LOUIS VIERNE
1870-1937

Naïades

No one composed an organ scherzo like Vierne, and his "*Water Nymphs*" is the ultimate. Fiendish, relentless scales propel the mythical swimmers to and fro, while the accompaniment makes only fleeting harmonic suggestions to keep the tonality in check.

Clair de Lune
Toccata

Vierne's *Fantasy Pieces* depict everything from a generic prelude or andantino to more descriptive images such as a starry night, phantoms, water nymphs, the Rhein River, and gargoyles. The movement depicting *Moonlight* is plenty dreamy and contains some of Vierne's most poignant writing, stretching traditional tonality to its limit without breaking it. The aggressive *Toccata* represents Vierne at his Gothic finest, and anyone who has visited Notre-Dame in Paris can understand the inspiration.

Symphony No. 6, Op. 59
I. Introduction et Allegro
II. Aria: Andante quasi adagio
III. Scherzo: Vivace
IV. Adagio: Larghetto
V. Final: Allegro molto

The use of a recurring musical theme in a multi-movement work goes back many hundreds of years. For the discussion at hand, we need go only as far back as Beethoven, whose Fifth Symphony visits the same rhythmic and/or melodic material in all movements. Beethoven took that process a step further in the introduction to the finale of his ninth Symphony, which more directly recalls the actual main themes from the preceding movements.

Another step forward: César Franck used but a single melodic theme as the primary unifying device throughout a large work, the *Grande Pièce Symphonique*, quite contemporary with similarly-constructed works by Franz Liszt (*Ad nos, ad salutarem undam*) and Julius Reubke (*Sonata on the Ninety-Fourth Psalm*).

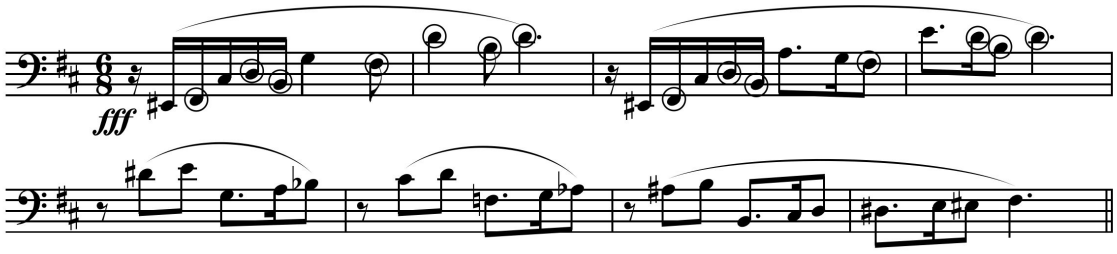
Another step forward: Beginning with Franck, French composers for the organ began to develop two independent themes in contrast against each other, then in combination with each other. Although this necessitated similar harmonic

approaches between the themes, the real interest lay in discovering the satisfying overlapping of the themes, despite their seeming dissimilarities as the piece unfolds.

Another step: Vierne used an aggregate approach to all of the above in his Sixth Symphony for solo organ: although each of its five movements has its own themes cast in traditional classical formal outlines, the primary theme of the *first* movement appears in *all* movements. This theme (hereinafter referred to as the "Main Theme") and its recurrences are outlined as follows:

I. *Introduction et Allegro*

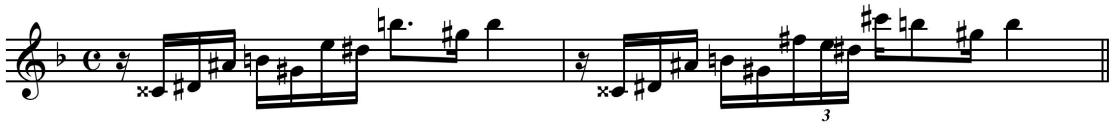
After the Introduction based on it, the Main Theme makes its first statement in the Pedal. It is constructed primarily from the tones of the B Minor triad (circled below) with embellishing half-step approaches:



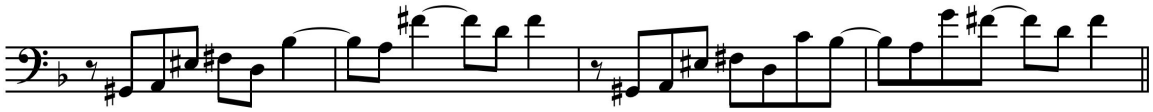
The movement progresses along a rather textbook Sonata-Allegro form, complete with a contrasting second theme, a development, and a full recapitulation. The first four bars of the Main Theme appear often and in many transient keys and voices, sometimes even in inversion, but always fully intact.

