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The purpose of this research was to examine a representative portion of organ repertoire that was initially improvised and later written or transcribed for organists to study and perform.

The pieces examined were Johann Sebastian Bach's "Fantasia and Fugue in G minor" (BWV 542), Louis Vierne's *Trois Improvisations pour Grand Orgue*, Gerre Hancock's "Fantasy on 'St. Denio'" and Charles Tournemire's *Improvisation sur le "Te Deum"* from his *Cinq Improvisations*. Each piece was examined for its value as having been improvised before it was published. In the case of the Bach and the Hancock, the pieces were improvised and later written by the composer. In the case of Tournemire and Vierne, the pieces were "reconstituted" by Maurice Duruflé from recordings made by the organists themselves. Representative information about each composer or improvisateur was collected and studied with reference to their philosophies regarding improvisation and this was used to analyze the pieces themselves.

The final outcome of this research was a lecture recital of each of the pieces using the research as a way of informing the performance. The recital included information about the way each improvisateur constructed their improvisations and about how each improvisation came to be put in print.

FROM IMAGINATION TO IMPROVISATION TO REALIZATION  
A STUDY OF PIECES BY FOUR ORGANISTS

by

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Improvisation is a skill that is invaluable to the organist, especially the organist in the church. The ability to improvise allows for seamless church service playing by “giving continuity to the flow and drama inherent in them.”<sup>1</sup> While these are conventional, utilitarian opportunities for improvisation, there are far greater reasons for learning to improvise. Overduin states that “improvisation is about the full use of the human imagination.”<sup>2</sup> Hancock carries this idea further by saying that “...the chief reason to learn improvisation is simply that our musical personalities are incomplete and underdeveloped if we are unable to express ourselves in a spontaneous fashion.”<sup>3</sup>

Although improvisation is recognized as an important proficiency for the organist, it is not taught as intensely as it once was. In the introduction to his translation of Dupré’s *Traité d’Improvisation à l’Orgue*, Fenstermaker finds the beginning of the decline of the improvisation teaching in the middle of the nineteenth century. He asserts that “before that time, one was obliged to know how to improvise, compose, and perform in order to be considered a musician.”<sup>4</sup> Fenstermaker further explains the continued importance placed

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1. Hancock, Gerre. *Improvising: How to Master the Art*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, Inc. 1934. vii.

2. Overduin, Jan. *Making Music: Improvisation for Organists*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. vii.

3. Hancock, Gerre. vii.

on organ improvisation by the French, stating that the Paris Conservatory requires organists to improvise variations and fugues in their exams. In the United States, improvisation is most predominate in the jazz genre, with its importance in the area of organ performance often overlooked.

In the preface to *Making Music: Improvisation for Organists*, Overduin states that it has been said that Jean Langlais could teach stones to improvise.<sup>5</sup> If it is that simple, why has there been a decline in the teaching of improvisation? According to Hancock, "... many musicians are discouraged from attempting to improvise because of a mythical aura of mystery surrounding the art; they perceive it as a special endowment bestowed on only a chosen few and unattainable by the rest." He refutes this statement, saying that "as in any other art, improvising must be analyzed, planned, and practiced both in private and in public, the more carefully, systematically and conscientiously, the better."<sup>6</sup>

While much of what is known of the skill of great improvisateurs of the past has come from stories passed down from generation to generation, one can find evidence of their improvisatory prowess in their compositions. Furthermore, the development of live recording technology in the twentieth century provides musicians with a new window on the world of improvisation, as live improvisations can and have been transcribed. Four pieces provide well-constructed models for the study of improvisation: Johann Sebastian Bach's Fantasy and Fugue in G minor; Louis Vierne's Three Improvisations; Gerre

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4. Fenstermaker, John in Marcel Dupré. *Complete Course in Organ Improvisation*. Paris: Leduc, 1962 (original French ed. 1937).

5. Overduin, Jan.

6. Hancock, Gerre.



Hancock's Fantasy on St. Denio; and Charles Tournemire's *Improvisation sur le Te Deum*. Some of these pieces are direct transcriptions of recorded improvisations; others are believed to originally have been improvised.

