

A Recording and Discussion of Organ Music by Pamela Decker

by

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A Research Paper  
Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Musical Arts

Approved October 2024 by the  
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ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

December 2024

## ABSTRACT

This project explores eight organ works by Pamela Decker, a leading figure in contemporary American organ music. Decker's compositions honor traditional organ repertoire while integrating other elements to create a unique artistic voice. Her works draw inspiration from a diverse range of traditions, including German chorales, South American dances, and the French toccata style, as well as the natural beauty of the Arizona desert. Her organ music incorporates tango rhythms, flamenco modes, Bulgarian dance rhythms, and other complex rhythmic structures, all within rich harmonic frameworks.

In addition to recording her works, this project addresses the historical underrepresentation of female composers in the organ repertoire. The field has long been dominated by male composers, yet Decker has emerged as a significant voice, earning recognition as Composer of the Year by the American Guild of Organists in 2018. She completed her Doctor of Musical Arts degree at Stanford University and advanced her studies in Germany through a Fulbright Grant, further shaping her distinctive compositional style. As of this writing, she is Professor of Organ and Composition at the Fred Fox School of Music at the University of Arizona in Tucson.

For this project I created a recording on the Richard-Fowkes organ at Pinnacle Presbyterian Church in Scottsdale, Arizona.

[https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1QidGC7slJk\\_n3qXXOOzwEtJeWw-sV6Qf](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1QidGC7slJk_n3qXXOOzwEtJeWw-sV6Qf)

The program focuses on both the emotional depth and technical sophistication of Decker's music. In collaboration with Decker herself, the repertoire was carefully chosen to reflect the broad influences that shape her work. Featured compositions include *Flores del Desierto*, *Passacaglia on BACH*, *Tango Toccata on a Theme by Melchior Vulpius*, *Golden Gate*, *Two Psalm Paraphrases*, *Psalm 139*, and *Jesu, dulcis memoria*. These pieces highlight her engagement with German and South American musical styles as well as longstanding liturgical traditions, reflecting her ability to infuse tradition with modern elements.

Ultimately, this project seeks to celebrate Pamela Decker's contributions to organ music while advocating for greater recognition of female composers. By presenting her compositions in this recording, I hope to disseminate her music more widely and to foster a deeper appreciation of the diversity and richness of contemporary organ repertoire composed by women.

Recordings of individual organ works by Pamela Decker:

Flores del Desierto:

[https://youtu.be/ZUHs94\\_F5nE?si=t6dilgcGdDB7lz7g](https://youtu.be/ZUHs94_F5nE?si=t6dilgcGdDB7lz7g)

[https://youtu.be/Y\\_466ZSXag8?si=xtvpXeFPUXiSbaRP](https://youtu.be/Y_466ZSXag8?si=xtvpXeFPUXiSbaRP)

<https://youtu.be/dRtheEortBM?si=wS4rncjIAkxIBHc2>

Passacaglia on BACH: <https://youtu.be/1hbsaNGg0WQ?si=DLZ9DJSxzANStCLE>

Tango Toccata on a Theme by Melchior Vulpius:

<https://youtu.be/BjuW74dwAF8?si=0hQZPY3Z13GsaNup>

Golden Gate: <https://youtu.be/v89IY83zTcU?si=fbYEjYSONpBBYdBa>

Two Psalm Paraphrases: <https://youtu.be/gqhSE16wGYY?si=9yYqE1LK89nMFsN3>

Psalm 139: [https://youtu.be/HqeG3-t\\_pZ8?si=rPvWjUgPt\\_S0AC6r](https://youtu.be/HqeG3-t_pZ8?si=rPvWjUgPt_S0AC6r)

Jesu, dulcis memoria: <https://youtu.be/qmTO3P7Bqc8?si=Z49mBveXHMslLw2>

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The program of the accompanying recording features a broad selection of organ works by Pamela Decker. In recording her music, I drew inspiration from the scores, from the Richards-Fowkes instrument at Pinnacle Presbyterian Church in Scottsdale, Arizona, and from the composer herself. A consummate organist, Decker informs her compositional practice with Germanic, South American, and liturgical musical traditions. She also depicts extramusical themes, such as desert flowers and specific geographical locations. The recording and this document are meant to enrich our understanding of these works.

This document accompanies a recording project dedicated to selected organ works by Decker, who was recognized as Composer of the Year by the American Guild of Organists in 2018, further affirming her influence and stature within the organ community. Her academic journey, which encompasses a Doctor of Musical Arts degree from Stanford University and a Fulbright Grant to study organ and composition in Germany, has greatly informed her distinctive compositional voice. Drawing inspiration from various sources, including the rich hymnody of the Christian tradition and the natural beauty of the Arizona desert, Decker's music is characterized by both elegance and complexity.