II. *Aria*

The "aria" has its own melody – a long, mournful, angular lament on a solo trumpet, over Vierne's characteristically chromatic harmonies. Near the end, the Main Theme is briefly stated as a final plaintive, melodic cry…

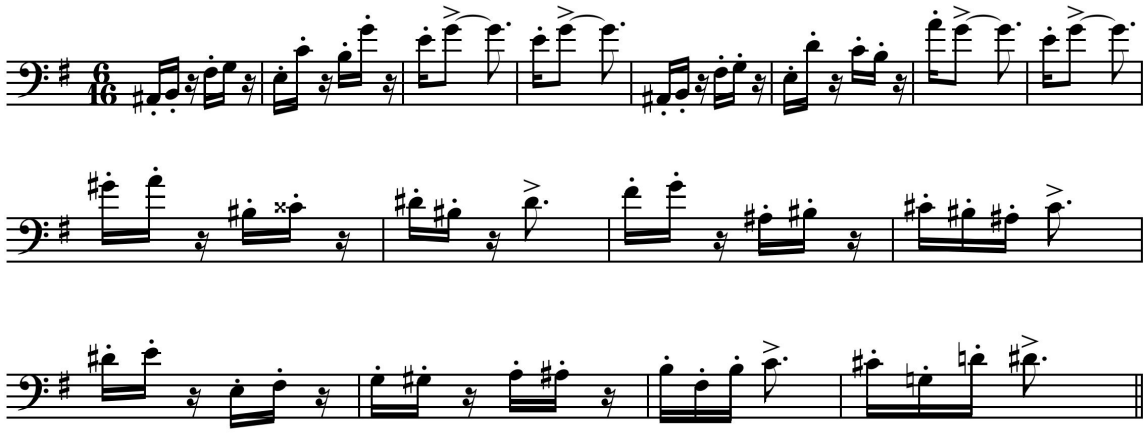


…then re-appears in the left hand during the conclusion, slowly and deliberately:

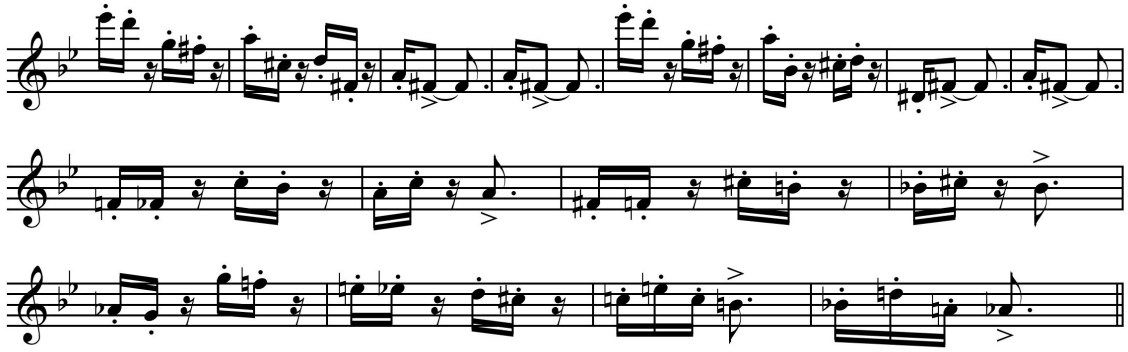


III. *Scherzo*

This movement dances with an exceptionally jaunty rhythm but is quite brutally diabolical in effect. The Main Theme serves as the "Trio" section's theme. It appears six times in its entirely, though in a completely different rhythmic guise than before…

