

James Woodman's *Sonata in Sea: Cape Cod*

There are not many pieces in my repertoire that get trotted out as often as this one. It travels well, and it's interesting, beautiful, different, and fun. It works on organs large and small, and has balanced many a program that might otherwise be a bit too intense. I love it! *Thank you.*

CHRISTA RAKICH
Oberlin Conservatory

BY JAMES WOODMAN

The score

Sonata in Sea: Cape Cod was commissioned by the 2003 American Guild of Organists Region I Convention and was conceived for the endearingly modest 19th- and early 20th-century organs so readily found on Cape Cod. The score is dedicated to Christa Rakich, and the premiere performance was given by her on June 30, 2003, at the First Congregational Church of Wellfleet (UCC), in Wellfleet, Mass.

The sonata's three movements reflect an entirely personal response to three contrasting locales on Cape Cod. In the first, *Barnstable*, I had in mind the quiet daily bustle of a working and fishing New England town. *Wellfleet* is a meditation on the almost uncanny beauty of the Atlantic Ocean to be found there; it is in the form of a chaconne in 12/8 time. And for the final movement, *Provincetown* . . . well, for *Provincetown* I chose the free-spirited form of the quodlibet (Latin for "What you please"), in which two tunes are made, sometimes a bit roughly, to be heard simultaneously. The two tunes I have chosen are each presented separately, and then combined in double counterpoint. The first theme early music connoisseurs will recognize as the popular air from 16th-century England "Jhon come kisse me now" (see the setting by William Byrd in the *Fitzwilliam Virginal Book*). The second is the robust hymn tune MELITA, by John Bacchus

Dykes, widely known and loved as the "Navy Hymn."

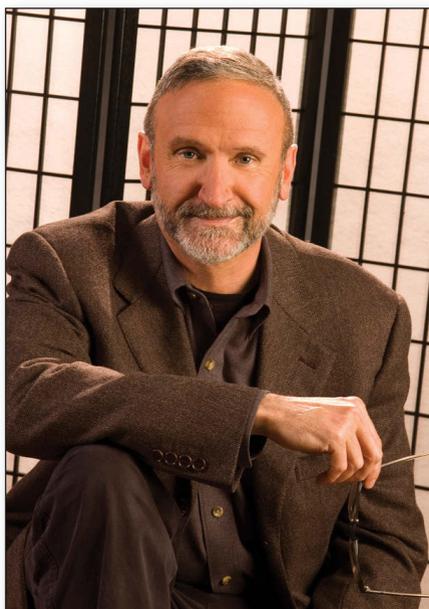
The duration of the sonata is 10'30". Because of the limited time allotted to each competitor, I have suggested to the 2021 RCYO Committee that the option to perform any two of the three movements be allowed. Of course, those wishing to present all three are invited to do so.

Performing new music

The performance of music that is new to both the artist and the audience poses special challenges. While I'm grateful for all performances of my work, I'm occasionally a little disheartened by what seem to me strictly metronomic readings, with little flexibility of touch. I'm left with the impression that sheer *accuracy* was the highest aim. There are indeed scores from the Modernist era that demand such clinical treatment, but I feel I live in a time when I might look forward to musicians adding their own artistic sensibility to the performance. And I've found that really fine performers can reveal aspects of the score I didn't even know were there. The score is the starting point, not the ending.

Registration

The first performance of *Sonata in Sea* was given on a lovingly preserved E. & G.G. Hook & Hastings (1873). A modest and gentle two-manual instrument of 17 ranks, it filled the room nicely. But for purposes of the competition I would



remind the performer: Register for the organ and the room you have, not the one you don't. For example, I have heard the second movement, *Wellfleet*, performed on a large orchestral instrument with generous ensemble of lush and shimmering strings. Obviously not possible on the little Hook & Hastings, but thoroughly convincing in conveying the essence of the movement. In the same movement, a note suggesting an increase in registration reads, "add one or two (8') stops." This means add something like a Geigen at 8' pitch if you have one, but 4' is perfectly fine if you don't.

Rhythm

Let's continue with the second movement, *Wellfleet*, as an example. Rhythmic engagement is of the essence here. (A marking at the beginning of the piece reads, "quietly, serenely dancing.") The pedal line is characterized by frequent short-long figures that may become obstacles in performance unless deeply felt—indeed, danced.

My early training set great store by maintaining a posture of near immobility on the bench. Reasons given included the importance of learning to internalize the beat, and to conserve energy (whatever *that* means). The artist will have his own convictions on this matter, but I would recommend experimenting with a certain upper body freedom in the later stages of preparation. Imagine a conductor standing quite still while leading a string ensemble in this piece. It seems to me the outcome would be doubtful.

Touch

Organists have a wide palette of touch available. Take advantage of it! For example, the first movement, *Barnstable*, presents four main gestures: fanfare, arpeggiation, dialogue, and scherzo. Project these varied textures by using a variety of different touches. This will make a mediocre instrument sound considerably more inviting and allow a truly artistic instrument to shine.

Analysis

Time spent with the score away from the keyboard will prove rewarding. The ritornello in the first movement appears four times. How is each appearance different? How is each appearance the same? The second movement is in the form of a chaconne. How many statements are there, and how do they compare to one another? The final movement exploits double counterpoint. How does that operate, and which passages employ it? The performer who is secure in the knowledge of the answers to such questions will surely give the more insightful performance.

Interpretation

Finally, add your own voice to the score. Once you're nearing the end of learning the notes, I ask you to articulate to yourself what you want to share, as you play, with the audience. Own those crunchy dissonances in the first movement, dance the dancing pedal line in the second, smile in the last movement—it's pretty funny! The piece is mine, but if you come to believe in it then it becomes ours.

Sonata in Sea: Cape Cod is available as a PDF to competitors in the 2021 AGO Regional Competitions for Young Organists. A preview score containing the first two pages of each movement is available on the AGO website, AGOhq.org. Competitors can purchase the music for ten dollars at the time of their online application. The price includes permission to print four copies for use in the 2021 competition.

James Woodman is monastery organist for the Society of St. John the Evangelist, an Episcopal religious order in Cambridge, Mass. His most recent publication for organ is *Eight Little Harmonies and Counterpoints* (Thorpe Music Publishing Co.).