My initial encounter with Decker's compositions took place during my exploration of works by women composers, a subject often overlooked in the predominantly male-dominated landscape of organ music. This experience fueled my desire to focus on a significant contemporary American female composer for my final project. All of these works have been recorded by the composer herself; this project aims to present her works from a fresh perspective, emphasizing their emotional depth and technical sophistication.

In discussions with Dr. Decker, she encouraged me to select pieces that reflect the diverse influences shaping her musical style. This approach provides a comprehensive representation of her work, showcasing compositions inspired by global musical traditions.

Accompanying the recording, this document offers insights into the historical context, compositional techniques, and thematic elements of each selected piece.

Ultimately, the project celebrates Pamela Decker's contributions to organ music while advocating for greater recognition of female composers in the field. By sharing her works through this recording, I hope to inspire a wider appreciation for the diversity and richness of contemporary organ repertoire, encouraging future performers and audiences to engage with the invaluable voices.

## CHAPTER 2

### *FLORES DEL DESIERTO*

#### Origins and Inspirations

*Flores del Desierto*, published in 2002, was composed to honor the renowned Argentine tango composer Astor Piazzolla. This work was commissioned by organist Janice Beck and is a secular organ composition consisting of three movements.

Decker, who resides in Tucson, Arizona, drew inspiration from the unique desert environment surrounding her, particularly the beautiful cactus flowers that bloom in this harsh landscape. The titles of each movement are taken from the names of actual desert flowers. This serves as a metaphor for resilience and life flourishing in difficult conditions, a theme that runs throughout the piece. Decker sought to capture in music the desert's quiet stillness and the awe-inspiring natural beauty found within it.<sup>1</sup> The composition is structured around three types of tango forms, with each movement combining tango rhythms and flamenco modes to create distinctive musical depictions of each flower. Decker was especially influenced by Piazzolla's *nuevo tango*, for which she created a new context on the organ.

The first movement, "Albarda," is a tango-tocatta with lively, fast rhythms. It opens with a strong *marcato* bass line and culminates in a *tocatta* section. The second movement, "Espuelita," features a lyrical melody over a slow tango, incorporating elements from earlier organ forms, the embellished *chorale* setting and the *chaconne*. The final movement, 'Saiya,' features an energetic theme, while the introduction of the piece opens with the theme presented in each voice part. This movement builds to a grand climax in the form of a majestic *tocatta*, bringing the work to its powerful conclusion.

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<sup>1</sup> 4 Ham, Lisa. "An Analysis of the Influence of Tangos on Selected Organ Works by Pamela Decker: 'Flores Del Desierto.'" DMA diss., University of Washington, 2009. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

I. Albarda: [https://youtu.be/ZUHs94\\_F5nE?si=M9oBNd\\_UqHBzT8BZ](https://youtu.be/ZUHs94_F5nE?si=M9oBNd_UqHBzT8BZ)

“Albarda,” is the ocotillo, a plant with long, thorny stems and red-orange flowers that bloom during hummingbird migrations, creating vibrant displays when visited by colorful birds. In “Albarda,” Decker combines the tradition of Argentine tango with her own unique musical ideas. By structuring the piece in ABA' form, Decker follows a traditional format while introducing contrasting tempos and rhythms in each section to create variation. The A section begins energetically with the milonga rhythm. The milonga rhythm, a lively subgenre of Argentine and Uruguayan tango, is faster and lighter.

The B section slows down, forming a contrasting atmosphere using soft foundation stops with solo reed registration. In the final A' section, the A' section, the original rhythm and melody are presented in a slightly altered form. The movement culminates in toccata figuration. Through these structural elements, Decker enriches the flow of the piece and adds a modern interpretation to traditional tango.

II. Espuelita: [https://youtu.be/Y\\_466ZSXag8?si=JxFqi7cqEUrHVg-r](https://youtu.be/Y_466ZSXag8?si=JxFqi7cqEUrHVg-r)

“Espuelita” or desert larkspur, is a delicate flower with intense blue sepals and a two-toothed spur in bronze or purple. To suggest the espuelita flower, Decker incorporates habanera rhythms based on Piazzolla's tango style. While the habanera traditionally follows a 2-beat rhythm, Decker modifies it into a 4-beat rhythm, adding a unique rhythmic flow to this movement. The composition follows an ABA' structure and includes elements of a traditional chorale prelude and chaconne, showcasing Decker's attempt to blend not only tango rhythms and forms but also traditional Western music structures.

Notably, the ambiguous harmonies at the introduction, supported by soft registrations such as Flute, Celeste, and Cornet or Solo stops, enhance the mysterious atmosphere of the piece. By combining traditional tango rhythms with Western musical forms, Decker creates a unique work, a highly original tango. “Espuelita” requires performers to use delicacy in their expression of the delicate flower, and to bring out the distinctive tango rhythmic pattern.

III. Saiya: <https://youtu.be/dRtheEortBM?si=uOdqk11-IP2WRoHb>

“Saiya” is inspired by the eponymous flower with orange blooms of five petals marked by reddish-brown spots. Its edible parts include seed capsules used as a coffee substitute. Just as the plant is composed of different parts and has different uses, Decker uses different forms in the music, combining a fugue, tango, and toccata into a single piece. One of the key features of this work is gradual acceleration, a technique inspired by Piazzolla. Decker progressively increases the tempo throughout the piece to heighten tension and create a sense of momentum.

In the opening fugue section (Fig. 1), the subject appears in different keys across the right hand, left hand, and pedal. Ornamental thirty-second notes are often used to highlight the final notes of phrases, adding a seductive and captivating quality characteristic of tango.

Figure 1: Fugue Subject in Various Keys with Ornamental 32nd Notes Leading into Final Phrase Notes.

“Saiya” from *Flores del Desierto*, mm 1-7

The musical score for "Saiya" from *Flores del Desierto*, measures 1-7, is presented in three systems. The tempo is marked as  $\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 76 - 80$ . The score is for piano, with parts for the right hand (RH), left hand (LH), and pedal. The first system (measures 1-3) is in G major. The second system (measures 4-5) is in B-flat major. The third system (measures 6-7) is in D-flat major. Ornamental thirty-second notes are used to highlight the final notes of phrases.

## Performance Considerations

*Flores del Desierto* invites listeners to contemplate the beauty of nature and provides inspiration through music.

### I. Albarda

A key aspect of performing “Albarda” is maintaining the milonga rhythm and effectively expressing the changes in tempo. The milonga rhythm, comprising a dotted eighth note, a sixteenth note, and two eighth notes—occasionally followed by syncopation—alternates between the manuals and pedal, increasing the challenge of coordinating hands and feet. The performer must maintain rhythmic precision while ensuring that each note is clear, particularly in the pedal, which sustains the rhythm that forms the piece’s character.

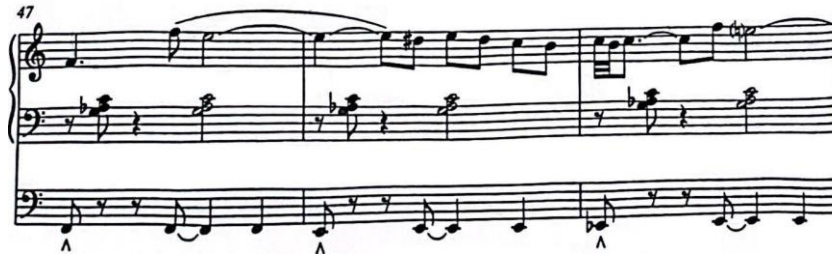
Figure 2: The variegated theme with the Milonga rhythm on the Choir manual.

“Albarda” from *Flores del Deserto*, mm 65-70

The image displays a musical score for the piece "Albarda" from *Flores del Deserto*, measures 65-70. The score is written for a grand piano (Gl.) and a choir (Ch.). The tempo is marked as  $J = 104 - 108$ . The music is in 3/4 time and features a complex, syncopated milonga rhythm. The grand piano part consists of a treble and bass staff. The choir part is written in a single staff with a soprano clef. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like  $\lambda$  and  $v$ . The key signature has one flat (B-flat).

Figure 3: Milonga rhythm in the Pedal.

“Albarda” from *Flores del Deserto*, mm 47-49



Tempo shifts play a crucial role in this piece. When transitioning from the energetic milonga rhythm of the A section to the B section, where the tempo slows, the performer must use subtle expression to highlight the contrast between the sections. This can be expressed using a softer registration, different from the previous section. The energetic toccata of the final A' section requires clarity and rhythmic drive to emphasize the climax. The performer must accurately play the milonga rhythm, convey the mood changes through tempo shifts, and capture the intensity of the final toccata.

## II. Espuelita

The second movement of *Flores del Desierto* is characterized by its lyrical, peaceful atmosphere. A slow, steady tempo conveys the serene mood, allowing for emotional depth in each note. The offbeat bass notes in the first section should be played with rhythmic precision. The core rhythm pattern is the habanera rhythm, which starts with a dotted eighth followed by a sixteenth note, then continuing with two eighth notes, creating a 2-beat pattern. Decker uses this rhythm to create a tango atmosphere, but she transforms it by doubling its value to fit a 4/4 rhythm.

Figure 4: Habanera rhythm transformed into 4/4 meter.

“Espuelita” from *Flores del Deserto*, mm 16-18



This habanera is played slowly, and the performer must ensure a smooth, gentle pulse throughout the piece.

### III. Saiya

Decker does not often provide explicit phrasing or legato markings in her scores, so the performer must carefully analyze the structure and melody. The composer provides cues through repetition, imitation, and sequences, helping the performer to establish phrasing and interpret the flow of the piece. The section starting at m. 59 features a thirty-second note pattern in the manual part, where the right and left hands alternate in playing rapid arpeggiations over chromatic scales in the pedal part.

Figure 5: Thirty-second Note Pattern and Toccata-like Section with Pedal Ostinato.

“Saiya” from Flores del Deserto, mm 58-60.

The image displays a musical score for the piece "Saiya" from Flores del Deserto, covering measures 58 to 60. The score is written for piano and consists of two systems. The first system, starting at measure 58, features a treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat major) and a 2/4 time signature. The right hand plays a complex, rhythmic pattern of thirty-second notes, while the left hand provides a steady, rhythmic accompaniment. The second system, starting at measure 60, continues the thirty-second note pattern in the right hand, with the left hand maintaining the accompaniment. The score concludes with a double bar line at the end of measure 60.

The pedal is an ostinato bass, which provides cohesion through the piece, providing a background for the rhythmic energy and tension. Decker instructs the performer to gradually increase the tempo at the beginning, and later to add stops to intensify the expression. This combination of acceleration and increasing sound heightens tension. At the work's end, strong 16' and 32' pedal stops should be added to create a more powerful, grounded sound. "Saiya" requires from the performer the precise execution of rhythm, an understanding of phrasing and structure, and careful registration choices to reflect the dynamic progression of the piece.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE PASSACAGLIA ON BACH

Recording at: <https://youtu.be/1hbsaNGg0WQ?si=WZg6OohEGncTWsDu>

#### Origins and Inspirations

Pamela Decker's Passacaglia on BACH, published in 2005, is a modern reinterpretation of the traditional passacaglia form. It draws significant inspiration from J.S. Bach's organ works, particularly the Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor, BWV 582. Although composed over a repeated bass line like 17-century examples of the genre, Bach's work transcends earlier models. Instead of the usual four-bar theme of Baroque passacaglias, his theme is twice as long as usual, including more varied textures and figurations, and he ends with a complex fugue in invertible counterpoint. Decker pays homage to Bach's innovation, crafting a work that offers a fresh perspective on classical themes within a modern context. The piece is celebrated for its ability to resonate with both skilled organists and audiences, showcasing the timeless appeal of Bach's theme across centuries.

#### Compositional Reflections

The Passacaglia on BACH exemplifies Decker's commitment to building her style upon the foundations of organ repertoire spanning more than five centuries. She bases her Passacaglia upon Bach's name, represented by the pitches B-flat, A, C, B-natural. Like Bach, she introduces a variety of textures and harmonies to create variations around the main theme. Although Bach left no indication of the timbres he desired for the variations of his Passacaglia, Decker is specific about the organ registrations to be employed. She ensures that each variation offers something unique, providing distinct auditory experiences for the listener.

The work follows traditional variation form, with the variations connecting seamlessly to create an overarching narrative. The composer gives performers a degree of interpretive freedom to create for the listener a sense that the music is being improvised. This flexibility challenges the audience's ability to predict the music's direction, enhancing emotional

engagement. Decker freely manipulates harmony, introducing dissonance beyond traditional tonal boundaries to create tension.

\*These notes in German are designated by B, A, C, H.

Figure 6: Heightening Tension through Harmonic Dissonance.

Passacaglia on BACH, mm 63-67

The image shows a musical score for a Passacaglia on BACH, measures 63-67. The score is in 3/4 time and consists of two systems of music. The first system starts at measure 42 and includes the instruction "Increase to *fff*, with man.16 (Ped. 32)" and a tempo marking "♩ = ca. 72". The right hand part is marked "Broaden, with emphasis" and "with crisp clarity". The left hand part is marked "fff". The second system starts at measure 43 and continues the piece.

By expanding on conventional harmonic possibilities, she enriches the piece with a broad palette of musical colors. This harmonic innovation allows for complex and expressive storytelling. Each variation explores new tonal possibilities, from soft, lyrical voices to bold, dramatic textures, ensuring that each variation has a distinct identity while contributing to the work's overall cohesion.

#### Performance Considerations

Given that this piece is in variation form, the organist must carefully select registrations based on the score's indications, highlighting the distinct character of each section. The opening section begins with soft flute, string, and string celeste registrations contrasted by a solo reed, and the Richard-Fowkes organ is well-suited for such tonal contrasts due to its three manuals. The organ's swell box is essential for achieving the

dynamic nuances indicated in the score, and the presence of 16' and Pedal 32' stops allow the organist to faithfully realize the *fff* dynamics.

The Passacaglia on BACH demands a high level of technical proficiency, challenging the performer with intricate passages and dramatic contrasts. The variations differ significantly in tone and texture, going beyond the traditional sense of variation. For example, each variation employs different registrations to create contrast.

Figure 7: Variation utilizing foundation stops.  
Passacaglia on BACH, mm 63-67

Sw.: Foundations 8' and 4'  
Gt.: Foundations 8' and 4', Sw. to Gt., Ch. to Gt.  
Ch.: Foundations 8' and 4'

63 Sw.: change to Flute 8', Tremolo  $\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 69$

Sw.  
Gt. *legato ed espressivo*  
Ped.: Foundations 16' and 8', couplers to balance

Figure 8: Variation utilizing Full with Mixture stops.  
Passacaglia on BACH, mm 88-91

Sw.: Full with Mixture, light 16' possible  
Gt.: Full with Mixture, Sw. to Gt., Ch. to Gt.  
Ch.: Full with optional light Reed

88  $\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 60$

Gt. *f with clarity and emphasis*

When performing Decker's written-out ornamentation, it is important to remember that these embellishments emphasize certain notes or themes within the music. Allowing a slight breath before playing an ornament can enhance its impact and contribute to the overall atmosphere of the piece.

Echoing the virtuosity of Bach's Passacaglia, Decker includes difficult figurative patterns and pedal work. Noteworthy is a double pedal section with lengthy running melodies

in both feet. This extended pedal solo requires advanced pedal technique from the performer, adding a layer of complexity to the execution of the work.

Figure 9: Double Pedal Section with Extended Solo Pedal Line.

Passacaglia on BACH, mm 55-60

The image displays three staves of musical notation for a double pedal section. The first staff, starting at measure 55, shows a complex rhythmic pattern with a prominent bass line. The second staff, starting at measure 57, continues this pattern with a similar bass line. The third staff, starting at measure 59, includes a performance instruction: "Ped.: change to Solo Flute 4'". This instruction indicates a change in the pedal technique, likely to a solo flute sound, which is a key feature of this section. The notation includes various note values, rests, and dynamic markings, all set against a background of a complex, repeating bass line.

## CHAPTER 4

### TANGO TOCCATA ON A THEME BY MELCHIOR VULPIUS

Recording at: <https://youtu.be/BjuW74dwAF8?si=0hQZPY3Z13GsaNup>

#### Origins and Inspirations

Decker's *Tango Toccata* is based on hymn no. 343 from the *Evangelisches Kirchen Gesangbuch*, a melody composed by Melchior Vulpius in 1609, categorized as a hymn for morning praise. This work showcases the composer's playful exploration of both tradition and innovation through blending traditional forms with contemporary sensibilities. The work is inspired by the rhythmic and melodic characteristics of tango, known for its passionate expression and intricate dance rhythms. Decker transforms these styles through her unique compositional voice, creating a vibrant piece that challenges the performer while captivating the audience. In this work, the composer sought to expand the boundaries of traditional organ music and provide new auditory experiences.

*Tango Toccata* was commissioned for the Region IX Convention of the American Guild of Organists (AGO) in San Diego during the summer of 2001. The piece had its world premiere at the convention, performed by Charles Rus. It was subsequently published in 2010.

#### Compositional Reflections

In *Tango Toccata*, Decker focused on transforming a traditional hymn into a contemporary idiom. She believed the modal characteristics of the melody and the text, which praises God at the dawn of morning, were well-suited to various transformations. As a result, the piece is structured as a set of variations on the melody, with tango rhythms and flamenco-inspired modal language working in harmony with the melody's contours and rhythms. The rhythms and harmonic language of tango align well with the structure of the hymn, as both musical traditions share a modal foundation, allowing them to blend harmoniously. The composition opens with the melody clearly presented in the pedal in measures 10-12, while swirling toccata-like passages are layered above.

Figure 10: Pedal Melody and Toccata Passages.

*Tango Toccata on a Theme by Melchior Vulpius*, mm 10-11

The image displays a musical score for two systems, measures 10 and 11. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 96. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The score is written for piano, with a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) and a separate bass line for the pedals. In measure 10, the right hand (R.H.) plays a melody with a 5-finger fingering, while the left hand (L.H.) plays a rapid, repeated chord pattern in the pedals with a 9-finger fingering. In measure 11, the right hand continues the melody with a 5-finger fingering, and the left hand plays a similar rapid chord pattern in the pedals, marked with the instruction 'simile' and a 9-finger fingering. The pedal part in both measures consists of repeated chords in a rhythmic pattern.

Decker explores a range of musical expressions throughout the work, with the first variation prominently featuring the melody in the pedal. The second variation is transformed into a lyrical “song” with chromaticism in the string accompaniment, enriching the emotional depth. The third variation features accented tango rhythms, highlighting the energy and verve of the dance.

The work concludes with brilliant toccata figuration over the theme in the pedals (Fig. 11). Decker clearly pays tribute to the French virtuoso organist Marcel Dupré, whose *Variations sur un vieux Noël*, Op. 20, end in a similar texture, with fast repeated chords in the manuals over the thunderous theme played in the pedals, as seen here:



Like Dupré, she offers the listener a fresh experience of a familiar melody, creating a moment where tradition and innovation coexist.

Figure 11: Finale of Tango Toccata

*Tango Toccata on a Theme by Melchior Vulpus*, mm 136-138



#### Performance Considerations

Registration should be based on the composer's markings in the score. The Richard-Fowkes organ allows for *legatissimo* passages to be executed smoothly. Its mechanical key and stop action give the performer great control to capture the soft, flowing expression of the middle variation. In sections where different manuals are required to express distinct dynamics, the performer should adapt the registration accordingly. For example, in the *legatissimo* section, the Choir manual is marked *mf* while the Great manual is *mp*. Decker suggests a reed stop on the Choir manual to emphasize the left-hand melody, while the right hand accompanies it on a softer sound.

Figure 12: Registration and Performance Notes for *Legatissimo* Passages

*Tango Toccata on a Theme by Melchior Vulpius*, mm 27-31

Sw.: change to Flutes, Strings 8' and String Celeste 8'  
Gt.: change to Flute 8', Sw. to Gt.  
Ch.: change to Solo Reed 8'  
Ped.: change to Flutes 16' and 8'

27 Ch. Gt. Gt. mp

In measure 77, where the tango rhythm begins, Decker indicates the use of mixture stops on the manuals. These create clarity and the lively accents of the tango. The tango rhythm is characterized by syncopation and dotted rhythms, creating a dynamic and lively feel through strong downbeats and offbeat accents. Pedal work must be performed with clarity and precision to maintain rhythmic drive using full mixture registration.

Figure 13: Vibrant Expression of the Tango Rhythm with the Indicated Registration

*Tango Toccata on a Theme by Melchior Vulpius*, mm 77-81

$\text{♩} = 126$   
All divisions: full, with mixtures  
(light reed possible) and couplers as needed

77 Ch. Gt. f

The final Tutti section forms the climax of the piece, with all stops engaged to produce momentum and power. As its title indicates, Decker's *Tango Toccata* relies heavily on the tango rhythm. The composer has explored tango in other organ works such as *Flores del Desierto* (2004), discussed above, and *In Memoriam: Tango and Chorale* (2007), a memorial piece that blends tango with the chorale to express deep emotions. *Tango*

*Invocations* (2002) evokes an intense, prayer-like atmosphere through tango rhythms, while in *The Freese Collection: Suite No. 3 - Tango* (2005), one movement focuses on tango rhythms. Lastly, *Tango Estampie* (1999) creatively combines the medieval estampie dance form with tango, merging historical and contemporary styles.

## CHAPTER 5

### GOLDEN GATE

Recording at: <https://youtu.be/v89IY83zTcU?si=ojoEmzFWkL9OoacD>

#### Origins and Inspirations

*Golden Gates* was composed as a tribute to the culturally diverse city of San Francisco and was published in 2011. Given that this city is home to people from various countries around the world, Pamela Decker crafted this piece based on the unique historical background of this cultural fusion. Specifically, she incorporated elements of Chinese, Hispanic, and South American music to reflect the diversity of the city. This distinctive feature of her composition serves as a bridge between tradition and modernity, while also capturing the cultural characteristics of various countries in one piece, bringing a new perspective to organ music through Decker's creative interpretation.

#### Compositional Reflections

*Golden Gates* incorporates musical elements from various cultures, with the primary theme reflecting Chinese traditional music. The Chinese influence in this piece is most apparent in the use of the pentatonic scale and the flow of the melody. Chinese traditional music often employs a five-note scale, and in this piece, there are notes that resemble the E major and E minor pentatonic scales. Additionally, the melody flows smoothly and gently, and the legato sections naturally evoke the serene and lyrical qualities characteristic of some Chinese music. The structure is relatively simple, focusing more on the melody than on complex harmonies, which is another hallmark of Chinese traditional music. The melodic line effectively conveys the quiet beauty and some aspects of Chinese culture.

Figure 14: Chinese-inspired Melody

*Golden Gate*, mm 4-8

The image displays a musical score for the piece 'Golden Gate', measures 4 through 8. The score is written for a grand piano and includes three staves: Manual (right hand), Pedal (left hand), and a separate staff for the Sw. (Swell) pedal. The tempo is marked as '♩ = ca. 63'. The Manual part begins with a 'p' (piano) dynamic and a 'legato' instruction. The Sw. part starts with a 'pp' (pianissimo) dynamic. The Pedal part features a melodic line with a 'p' dynamic. The score is in 4/4 time and includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and dynamic markings.

The second theme evokes Hispanic culture, specifically Flamenco. Originating from the Andalusian region of Spain, Flamenco is characterized by intense rhythms and emotional melodies. In *Golden Gates*, the influence of Flamenco is particularly evident through the use of triplets and quintuplets, incorporating irregular rhythms that echo the Compás patterns found in Flamenco music. These rhythmic patterns are essential in Flamenco and can take various forms, such as 12-beat, 4-beat, or 6-beat structures. Each specific genre, or palo, adheres to a unique combination of beats and accentuation, giving Flamenco its distinctive and dynamic character. The fast tempo and strong accents are common features in Spanish dance music. Furthermore, the chromatic and improvisatory melodic development mirrors the virtuosic and elaborate melodies generally found in Hispanic music, particularly in Flamenco.

Figure 15: Flamenco-Inspired Rhythm

*Golden Gate*, mm 80-84

The image displays a musical score for the piece "Golden Gate" from measures 80 to 84. The score is written for guitar (Gt.) and piano (p). The tempo is marked as "Forceful" with a quarter note equal to approximately 56 beats per minute. The music features complex rhythms, including triplets and quintuplets, and is characterized by a strong, forceful dynamic (f). The score is divided into two systems. The first system (measures 80-84) shows a guitar part with a triplet of eighth notes, a quintuplet of eighth notes, and another triplet of eighth notes. The piano part features a complex rhythmic pattern with many sixteenth and thirty-second notes. The second system (measures 82b-84) continues the complex rhythmic patterns, with a triplet of eighth notes in the guitar part and a triplet of eighth notes in the piano part. A performance instruction "Man: 16' possible" is written above the final measure of the second system.

Improvisatory elements can be heard through rhythmic flexibility, chromatic melodies, and complex harmonies. The chromatic progressions evoke the free-flowing passagework often seen in improvisational solos (Fig. 16). Additionally, the rapid transitions between major and minor keys reflect the complex chord progressions that create a sense of spontaneity. These elements demonstrate how the piece embodies rhythmic freedom and harmonic diversity through its improvisatory nature.

Figure 16: Progression Evoking Improvisatory Passagework

*Golden Gate*, mm 95-100

The image displays two systems of musical notation for piano accompaniment. The first system, starting at measure 96b, features a treble clef staff with a melodic line marked 'increase to *fff*' and a bass clef staff with a rhythmic accompaniment. A triplet of eighth notes is marked with a '3' and a slur, and a group of nine notes is marked with a '9' and a slur. The second system, starting at measure 98b, is marked 'with freedom' and 'ad lib.' with a tempo marking '♩ = ca. 96'. It shows a treble clef staff with a melodic line and a bass clef staff with a rhythmic accompaniment. The notation includes various note values, rests, and slurs, indicating a more improvisatory and expressive section.

These cultural influences inspired Decker's musical representation of San Francisco's multicultural identity. The composer's creative approach allows the music vividly to reflect the city's diversity, offering the audience an immersive cultural experience.

#### Performance Considerations

To bring out the fusion of musical elements in this piece, it is essential to utilize the organ's diverse tonal palette effectively. The introduction, inspired by Chinese melodies and rhythms, uses dynamic expression via the swell box to convey emotional subtlety. The primary melody is introduced using soft and warm string and flute stops, maintaining a stable rhythm to evoke a sense of calm and serenity.

Throughout the piece, there is a gradual emotional build-up, and each section adds to the growing tension. The middle section, inspired by Hispanic Flamenco, showcases Decker's distinctive musical color. The use of mixture stops should make the touch clear, with an emphasis on rhythm to ensure the music remains strong and vivid.

The final section reaches the emotional peak of the piece, where the tension culminates. To emphasize the main theme and enhance the dramatic conclusion, adding a 32' stop to the pedal is recommended. This will bring out the power of the final climax, leaving a strong and dramatic impression on the audience as the piece comes to a close.

## CHAPTER 6

### *JESU, DULCIS MEMORIA*

Recording at: <https://youtu.be/qmTO3P7Bqc8?si=GCgBhhstIF6QMBpt>

#### Origins and Inspirations

*Jesu, dulcis memoria* embodies the deep spirituality and beauty of the Christian tradition, using a Gregorian chant as its melodic foundation. This chant is one of the most representative hymns of Christianity, portraying the love and grace of Jesus. Pamela Decker drew inspiration from the sacred hymn, infusing it with her modern sensibilities to create a piece that serves as a prayer for inner peace.

