

Dr. Leo Sowerby: His Life and Organ Music by Faythe Freese

Dr. Leo Sowerby was an authentic musical voice of the Midwest, our great American heartland. His works were featured on programs by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra from his early 20s on. He wrote over 550 works including all genre with the exception of opera. He won the Pulitzer Prize in 1946 for his cantata, *The Canticle of the Sun*. His music was performed not only by the CSO but also the Boston Symphony, the Philadelphia Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic and others.

He wrote not only for the traditional classical concert stage, and church music (organ and choral) but also music in the jazz idiom for the bandleader Paul Whiteman in the 1920s and 30s. He called himself “a musical Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.” His music could produce the syncopated rhythms of the Jazz era but could also colorfully paint vivid landscapes, like the tone poems, *Prairie* and *Comes Autumn Time*.

He was truly an American composer, with a national reputation in the world of concert music to have a keen interest in church music. He was organist at St. James’ Episcopal Cathedral in Chicago for 35 years and served six years as the founding director of the College of Church Musicians at Washington National Cathedral consequently, his liturgical music holds a major place in the history of American church music.

There is no authentic performance practice to learn when performing the works of Dr. Leo. Everything is contained in the score. His instructions are very precise and he expected the performer to observe them. He once called my organ teacher, Robert Rayfield, to task for his performance of *Carillon*, *Comes Autumn Time* and *Pageant* at the Kimball Hall in Chicago. Sowerby in particular said that Rayfield had not observed his registration indications. There was and is room however, for interpretation concerning musicality such as the shaping of a line and realizing climactic points within the line.

Influential Pipe Organs:

Chicago, IL			
Fourth Presbyterian Church			
Builder:	Skinner Organ Co.		
Year:	1913		
Opus:	210		
No. manuals:	4		
No. stops:	74		
No. ranks:	57		
No. pipes:	3,484		
Specification			
Great	16'	Diapason	61
	16'	Bourdon	17 (Pedal ext.)
	8'	First Diapason	61
	8'	Second Diapason	61
	8'	Third Diapason	61
	8'	Philomela	PED
	8'	Waldflöte	61
	8'	Erzähler	61
	4'	Octave	61
	4'	Flute	61
	2'	Fifteenth	61
	16'	Ophicleide	61
	8'	Tromba	12
	4'	Claron	12
Swell	16'	Bourdon	73
	16'	Dulciana	73
	8'	Diapason	73
	8'	Clarabella	73
	8'	Spiriflöte	73
	8'	Gedackt	73
	8'	Salicional	73
	8'	Voix Celestes	73
	8'	Aeoline	73
	8'	Unda Maris	61
	4'	Octave	73
	4'	Flute	73
	2'	Flautino	61
	III	Mixture	183
	16'	Contra Posaune	73
	8'	Cornopean	73
8'	Oboe	73	
8'	Vox Humana	73	
4'	Claron	73	
	Tremolo		

Choir		
16'	Gamba	73
8'	Geigen Principal	73
8'	Concert Flute	73
8'	Quintaden	73
8'	Kleine Erzähler	61
8'	Dulcet II	122
4'	Flute	73
2'	Piccolo	61
16'	English Horn	73
16'	Fagotto	73
8'	Clarinet	73
8'	Orchestral Oboe	73
8'	Flugel Horn	73
	Tremolo	
	Celesta	61 bars
Solo		
8'	Philomela	PED
8'	Gamba	73
8'	Gamba Celeste	73
16'	Fagotto	CH
8'	Tuba Mirabilis	73
8'	French Horn	73
8'	Flugel Horn	CH
8'	Orchestral Oboe	CH
	Tremolo	
Echo		
8'	Diapason	61
8'	Gedeckt	61
4'	Flute	61
8'	Vox Humana	61
	Tremolo	
Pedal		
32'	Contra Violone	32
16'	Diapason	32
16'	Violone	12
16'	First Bourdon	32
16'	Second Bourdon	SW
16'	Gamba	CH
16'	Dulciana	SW
8'	Octave	12
8'	Gedeckt	12
8'	Cello	SO
8'	Still Gedeckt	SW
32'	Bombarde	12
16'	Ophicleide	GT
16'	Posaune	SW
8'	Tromba	GT
4'	Tromba	GT

The colorful palette of the E.M. Skinner organ at Fourth Presbyterian Church helped mold Sowerby's compositional style, with particular attention to registration.