The importance of improvisation for the organist cannot be overlooked. The skill is not only invaluable from a utilitarian standpoint; it is also an important component to being a complete musician. By understanding the concepts and constructs used by the great masters of this artful skill, one can begin to develop one's own abilities.

CHAPTER II  
JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH'S  
FANTASIA AND FUGUE, G MINOR (BWV 542)

While Johann Sebastian Bach's (1685-1750) genius as an improvisateur is not discussed as much as his genius as a composer, he was well-known during his time for brilliance in the skill of improvisation<sup>7</sup>. Of course, "it was expected that an accomplished musician of his time could realize a figured bass at sight, that is, improvise a complete accompaniment, usually in four voices."<sup>8</sup> According to Berio "Improvisation during the baroque era was somewhat like a jazz improvisation in that it based itself upon a harmonic (and therefore a rhythmic and metric) structure that was clear and, as it were, unanimous."<sup>9</sup> Bach was often called upon to improvise at a moment's notice and could do so for hours on a given theme in many variations. Johann Adam Reinken, after hearing Bach extemporize on *An Wasserflüssen Babylon* on the organ at St. Catherine's church in Hamburg, paid Bach the following compliment: "I thought that this art was dead, but I see that in you it still lives."<sup>10</sup> According to Wolff,

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7. Wolff, Christoph, Hans T. David, and Arthur Mendel. *The New Bach Reader: A Life of Johann Sebastian Bach in Letters and Documents*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1998. 26.

8. *Ibid.*, 8.

9. Fisk, Josiah, and Jeff Nichols. *Composers on Music: Eight Centuries of Writings*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1997. 434.

10. Wolff, 302.

This [Weimar] Obituary statement clearly refers to written compositions, and considering that a large portion of a capable organist's work consisted of improvised music, the organ compositions that have come down to us represent only a fraction of the music that originated from Bach's creative mind. Nevertheless, his decision to fix so many organ works—some if not all of them based on improvisations—in written form indicates that Bach considered these pieces worthy of elaboration and preservation...<sup>11</sup>

The Fantasia and Fugue in G minor (BWV 542) is one of Bach's most intricate and developed works of organ repertoire. The Fantasia contains sweeping, Frescobaldi-like recitative passages which, while calculated and holding fast to the rules of harmony during that time, sound like free-improvisation to the listener. These passages are contrasted with more restrained fugato sections. After developing these musical ideas, Bach begins

a spiraling modulation through many keys, starting with D major and creating a crescendo which continues on the manuals as the parts increase in number from two to five. Other deceptive cadences, harmonic anticipations and swift enharmonic changes of direction make this fantasia one of the most interesting and boldest of Bach's harmonic creations.<sup>12</sup>

While it is not known if the pieces were composed as a set, it is known that Bach improvised the fugue for a job audition at *St. Jakobkirche* in Hamburg in 1720. Bach bases the fugue on the Dutch folk tune "*Ik ben gegroet*" (see Figure 1) and ornaments the general shape of the melody while keeping its contour readily heard (see Figure 2). It is

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11. Wolff, Christoph. *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000. 125

12. Lukas, Viktor. *A Guide to Organ Music*, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition. Edited by Reinhard G. Pauly. Translated by Anne Wyburd. Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1986. 73

widely thought that Bach used this folk tune to honor the Dutch organist Reineke, who was present at the audition.<sup>13</sup>

Figure 1. Dutch Folk Tune “*Ik ben gegroet*”



Figure 2. Bach's theme for the G minor Fugue



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13. Stauffer, George B. Liner Notes. Gothic G-49260, 2008.

