The first movement is a large sonata form. Sowerby’s mastery of composition is shown in the genius of this giant structure, his themes all being related and designed to develop and interact in every way possible. An excellent organist himself, Sowerby uses all of the resources of the instrument: covering the complete range of the keyboards and pedalboard, and orchestrates the piece using every color and stop available on the organ in their seemingly endless expressive and tonal varieties. The influence of American jazz harmonies colors the textures, which, when the piece was introduced to American organists 89 years ago, was more than most could handle!

Sowerby’s middle, or Scherzo, movement is labeled “Fast and sinister”, and is a virtuosic display of his compositional genius and ability to push the limits of the organ (and organist). Sowerby’s themes build upon each other and as they become intertwined the piece becomes more and more fantastic, until the dramatic final pedal cadenza and fanfares.

The Passacaglia movement is a form created with 34 variations based on an 8-measure theme that is presented initially in the pedal. The piece begins with the softest sounds of the organ, and Sowerby develops and changes with each successive variation: melody, harmony, rhythm, texture, organ colors.

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CURT SATHER was born in Wisconsin where he began music lessons on the accordion at age 7, and started playing the organ for church at age 12. Music degrees were earned from ASU, and the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, NY. After serving as Organist & Choirmaster of the Episcopal Parish of St. Barnabas on the Desert, Scottsdale, AZ, for 13 years, he joined the Benedictine monastery of San Miniato al Monte, Florence, Italy. Upon returning to the US, he has served as church musician, music instructor, organ technician, and board member of the American Guild of Organists in Milwaukee, WI; Phoenix, AZ; Los Angeles, CA; and Olympia, WA. He currently resides in upstate New York where he has started a new career working for a bank founded in 1839. Hobbies include traveling, visiting the museums of New York City and attending the Metropolitan Opera, and the study of Arabic.

He has performed throughout the USA, Europe, New Zealand and Australia; recorded several CDs of the organ works of J. S. Bach; and has performed the complete organ works of J. S. Bach four times: twice in a series of 14 recitals, and twice in a 24-hour marathon.
Program

Organ Chorales

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

I. Lobt Gott, ihr Christen allzugleich, BWV 732
II. Wer nur den lieben Gott last walten, BWV 690, 690a, 691a
III. Nun freut euch, lieben Christian g’mein, BWV 734
IV. Wir glauben all’ an einen Gott, Vater, BWV 740
V. Valet will ich dir geben, BWV 736

Symphony in G Major (1930)

Leo Sowerby (1895-1968)

I. Very broadly
II. Fast and sinister
III. Passacaglia

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Program Notes

The more than 200 extant organ chorales of Johann Sebastian Bach cover 50 years of his life as a composer, and display an awesome range of compositional styles. 

Lobt Gott, ihr Christen, allzugleich, BWV 732, is a setting for congregational singing, each line of the hymn connected by fantastic flourishes.

Praise God, you Christians, all together, on his highest throne, who today unlocks his heavenly kingdom and bestows on us his son.

Wer nur den lieben Gott last walten, BWV 690, 690a, 691a, three settings of a text and tune from 1641/1657, the first with running 16th note figurations beneath the tune, the second a simple 4-part harmonization, the third a variant of an ornamented setting from the Clavierbüchlein for his son Wilhelm Friedemann, with interpolations between hymn phrases composed by someone other than J. S. Bach, perhaps by one of his sons.

Whoever lets only the dear God reign and hopes in him at all times, he will preserve in a marvelous way in every cross and sadness. Whoever trusts in almighty God has not built upon sand.

Nun freut euch, lieben Christen g’mein, BWV 734, is a 1523 hymn by Martin Luther. This setting is a trio, with the tune sounding forth on the trumpet in the pedal, constant 8th notes in the left hand, and virtuosic perpetual motion 16th notes in the right hand. (Note the last lines of text “the wonders...his right arm”!) An alternate hymn text to this tune is Es ist gewisslich an der Zeit (The Day of Judgment is at hand), mentions the “world going up in flames” at the moment the right hand flies up to high C on the keyboard, another example of Bach’s expertise at musical text painting.

Dear Christians, one and all, rejoice, With exultation springing, Right dearly it has cost Him. And, with united heart and voice And holy rapture singing, Proclaim the wonders God has done, How His right arm the victory won.

Wir glauben all’ an einen Gott, Vater, BWV 740, has also been attributed to Bach’s student J. L. Krebs (1713-1780). This is a setting of the hymn tune elaborately ornamented in the right hand, supported by four independent voices, two of which are played by the feet. Such 5-part writing, with double pedal, is rare in organ composition, but appears notably in Bach’s output.

We all believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Who helps us in all need, Whom the cherub band And angel host praise. Through whose mighty power All is created and done and accomplished.

Valet will ich dir geben, BWV 736, is based on the tune which English speaking churches know as “All Glory, Laud, and Honor”, sung on Palm Sunday. But the chorale which Bach sets is actually a hymn for the dying. The tune is heard in long notes in the pedal, over which constant streams of triplets fly from earth up to heaven.

I want to bid you farewell, you evil, false world. Your sinful, wicked life is not pleasing to me. In heaven it is good to dwell; My longing is set on what is above; There God will reward forever.

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Leo Sowerby composed his massive Symphony during his long tenure as Organist & Choirmaster of St. James Episcopal Church (Cathedral in 1955), Chicago, 1927-1962. The piece is dedicated to the greatest organist of the day, Lynnwood Farnam, who died in 1930.