Please note the diverse colors of the instrument:

1. The multiple undulating stops: Unda maris, voix celeste, gamba celeste, dulcet II (Skinner used these as early as 1910.)

2. First, second and third Diapason on the Great alone

3. Interesting reeds:

a. Cornopean on the Swell: The Cornopean is essentially a Trumpet of larger scale, having the typical inverted conical resonators. Tonally it lies between the Trumpet and the Horn, though often the name is used interchangeably with *Trumpet*. Its reeds will be of the closed variety, with thick tongues, and harmonic-length resonators in the treble.

b. Ophicleide on the Great: The *Ophicleide* is a high-pressure chorus reed, speaking on a wind pressure of anywhere from 10" to 50". It is one of the most powerful stops of all; Hopkins & Rimbault considered it the most powerful, synonymous with the Tuba Mirabilis. Irwin claims it to be louder than the *Tuba Mirabilis*.

4. Choir: 16' Gamba, Kleine erzähler (Little storyteller), English horn, Clarinet, Fagotto, Flugel Horn

5. Solo: Tuba Mirabilis, French Horn, Philomela (open wood with 2 mouths)

6. Pedal: 32' Contra Violone (Skinner usually used metal rather than wood)

Cathedral of St. James, Chicago, IL Austin, 1920	
Great	Pedal
Double Diapason 16'	Resultant Bass 32'
Principal Diapason 8'	Open Diapason 16'
Spitz Flute 8'	Bourdon 16'
Doppel Flute 8'	Second Bourdon 16' (Sw.)
Gemshorn 8' (enclosed)	Gross Flute 8' (Solo)
Gemshorn Celeste 8' (enclosed)	Tuba Profunda 16' (Solo)
Octave 4'	Contra Fagotto 16' (Sw.)
Harmonic Flute 4'	Harmonic Tuba 8' (Solo)
Trumpet 8'	Tremulants on Swell, Choir, Solo
	Standard 16', 8', 4' couplers
Swell (enclosed)	
Bourdon 16'	
Open Diapason 8'	
Viole d' Orchestre 8'	
Echo Salicional 8'	
Voix Celeste 8'	
Flauto Traverso 4'	
Piccolo 2'	
Dolce Cornet III	
Contra Fagotto 16'	
Cornopean 8'	
Oboe 8'	
Vox Humana 8'	
Choir (enclosed)	
Open Diapason 8'	
Concert Flute 8'	
Unda Maris 8'	
Dulciana 8'	
Flute d' Amour 4'	
Flautino 2'	
Clarinet 8'	
Solo (enclosed)	
Flauto Major 8'	
Stentorphone 8'	
Gross Gamba 8'	
Gamba Celeste 8'	
Flute Ouverte 4'	
Tuba Profunda 16'	
Harmonic Tuba 8'	
Harmonic Clarion 4'	
Cor Anglais 8'	
Chimes	

The 1920 Austin organ at St. James Episcopal Cathedral however, had a more lasting effect on Sowerby's mature works. It is important to remember that when one performs works written after 1926, that the texture of Sowerby's music was tailored to a specific sound--the sound of the St. James organ. The sound of this organ has been described as "tubby" not particularly the sound ideal of many of today's organists. Sowerby's works did seem however, to come alive on this instrument. Items of interest:

- Diverse colors of the instrument: Clarinet on Choir
- Three enclosed divisions: choir, Swell, Solo
- Items of interest on the Solo division:
- Stentorphone – A double pipe, metal like a Philomela which produced a smooth, liquid sound
- Gross Gamba on the Solo was very large. A true solo stop, called for quite frequently by Sowerby such as in Fantasy for Flute Stops and Prelude on Song 46.
- Cor Anglais

Sowerby's Self-Prescribed Compositional Periods and Sample Works

Leo Sowerby classified his pieces as either for church or for concert although the lines of demarcation were hazy. He requested of my organ teacher Robert Rayfield to play *Pageant* as a postlude for one of Sowerby's festival services. Reason: Sowerby said, "The music used in church need not be, and should not be, dull; it need rarely be mournful, and not frequently slow-moving. It certainly may be joyous, brilliant on occasion, ecstatic even. . ."