CHAPTER III  
LOUIS VIERNE'S  
*TROIS IMPROVISATIONS*

Louis Vierne (1870-1937) is known best for the post he held at Paris' Notre Dame Cathedral. Blind from birth, he taught at the conservatory in Paris where he had studied during his youth. His most notable teachers at the conservatory were César Franck and Charles-Marie Widor. Under Franck, five hours of the six hours of study each day were devoted to improvisation, which was the most difficult portion of the examinations each year.<sup>14</sup> Franck's successor Widor, on the other hand, taught performance more than improvisation, as he saw that studying the great organ works of the masters informed the improvisation.<sup>15</sup>

With this background in organ repertoire and improvisation, Vierne formed his own definite ideals regarding improvisation. Bouvard states

Above all the rules, all the recipes, Vierne put "music" first; to the development of a perfect structure, but in which no personal or human note appeared, he preferred the free course of inspiration. Nothing delighted him more than an excursion into some distant keys. If he valued the free theme, it was above all as a scholastic form for developing the precious gifts of inspiration, an outline to guide and help the pupil, a constraint from which the maître knew how to extricate himself.<sup>16</sup>

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14. Smith, Rollin. *Louis Vierne: Organist of Notre-Dame Cathedral*. Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 1999. 43.

15. *Ibid*, 55-59.

16. *Ibid*, 745.

Vierne taught his pupils that a well-planned improvisation should give the illusion of a written work with “a good restrained exposition; a secure marking out of the development; judicious return of the several periods; and... a tight conclusion.”<sup>17</sup> A detailed arrangement of his plan is seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Vierne’s plan for a well-constructed improvisation<sup>18</sup>

<b>First Exposition (16-20 measures)</b>	<b>Bridge (12 measures)</b>	<b>Second Exposition (12-16 measures)</b>
Theme. Commentary. Return of the Theme. Concluding Commentary in the principal key.	Three modulatory phrases: a, b, c (separated by a break) constructed on a measure of the same.	Theme. Commentary. Return of the theme <i>ad libitum</i> . Brief conclusion in the key of the second exposition.
<b>Development (24-32 measures)</b>	<b>Preparation for Return of the Theme</b>	<b>Return of the Theme (24-28 measures)</b>
On a rhythmic element and a melodic element of the theme.	Two measures twice on the “head” of the theme.	Theme. Commentary. (canon). Brief Reference to the Bridge. (Theme inverted). Commentary on the pedal of the tonic and conclusion.

Vierne composed many themes for improvisation to aid his pupils in their study of the art. Three representative themes from fifty collected by his student Jean Bouvard may be seen in Figure 3. The contours of each four measure theme span nearly an octave and hold rhythmic as well as melodic interest.

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17. Doyen, Henri. *Mes Leçons avec Louis Vierne*. Soissons: Saint-Antoine, 1966.

18. Smith, Rollin. 744.

Figure 3. Three of Vierne's composed themes for improvisation.<sup>19</sup>

a.



b.



c.



Vierne recorded the *Trois Improvisations pour Grand Orgue* at Notre-Dame Cathedral in 1930, and his student Maurice Duruflé transcribed them later for publication in 1937. The three pieces are 1) *Marche épiscopale*, 2) *Méditation* and 3) *Cortège*. The two outer pieces are strong processional-like pieces and the quiet prayer-like *Méditation* is more pastorate in nature with flowing triplets in the accompaniment. When compared with Vierne's plan for a well-constructed improvisation, these pieces follow the design almost to the letter with the exception of the *Marche épiscopale* which, being a shorter improvisation, lacks a full Development and the *Méditation*, which ends with a codetta. The plan for each piece can be seen in Tables 2 through 4.

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19. Ibid. 753.

Table 2. Analysis of Vierne's *Marche épiscopale*

<b>First Exposition</b>	<b>Bridge</b>	<b>Second Exposition</b>
19 measures	18 measures	15 measures
<b>Development</b>	<b>Preparation for Theme Return</b>	<b>Return of the Theme</b>
none	5 measures	19 measures

Table 3. Analysis of Vierne's *Méditation*

<b>First Exposition</b>	<b>Bridge</b>	<b>Second Exposition</b>
14 measures	10 measures	12 measures
<b>Development</b>	<b>Preparation for Theme Return</b>	<b>Return of the Theme</b>
18 measures	4 measures	19 measures (Codetta)

Table 4. Analysis of Vierne's *Cortège*

<b>First Exposition</b>	<b>Bridge</b>	<b>Second Exposition</b>
20 measures	15 measures	5 measures
<b>Development</b>	<b>Preparation for Theme Return</b>	<b>Return of the Theme</b>
15 measures	6 measures	34 measures



CHAPTER IV  
 CHARLES TOURNEMIRE'S  
*CINQ IMPROVISATIONS*

Referred to as an “Impressionist Christian,”<sup>20</sup> Charles Tournemire (1870-1939) was a classmate of Vierne’s at the Conservatory in Paris, where he also studied with Franck and with Widor. Franck’s successor at Ste. Clotilde, Tournemire improvised services based on the chant propers found in the *Liber Usualis* which remained opened on the music rack of the organ.<sup>21</sup> According to Robert, “He never played organ repertoire during mass but always improvised, and he rarely ended the sortie on full organ, but generally preferred a quiet, rapturous conclusion.”<sup>22</sup> Named *professeur d’ensemble instrumental* at the Conservatory in 1919, Tournemire taught improvisation based on Gregorian Chant themes. His course required an accompaniment of a Gregorian antiphon followed by a short, free improvisation on the same theme, a *fugue d’ecole*, a free improvisation in the form of the first movement of a sonata with only one theme, and then a piece of repertoire.<sup>23</sup> According to Tournemire, form was less important than a musical flow in improvising.

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20. Doyen, Henri, 45

21. *Mes Souvenirs* in Robert, Philippe. “Maurice Duruflé: Sa vie, son œuvre.” Doctoral diss., Université de Liège, 1979.

22. Ronzon, Laurent. “Maurice Duruflé et le conservatoire de Paris, sa formation et son enseignement, 1920-1970.” Master’s mémoire, Sorbonne, Paris, 1996.

23. Frazier, James. “In Gregorian Mode,” in Maurice Duruflé, 1902-1986: The Last Impressionist, ed. Ronald Ebrecht. London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2002. 8

First, you create an atmosphere... Then you introduce a theme. This is followed by a massive crescendo, reaching a climax in a large, dissonant chord on full organ, followed by a long silence, followed by a second dissonant chord (all to frighten the audience!). The one concludes quietly on the Voix céleste.<sup>24</sup>

The *Cinq Improvisations* of Tournemire were, like Vierne's *Trois Improvisations*, actual improvisations that were reconstituted by Maurice Duruflé. Recorded in the 1930's at the Cavaille-Coll organ at Sainte-Clotilde, Tournemire objected to his improvisations being reconstituted, as he felt that the works were intended as improvisations and not as pieces for study and performance by other organists.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, Duruflé transcribed the recordings in 1958 which included a "*Cantilène Improvisé*," a "*Fantasie Improvisation sur l'Ave Maris Stella*," the "*Chorale Improvisation sur le Victimae Paschali*," a "*Petite Rapsodie Improvisée*" and an "*Improvisation sur le Te Deum*." They were published with the dedication "*En souvenir de mon Maître Charles Tournemire*."

Each Improvisation has its own impressionistic character with only the *Te Deum* and the *Victimae Paschali* calling for full organ at any point. While the others are more quiet and whimsical in nature, the *Ave Maris Stella* does call for the addition of reeds before ending quietly. The chant-based improvisations quote small portions of their "*cantus firmi*" and use this as a point of departure for free and rhapsodic development.

The *Improvisation sur le Te Deum* is based on the first 10 notes of the Gregorian Chant theme, which can be seen in Figure 4. When compared to the instructions that Tournemire gives regarding a good improvisation, with a few exceptions, we see that he

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24. Ibid. 9.

25. Frazier, 37.

holds to this rule in his own execution of the craft. With the opening fanfare, he creates the atmosphere and at the same time establishes the ten-note theme on which he will base the rest of the improvisation. At measure 49, the registration is reduced for the beginning of a crescendo which builds through measure 59 where the fanfare returns. All of this serves as introductory material before, at measure 66, the main development of the theme begins. This initiates another gradual dynamic and rhythmic crescendo that weaves through triplet figures, sixteenth figures, and quintuplet figures over 92 measures until the full-organ fanfare returns at measure 159. This builds to a dissonant chord in measure 186 which is followed by a cadenza-like flourish at measure 188, giving way to silence and then another dissonant chord. Tournemire breaks ranks with his instruction in this case by ending with another cadenza-like passage and ending full organ with crashing chords from measure 209 to the end.

