

# The Way of the Cross

Variations on a Noel

Robin Batterham

The Rieger organ at  
The Scots' Church  
Melbourne

*Marcel Dupré*





**MARCEL DUPRÉ (1886-1971)**

**Le Chemin de la Croix, Op 29 — *The Way of the Cross***

- 1** STATION I : *Jesus is condemned to death* 3'01"
- 2** STATION II : *Jesus carries His Cross* 2'57"
- 3** STATION III : *Jesus falls for the first time* 3'46"
- 4** STATION IV : *Jesus meets His Mother* 3'13"
- 5** STATION V : *Simon the Cyrene helps Jesus carry the Cross* 2'27"
- 6** STATION VI : *Jesus and Veronica* 2'48"
- 7** STATION VII : *Jesus falls for the second time* 3'31"
- 8** STATION VIII : *Jesus comforts the women of Jerusalem* 3'59"
- 9** STATION IX : *Jesus falls for the third time* 3'19"
- 10** STATION X : *Jesus is stripped of His garments* 2'43"
- 11** STATION XI : *Jesus is nailed to the Cross* 3'41"
- 12** STATION XII : *Jesus dies upon the Cross* 3'35"
- 13** STATION XIII : *The body of Jesus is taken down from the Cross and laid in Mary's bosom* 2'56"
- 14** STATION XIV : *The body of Jesus is laid in the tomb* 5'23"

**Variations Sur un Noël, Op 20 — *Variations on a Noel***

- 15** Theme – Moderato 0'53"
- 16** Variation I – Larghetto 0'44"
- 17** Variation II – Poco animato 0'35"
- 18** Variation III – Canon à l'octave 1'12"
- 19** Variation IV – Vif 0'28"
- 20** Variation V – Vivace 0'51"
- 21** Variation VI – Canon à la quarte et à la quarte 0'54"
- 22** Variation VII – Vivace 0'42"
- 23** Variation VIII – Can à la seconde 1'29"
- 24** Variation IX – Animé 0'45"
- 25** Variation X – Fugato 3'07"

Robin Batterham  
plays the Rieger organ in The Scots' Church Melbourne

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## MARCEL DUPRÉ (1886-1971)

Throughout his career Marcel Dupré was one of the best-known organists in the world, having established his reputation on an international scale in 1920 when, in ten recitals, he played the “complete” organ works of Bach from memory. Highly successful concert tours of the U.S. followed, and in 1939 he visited Australia for twenty recitals and four orchestral concerts, the artistic success of which has been unequalled by any organist in this country. His fame as a performer and improviser has tended to obscure his considerable accomplishments as a composer. With a few exceptions his solo organ works are heard only occasionally in recitals and his instrumental and vocal works seem to be no longer performed at all. He composed many organ works for the concert hall, as well as works for the church.

### Le Chemin de la Croix, Op 29

The Stations of the Cross is a popular form of devotion in the Roman Catholic and some Anglican churches. It consists of meditations on fourteen pictures or carvings recalling the passion of Christ from his condemnation to death by Pilate and the sorrow of his Mother to his death on the cross and burial. *Le Chemin de la Croix* (The Way of the Cross) enjoyed immediate recognition. It originated at a Brussels concert in February 1931 when Dupré improvised commentaries following the reading of fourteen verses of a poem by Paul Claudel (1868-1955). A plan for

each movement, the registration and the use of melodic and rhythmic ideas had been worked out in advance. He had found the double leap of two fourths for the Cross in Bach, Handel and Schütz; the four notes rising conjunctly for Redemption occur in Handel’s *Messiah* and Bach’s *St John Passion*, as well as in Franck’s *Beatitudes* and Wagner’s *Parsifal*.

The audience reaction was so favourable that Dupré decided to write the work down, trying to evoke the same atmosphere. The written version was first performed in Paris in March 1932. Representations of the fourteen stations can be found in nearly every Catholic church, and those that emphasise the hands and the feet remind us that the hands and feet of organists are needed for performances of this remarkable work. And the nature of the work was fully appropriate to the sombre years of its conception, a time when economic blows battered the Western world.

“The two principal characters are Jesus and his mother. Christ is first seen as the central figure in Pilate’s court, condemned to death. He receives the cross, and sets out to carry it to Calvary. On the way he falls three times, meets his mother, is helped by Simon, and comforted by Veronica. He talks to the women who follow the procession. As the work builds up to the actual crucifixion, the composer himself shares the Saviour’s sufferings which he so masterfully depicts. After the crucifixion, when Christ is laid in the tomb, Dupré’s faith shines forth with

radiant clarity. Mary plays a large part in this piece. She appears first in the fourth station, and her presence can be discerned in later ones. The Incarnation is recalled at the end of the tenth station; she is present at the death, holds her son’s body in her arms after the Deposition and sees the internment.” (Graham Steed)

All fourteen pieces are rich in personalities, and full of human and spiritual drama. Twelve melodic themes are used to portray the Cross, Suffering, Jesus, Salvation, The Virgin, Pity (for his tormentors), Consolation, Hate (from his tormentors), Stripping of his garments, Crucifixion, His agony, and the triumph of Redemption. A further six rhythms depict the crowds, the shouts of Barabbas, the stumbling steps of Jesus and his increasing weariness, flagellation, and finally the rope used to lower the body from the cross after death.