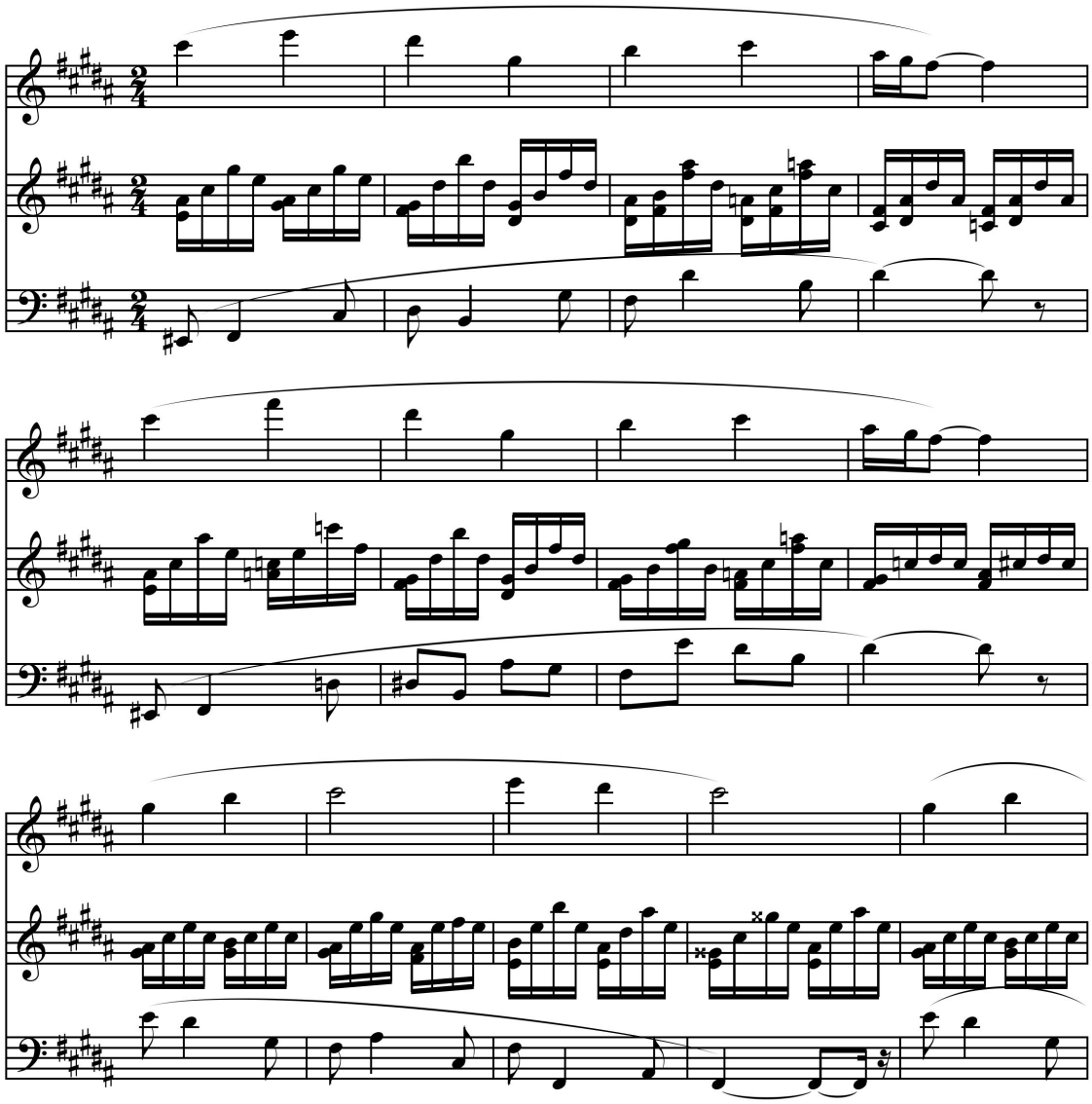
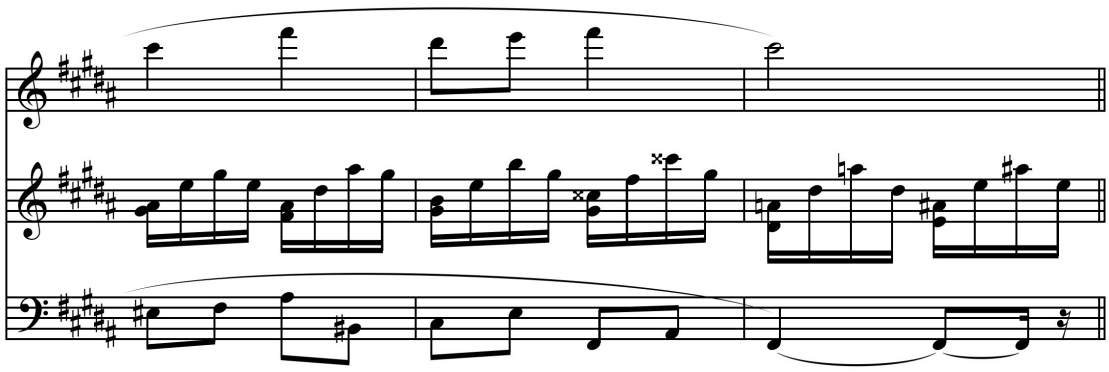


…and its sixth statement is inverted:



IV. *Adagio*

This movement, the Symphony's darkest, is a brooding rhapsody on the two themes of the first movement.

V. *Final*

Vierne's Finals tend to make more sense when preceded by the rest of the symphony. The first eight notes of this movement seem to come from nowhere when excerpted, but they make a perfect link between the preceding movement and this one. The murkiness and heavy chromaticism that have characterized the Symphony to this point suddenly dissipate and give way to a rather triumphal toccata in rondo form. The Main Theme appears only twice and very near the end but with resounding effect. Both statements of the Main Theme, one upright, one inverted, are in full Pedal against the Final's second theme in the right hand: