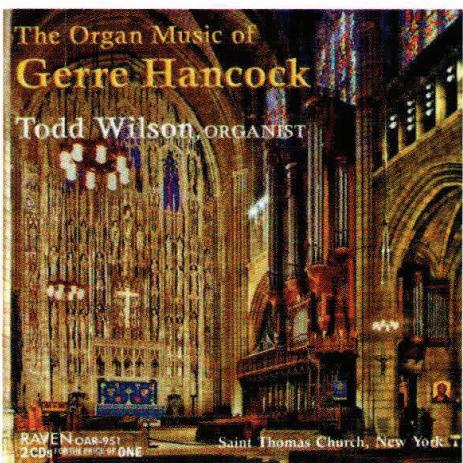


CD Review - *The American Organist*, December 2014

Todd Wilson—The Organ Music of Gerre Hancock

Raven OAR-951



THE ORGAN MUSIC OF GERRE HANCOCK. Todd Wilson, organist, assisted by Kevin Kwan, organist. The IV/160 Arents Memorial Organ of St. Thomas Church, New York City (chancel), 1965 Gilbert Adams and 2005 Mann & Trupiano, rebuilt from 1956 Aeolian-Skinner Opus 205-A, 1948 M.P. Möller Opus 7000, 1945 Ernest M. Skinner & Son, incorporating elements of 1913 Skinner Organ Company Opus 205) and the II/32 Loening-Hancock Gallery Organ (Taylor & Boody Opus 27, 1996). Raven OAR-951 (2 CDs). Ravencd.com. Also available from Ohscatalog.org. Todd Wilson, like many of us, was deeply influenced in his musically formative years by the service playing and improvisation of Gerre Hancock (1934–2012). Hancock exerted, and continues to exert, a deep influence in America and beyond as a church musician and organist. He was regarded by many as America's greatest improviser, inspiring untold thousands through his inimitable extemporizations. While his improvisations were the mainstream of his creative work, Hancock left a considerable catalog of choral and organ compositions, mostly in response to commissions or requests. In his treatise, *Improvising: How to Master the Art*, he clearly codified his creative methods. His improvised and composed works demonstrate a consistency of style and technique.

This two-CD set is a splendid tribute to the organ works of Gerre Hancock. Immaculately and excitingly performed by Todd Wilson on the instrument that Hancock commanded for 33 years, they are an authentic, definitive documentation of his complete composed oeuvre for the instrument. Unsurprisingly, most of Hancock's output is centered on hymn or chant melodies and sacred themes. He utilizes various forms: fantasy (*Divinum Mysterium*, St. Denio), variation (*Palm Beach*, *Ora labora*, *Coronation*), hymn prelude (*Nettleton*, *Playford*, *Bayhead* [performed on the gallery organ], *Somerset Hills*, *Hyfyrdol*, *Slane*), meditation (*Union Seminary*), prelude and fugue (*Union Seminary*), fanfare (*Antioch*), evocation (*Urbs Beata Jerusallem*), virtuosic showpiece (*Trumpet Flourishes for Christmas*, based on the tune Mendelssohn), paraphrase (St. Elizabeth), and the suite *Holy Week*, based on *Vexilla Regis* (Palm Sunday), *Pange lingua* (Maundy Thursday) and *Victimae Paschali* (Easter). The latter work is scored two organs. Todd Wilson is joined by his former Cleveland Institute of Music student Kevin Kwan, who was assistant organist at St. Thomas Church prior to his assuming the post of organist and director of music at Christ and St. Luke's Church in Norfolk, Va., in 2012. Wilson and Kwan alternate playing the chancel and gallery organs. The effect is spellbinding and extraordinary, particularly given the great distance between the two organs and the rhythmic complexity and velocity of the outer movements.

Hancock's free compositions include his earliest (1960), best-known organ work, *Air: A Prelude for Organ*, dedicated to Judith Eckerman, whom he married the following year; the brilliant *Toccata* cast in modified sonata form; the *Laredo Fanfare* that utilizes the Trompette en Chamade; and *A Fancy for Two to Play*, cast in song form for one organ with two players.

The entire scope of Gerre Hancock's composed organ music covers a wide range of moods and effects, from ethereal and poetic to monumental and extravagantly virtuosic. His harmonic language is uniquely colorful and usually easily identifiable, although in works such as *Trumpet Flourishes for Christmas* and the outer movements of *Holy Week*, Hancock seems to be pushing the envelope of tonality, the combined harmonies and ultravirtuosic passagework creating scintillatingly exciting effects. His music is carefully crafted to suit the occasion for which it was intended to be performed. We can indeed be grateful to have these "hard-copy" manifestations of Hancock's creative genius, which was most often expressed through improvisation.

Todd Wilson is an extraordinary, intrepid performer with immense technical capability and solid musicianship, qualities that eminently qualify him for this daunting project. His playing captures Hancock's spirit in every way; it could very well be Uncle Gerre himself playing. Todd has trained his student Kevin Kwan very well also; the

two play seamlessly in the duet works. Wilson wisely refrains from using the super- and subcouplers that were added to the console subsequent to the Hancocks' retirement from St. Thomas. While the Arents organ has suffered mechanical and tonal issues in recent years, it here sounds marvelous, under the careful preparation of Lawrence Trupiano. Its sound is as unique as is Hancock's music. It is truly a treasure to have the complete composed works recorded on this instrument and preserved for posterity. The recorded sound, produced by Ed Kelly, successfully captures the full spectrum of sound of both organs in the ambience of the spacious nave.

The program booklet includes excellent essays on Hancock and his organ music (Brian Preston Harlow), and the organs (Lawrence Trupiano). Several black and white photographs of Hancock in varying stages of his career, as well as of the organs, Dr. and Mrs. Hancock, and the performers are included. Judith Hancock also contributed brief comments on the recording. She says it best: "Years from now, when the organ heard on this recording is no longer at St. Thomas, this CD will assist our memory of the uniquely thrilling and beautiful qualities of that instrument—sounds that were so closely associated with Gerre's own playing and composing."

JAMES HILDRETH