Figure 4. First ten notes of the *Te Deum Laudamus*



CHAPTER V  
THE WORK OF GERRE HANCOCK  
AND HIS “FANTASY ON ST. DENIO”

In the United States, the focus of musical improvisation is generally found in the realm of the jazz world; however, there has been a resurgence of interest in improvisation at the organ. Young concert artists with gifts for performance and engaging audiences have worked to inform audiences about the excitement that can be found in the spontaneity of the improvisation. Furthermore, listeners are often involved in the process by being invited to offer tunes to be used in improvisation. Artists such as Robert Ridgell of Trinity Wall Street Church in New York City uses modern day songs pertinent to the day and time for improvisations in church services. For example, the Sunday following the week of the deaths of prominent public figures James Brown and Gerald Ford, Ridgell offered an improvisation at the offertory that included a James Brown style “break down” and “Hail to the Chief”. On the Sunday after Michael Jackson’s death, he improvised on “Beat It” and “ABC” at the Closing Voluntary. This ability to connect with the listener in meaningful ways makes the art of organ improvisation more viable in the realm of organ music in general.

The modern-day American master of improvisation is Gerre Hancock, professor of organ and sacred music at the University of Texas at Austin. Hancock studied improvisation with Searle Wright and with Nadia Boulanger, a former student of Vierne’s. For more than thirty years, he held the post of organist and choirmaster at New York City’s

Saint Thomas Church, Fifth Avenue. While at Saint Thomas, Hancock promulgated the art of improvisation through performances, education and authoring a textbook on the subject *Improvising: How to Master the Art*. In this textbook, Hancock teaches a step-by-step method for learning to improvise that begins, very simply, with a scale. Building on this general principle, the pupil is guided through the development of subjects such as “The Interlude”, “The Ornamented Hymn”, “The Song Form”, “The Sonata Form”, “The Toccata”, “The Canon” and the finally, “The Fugue”.

Hancock’s 1990 recording, “Fanfare” contains four improvisations, two of which are based on hymn tunes. In the liner notes, Denis Stevens states of Hancock’s “Improvisation on ‘St. Denio’”: “The decorative and melodic aspect of the improvisation often evokes the idea of “light inaccessible” and “unresting, unhasting” as if the words of the hymn were not, after all, so very far from the performer’s thought.”<sup>26</sup> The melody in the improvisation is given a lilting thirty-second note downward scalar motif which eventually enters the accompaniment. The entire improvisation is whimsical and quiet with a few registrational increases, which never move above a *mezzo forte* dynamic level. The piece ends as quietly and whimsically as it begins.

In 2008, Hinshaw Music Company in Chapel Hill, North Carolina published Hancock’s “Fantasy on ‘St. Denio’”. The character of this piece is much like that of Hancock’s improvisation in that the melodic line is ornamented with scalar motifs; however, the rhythmic drive is decreased from that of the improvisation, because the thirty-second notes are replaced by eighth notes. This melodic interpolation continues, like the improvisation until the eighth note motif is taken on in the accompaniment with the

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26. Stevens, Denis. Liner Notes. Gothic G-49038.

*cantus firmus* in the pedal line. The piece builds dynamically in contrast with its improvisational counterpart as it drives through a number of modulations while building registrations to full organ. The piece ends quietly, just as the improvisation does, returning to the original eighth-note idea. Hancock, who studied with Vierne's student Boulanger, follows, to some degree, the pattern for improvising set forth by Vierne. According to Hancock, "I was, in fact, asked to write a "reasonable facsimile" to the recorded improvisation."<sup>27</sup>

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27. Hancock, Gerre. Personal correspondence, 27 September 2009, Electronic Mail.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

Improvisation as an art form at the organ has developed through hundreds of years. From the simple, rule-oriented realization of a figured bass and development of contrapuntal complexities in Bach's time to the impressionistic aesthetics of Tournemire, improvisation has held at its core the imagination of the performer tempered by rules (some hard fast, some less stringent) of the art. The church has helped to develop this through ever-changing needs in the "liturgy of sound". For the organist in the church, improvisation is an invaluable skill.

Hancock answers the question "Why learn to improvise" in the Introduction to his textbook:

In order to play the works of other composers which are improvisatory in nature with more conviction and authority? Certainly: one thinks at once of the keyboard works of Titelouze, de Grigny, Buxtehude, Böhm, Bach, Beethoven, Franck, Dupré, Messiaen, and Cage, to mention but a few. Many of their works actually began as improvisations, because these composers possessed renowned improvisatory prowess.<sup>28</sup>

It is a skill that requires careful, systematic and conscientious planning and practice in both private and in public, just as we carefully, systematically and conscientiously prepare notated music.<sup>29</sup>

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28. Hancock, vii.

Tracing the development of organ improvisation, each of these pieces is an example of well-planned improvisation which was either improvised and then written by the composer's hand or improvised and later reconstructed from recordings. In either case, careful planning went into each piece, and each composer used either pre-existing rules of the day or rules that they had set forth in the art themselves.

Hancock concludes his textbook with an admonition to the practitioners of the art of improvisation:

We continue to learn from the master composers of the keyboard literature who were often themselves extraordinary improvisers. Now that we are creating music in our improvising, we must pursue the repertoire, studying it note by phrase by section by piece. A happy dividend is that we will play that repertory with more authority and conviction than before. We appreciate structure in a new light, having designed and worked our these forms ourselves.<sup>30</sup>

And so it is that musicians today study the work of our forebears and learn from the groundwork set before in order to produce our own unique art.

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29. Ibid.

30. Hancock. 160.



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APPENDIX A  
RECITAL PROGRAM AND HANDOUT

Fugue, G minor (BWV 542)	Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)
<i>Trois Improvisations pour Grand Orgue</i> (Reconstituées par Maurice Duruflé) I. <i>Marche épiscopale</i> II. <i>Méditation</i> III. <i>Cortège</i>	Louis Vierne (1870-1937)
<i>Improvisation sur le "Te Deum"</i> (Reconstituées par Maurice Duruflé)	Charles Tournemire (1870-1939)
Fantasy on "St. Denio"	Gerre Hancock (b. 1934)

### Dutch Folk Tune “*Ik ben gegroet*”



### Bach’s theme for the G minor Fugue



### Vierne’s plan for a well-constructed improvisation<sup>1</sup>

First Exposition (16-20 measures)	Bridge (12 measures)	Second Exposition (12-16 measures)
Theme. Commentary. Return of the Theme. Concluding Commentary in the principal key.	Three modulatory phrases: a, b, c (separated by a break) constructed on a measure of the same.	Theme. Commentary. Return of the theme <i>ad libitum</i> . Brief conclusion in the key of the second exposition.
Development (24-32 measures)	Preparation for Return of the Theme	Return of the Theme (24-28 measures)
On a rhythmic element and a melodic element of the theme.	Two measures twice on the “head” of the theme.	Theme. Commentary. (canon). Brief Reference to the Bridge. (Theme inverted). Commentary on the pedal of the tonic and conclusion.

1. Smith, Rollin. Louis Vierne: Organist of Notre-Dame Cathedral. Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 1999.

### Analysis of Vierne's *Marche épiscopale*

First Exposition	Bridge	Second Exposition
19 measures	18 measures	15 measures
Development	Preparation for Theme Return	Return of the Theme
none	5 measures	19 measures

### Analysis of Vierne's *Méditation*

First Exposition	Bridge	Second Exposition
14 measures	10 measures	12 measures
Development	Preparation for Theme Return	Return of the Theme
18 measures	4 measures	19 measures (Codetta)

### Analysis of Vierne's *Cortège*

First Exposition	Bridge	Second Exposition
20 measures	15 measures	5 measures
Development	Preparation for Theme Return	Return of the Theme
15 measures	6 measures	34 measures

### First ten notes of the *Te Deum Laudamus*