Sowerby divided his organ works into three compositional periods:

Orchestral Period (1913-1920)

Sowerby thought of the organ in terms of the orchestra of Debussy and Ravel. The works of this period are filled with lush chromatic harmonies and fast changing tone colors.

A. Church Music

1. *Requiescat in Pace* (1926)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-D5Upkrq8jE> Crozier, artist

B. Concert Music

1. *Carillon* (1920)

2. *Comes Autumn Time* (1916, Pub. 1927)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TCcwKRMymBI> Harold Stover, artist

- a. Inspired by a poem by Bliss Carman:

Autumn

Now when the time for fruit and grain is come,
When apples hang above the orchard wall,
And from the tangle by the roadside stream
A scent of wild grapes fills the racey air;
Comes Autumn with her sunburnt caravan,
Like a long gypsy train with her trappings gay
And tattered colors of the Orient,
Moving slow-footed through the dreamy hills,
The woods of Wilton at her coming wear
Tints of Bokhara and of Samarcand;
The maples glow with their Pompeian red,
The hickories with their burnt Etruscan gold;
And while the crickets fife along her march,
Behind her banners burns the crimson sun.

Pure Organ Period 1927-1937

In the Pure Organ Period, Sowerby thought of the organ more idiomatically. There are fewer registration changes and specific tone colors called for than in the orchestral period. Generally, the pieces are more concise, and the music more dissonant. Sowerby said he had no desire to write for the organ between 1920-1927.

A. Concert Music

1. *Symphony in G Major* (1930, pub. 1932)

- a. Mvt. 1, "Very Broadly-Moderately Fast"

- b. Mvt. 2, "Fast and Sinister"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VI1BZL1XnAo> Crozier, artist

- c. Mvt. 3, "Passacaglia"
 - 2. *Suite for Organ* (1928, pub. 1935)
 - a. Chorale and Fugue
 - b. Fantasy for Flute Stops
 - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9TuJSEiO_g Freese, artist
 - c. Air with Variations
 - d. March
 - 3. *Pageant* (1931, pub 1931)
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=14T7WkNjCds> Freese, artist
- B. Church Music-none composed during this period

Baroque Response Period (1937-1968)

In Sowerby's Baroque Response Period, his music was neo-classic or neo-baroque in tendency and was a response to the neo-classicism of some composers such as Stravinsky. The music's texture is stripped to the barest of essentials with the exception that at climactic points, Sowerby thickens the texture. Registration indications are minimal with the exception of indications for the Crescendo pedal. Case in point, there are no registration indications in the entire 40 pages of the *Sinphonia Brevis*.

NOTE: While late works are more dissonant than earlier works, they are basically homophonic and feature full, romantic registrational ideals. Style traits included: Terraced dynamics; motor rhythms; regular phrase groupings; classical ideals of balance and proportion; more dissonance.

- A. Church Music
 - 1. *Prelude on "Deus Tuorum Militum"* (*Ten Chorale Preludes*, 1955)
 - 2. *Meditations on Communion Hymns for Organ, "Picardy"* (1940, pub. 1942)
- B. Concert Music
 - 1. *Rhapsody* (1945, pub. 1946; also in *Modern Anthology*, Book II)
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7XWqJr4qlqQ> Freese, artist

Organ Plus

- A. *Fantasy for Trumpet and Organ* (1961)
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zqh5C2xY4So> Freese, Lewis, artists
- B. *Ballade* (1949) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FCafQbJt3pY> Freese, Haskell, artists