Abbé Robert Delestre wrote a commentary on the work, a summary of which follows:

*STATION I: Jesus is condemned to death*  
Opening with Pilate’s command, “Take ye Him and crucify Him”, the music becomes increasingly tumultuous, as the crowd shouts for the release of Barabbas, and for Jesus to be put to death.

*STATION II: Jesus carries His Cross*  
The March to Calvary begins, and the theme of the Cross comes into prominence: the stumbling steps of Jesus pervade every bar.

*STATION III : Jesus falls for the first time*

The march continues. Weariness at once becomes apparent. The theme of Suffering is heard high in the treble. Jesus' strength fails and He falls. In the last few bars the theme of Redemption is heard for the first time, *pianissimo*.

*STATION IV : Jesus meets His Mother*

A Flute solo with accompaniment in string tone depicts the *Mater Dolorosa*. No gesture, no words, escape from her, her grief is too deep for tears.

*STATION V : Simon the Cyrene helps Jesus carry the Cross*

Simon, coming into the city from the countryside, lends reluctant assistance, and does not find it easy at first. Gradually he synchronises his steps with those of Jesus. The Cross theme is inverted, and towards the end there is a brief appearance of the Redemption motif.

*STATION VI : Jesus and Veronica*

Veronica comes out of the crowd to wipe Jesus' brow with a cloth, evoking the theme of Compassion. The theme of the Cross is heard in the bass as Jesus pauses for a moment. As the movement ends the Redemption motif is heard again, exquisitely harmonised.

*STATION VII : Jesus falls for the second time*

The second fall passes almost unnoticed: the crowd presses in on all sides, and the burden

becomes intolerable. The gruesome horror of the scene is matched with ever more grinding dissonance.

*STATION VIII : Jesus comforts the women of Jerusalem*

There are some women present who feel pity for the victim, and the theme of Pity is a beautiful cantilena which pervades the entire movement, and will be heard again in Station XIV. Jesus' voice of Consolation is heard in the tenor register.

*STATION IX : Jesus falls for the third time*

The crowd, exasperated by the slow pace of the procession, clamours for blood, and screams insults. The theme is Persecution. The third and final fall is sudden and devastating, but now the place of execution has finally been reached, and a brief period of calm ensues before the final indignities are inflicted.

*STATION X : Jesus is stripped of His garments*

The executioners strip Jesus of His clothes, and throw dice for His seamless coat. After a pause there follows the music of the Incarnation. "For this purpose I am come into the world." Jesus awaits the end, a pitiable figure indeed.

*STATION XI : Jesus is nailed to the Cross*

Hammer blows expressive of the implacable cruelty of the executioners becomes the theme of Crucifixion. Suffering (from Station III) is combined with it.

*STATION XII : Jesus dies upon the Cross*

The agony of the slow passing hours has a theme akin to that of Redemption. The dying Jesus speaks His seven last words. The earth trembles: Jesus has been put "to death". An unearthly stillness follows the final tremors.

*STATION XIII : The body of Jesus is taken down from the Cross and laid in Mary's bosom*

The descent from the cross brings forth the curious representation of ropes, and the slow sliding movements by which the body is brought down evoke the theme of the now-accomplished Redemption. Mary's music is heard again as she holds the body of Jesus in her arms.

*STATION XIV : The body of Jesus is laid in the tomb*

Pity, the theme of the eighth station, is the dominant mood of the cortege which precedes the entombment. Suffering also accounts for a large portion of this final scene. The epilogue is a master stroke of genius and intuition. A heavenly stillness envelops the scene. Suffering, now transformed into the Fruits of the Redemption, opens the gates of heaven to those who have been participants in the events of that first Good Friday.

**Variations on a Noel, Op 20**

One of his more frequently performed and recorded works, the *Variations on a Noel* was composed in 1922 while Dupré was



touring the United States. The theme is a mediaeval French Christmas carol *Noël nouvelet*, a tune sometimes used with the Easter text “Now the green blade riseth”. After the theme, ten variations follow showing many varieties and combinations of organ tone. French organists have traditionally had an affinity for elaborating Christmas melodies, but unlike his predecessors, Dupré is not content with mere melodic modifications. His approach is a subtle one, expanding not only the melody but also the rhythm and harmonies. Variations three and eight are canons; the sixth is a trio, in double canon. Only in the final variations does he draw on the full resources of the organ. Starting with a lively fugato, showing the theme both in diminution and augmentation, and at one point in three speeds at once, a powerful cadenza leads to a concluding toccata with the theme in the pedals.

*Program notes compiled by Michael Edgeloe*



Robin Batterham is assistant organist at Scots Church Melbourne where his activities include recitals, service playing, choir accompaniment and continuo work. He is also one of the country's leading scientists and engineers. He served as Chief Scientist of Australia from 1999 to 2005.

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