

# NEW MUSIC

Daniel Ficarri

## Exultation

for solo organ

A new Dobson organ for Saint Thomas, Fifth Avenue, is eagerly awaited. Daniel Ficarri talks to **Shirley Ratcliffe** about his new work for the instrument's dedication service



▲ 'Struck by the organ's limitless possibilities': composer Daniel Ficarri

Attending an organ concert at St Paul's Cathedral in his hometown of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, was the kick-start that Daniel Ficarri needed to have organ lessons. He was 14, he explains: 'I was

immediately struck by the seemingly limitless possibilities of the instrument and its repertoire. I was fascinated by organists and by the incredible passion and dedication that their work required. It was this that inspired me.'

During his four years at high school, Ficarri had lessons with Robert Kardasz, organist at a nearby church. 'Under his guidance I studied a considerable amount of repertoire and developed a growing desire to work as hard as possible to discover my potential as a musician.'

As a child Ficarri had many opportunities for music. His school had what he describes as 'a wonderful music education programme', and he was able to study the violin and piano. 'My local parish church, St John Neumann, had a vibrant music programme,' he adds 'and I spent many years singing with and accompanying choirs. The church served as an outlet for me to explore my musical interests. I played and organised many services and concerts, and gradually musicians from around the community expressed interest in contributing their talents as well.' Ficarri had to find a way to accommodate this: 'I began arranging and composing music for choir, organ, piano, strings and brass. I also had the opportunity to learn from the church's extraordinary choral conductor, Ashley McCullar. She was extremely influential in teaching me how to work with a choir and help musicians realise their full potential. These experiences gave me a foundation for my organ playing and the confidence to move to New York City to study at Juilliard.'

When Ficarri arrived at Juilliard he had a great love for both organ and orchestral repertoire. 'My teacher, Paul Jacobs, was the first person I encountered to fuse these two worlds of music. He works tirelessly to expand the audience for organ music and to increase its repertoire, especially

in orchestral settings. Some of my most memorable and influential experiences have been hearing him perform works for organ and orchestra by Christopher Rouse, Wayne Oquin, James MacMillan and other composers. Witnessing large audiences embrace the organ in his performances opened my eyes to the incredible possibilities in store if the organ is to be continually incorporated into new settings.'

Ficarri describes his teacher's approach to the organ 'as an instrument with the potential to affect positively anyone with an open mind and heart, rather than an exclusive machine that can only be fully appreciated by the elite of music lovers. His attitude, I believe, is essential to the future health of organ music.' Aiming to follow in his teacher's footsteps, Ficarri is currently organ scholar at the Church of St Paul the Apostle in Manhattan, where he directs a concert series providing organ music to the Lincoln Center neighbourhood. 'This fall,' he adds, 'I am looking forward to continuing my studies at the Juilliard School as a Master of Music student in the organ studio of Dr Jacobs.'

Are there any composers that particularly inspire Ficarri? 'I find the music of J.S. Bach to be endlessly fulfilling; studying it has proved to be invaluable in improving my own counterpoint. And I am often inspired by the imagination and harmonic language of composers such as Olivier Messiaen and Samuel Barber.'

Which of his works has done the most to further his career as a composer? 'My *Suite no.1 for Organ*,' he says. 'This is a three-movement work commissioned by one of my classmates, David Ball, for a performance at my church. The piece was inspired by the incredible acoustics and architecture of the church. Since the premiere, it has received many performances around the United States and has been featured on classical music radio stations.'

For the New Music series, Ficarri was commissioned by C&O to write a Gospel fanfare for the dedication of the new Dobson organ in Saint Thomas, Fifth Avenue. What state was the organ in at that point? 'At the time I received the

commission, the Dobson organ was mostly constructed and installed. However, much of the pipework had not been voiced and so I wasn't able to get a clear sense of the sound of the instrument. Fortunately I had heard organ music in the space on many occasions, so I was able to imagine how my piece would sound in the sanctuary. Although the composition was commissioned for a specific occasion, I wanted my short work to have a life beyond its premiere. I wrote it so that it could be easily performed on any instrument of any size or style, in a variety of acoustical settings.

'*Exultation* has a majestic, rhythmic character that is perfect for celebratory occasions. Its brief length, only a minute and a half long, makes it usable in church services or as a short concert or encore piece. It enables the organist to showcase the full power of an instrument, specifically the reeds.'

Throughout our interview, it is evident that Daniel Ficarri is a young composer/organist on a mission as he discusses the place of the organist today and bringing organ music within the reach of larger audiences: 'I believe that growing the organ's audience begins with education. Even within the classical music world I regularly encounter conductors, composers and musicians of all kinds who are unaware of the organ's capabilities and have never been exposed to the instrument's repertoire. As organists, we are fortunate to be caretakers of an immense wealth of great repertoire. We simply have to make the effort to educate and introduce others to the timeless music we have inherited.'

'In today's increasingly connected world, organists have the opportunity to bring the instrument to audiences that were once out of reach of it. Because organs exist most often in places of worship, it is easy for the instrument and its music to be isolated and only exposed to a select group. However, witnessing first-hand the efforts of my classmates and teacher to bring the organ out of isolation has given me hope for a brighter future for organists.' ■  
[www.danielficarri.com](http://www.danielficarri.com)

Commissioned by Choir & Organ for Daniel Hyde and Saint Thomas Church, Fifth Avenue

I: Solo Reed  
II: Principals, III/II  
III: Principals, Mixtures, Reeds  
Ped: Principals, Soft 32'

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The premiere of *Exultation* will be given on 7 October during the Dedication Service at Saint Thomas, Fifth Avenue.