Decker's attempt to modernize traditional chant through contemporary organ expressions provides the performer with a rich medium to convey spiritual elevation. Since the piece is based on Gregorian chant, the soft opening section could be used liturgically, an ideal choice for meditative sections of the church service. This work is an important contribution to modern organ repertoire, showcasing the creative potential of chant through Decker's innovative vision. This piece, dedicated to Douglas Cleveland, offers new possibilities for incorporating chant into contemporary organ music. It was published by Wayne Leupold Editions in 2011.

#### Compositional Reflections

Decker's concept is to convey musically the love and grace of Christ. This introduction begins with a lyrical melody, and the theme appears repeatedly. The following fugue, while not departing significantly from the atmosphere of the prelude, develops the theme further with contrapuntal elements and gradually increases the sound with additional light Reed sounds. The passage of rapid sixteenth notes builds toward a vibrant conclusion, seamlessly leading into the final toccata section. In this brilliant tessitura, the theme appears in the pedal part, and is emphasized with powerful tonalities, bringing the work to a strong and dramatic conclusion.

## Performance Considerations

In the first section, a soft flute and soprano pipe tone are used to create a calm and meditative atmosphere, with sustained harmonies in the lower register adding depth. The performer must convey the emotion of the melody with a gentle touch, allowing flexibility in dynamics and rhythm to maintain a natural flow. It is important to use the pedals to provide a stable foundation in the lower register, ensuring that the overall tone and emotion are well communicated.

The second section utilizes counterpoint, with multiple voices moving independently and interacting with each other. Each voice introduces and transforms the theme, creating musical tension through the contrast and harmony between the parts. This imitative technique adds complexity to the structure of the piece, offering the audience a profound emotional experience. Initially, foundation stops are used, but reed tones and 16' registers are gradually added to heighten the musical intensity.

Figure 17: Contrapuntal Development of the Theme.

*Jesu, dulcis memoria*, mm 47-51



The musical score for Figure 17 consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef and contains a melodic line with a dynamic marking of *mf* and the instruction 'Ch.'. The lower staff is in bass clef and contains a supporting line with a dynamic marking of *mf*. The music is in a minor key and features a complex, imitative texture with multiple voices moving independently.

The final toccata section forms the climax of the piece, creating energy with fast and dynamic rhythms. The previous theme reappears in various transformations, reinforcing the unity of the piece, while the prominent use of the pedal in the lower register provides a strong harmonic foundation. This section reaches an emotional peak, and the optional addition of 32'

stops for the *fortississimo* dynamics leaves a powerful impression on the audience, concluding the musical journey with a dramatic finish.

Figure 18: Final Toccata Section.

*Jesu, dulcis memoria*, mm 88-89

The image shows a musical score for the final Toccata section of 'Jesu, dulcis memoria', measures 88-89. The score is written for piano and consists of three staves: a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) and a separate bass line. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 2/4. The music is marked with a forte dynamic (*ff*) at the beginning of measure 88. The melody in the right hand features a series of eighth-note runs. The left hand provides a rhythmic accompaniment with eighth notes. A pedal instruction 'Ped.: 32' may be added' is located below the bass line, followed by another *ff* dynamic marking.

## CHAPTER 7

### TWO PSALM PARAPHRASES

Recording at: <https://youtu.be/gqhSE16wGYY?si=-gEI9SkxAF-y42io>

#### Origins and Inspirations

*Two Psalm Paraphrases* reinterprets the texts of Psalm 130 and Psalm 146 through a modern musical language, aiming to explore the Christian faith. Decker sought to convey the messages of the psalms in a contemporary context, allowing the audience to experience the spiritual aspects conveyed in the texts. Each psalm has its own unique sentiment, and Decker utilizes a variety of tonal colors and rhythms to express these emotions musically. The process reflects the task of translating the spiritual messages of the psalm texts into music.

The work was published in 2024."

The first paraphrase on "Psalm 130" conveys deep anguish and prayer, expressed through contrapuntal textures that create a meditative and introspective atmosphere. The piece begins with the Lutheran chorale melody "Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu Dir" ("Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord"), reinforcing the sense of supplication. These figures gently transform into flowing, water-like lines within the texture, capturing the emotional depth of the plea for mercy.

In contrast, the second paraphrase on "Psalm 146" is a celebratory hymn, exuding joy at God's support for the oppressed, liberating the afflicted. The music expresses this, as stated in the seventh verse of Psalm 146: "The Lord executes justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry, and sets the prisoners free." Furthermore, verse 10 declares, "The Lord will reign forever," celebrating God's eternal rule and ultimate triumph. To depict this musically, the composer includes the Lutheran chorale melody "Heut triumphiret Gottes Sohn" ("Today God's Son Triumphs").

Decker frames this paraphrase of "Psalm 146" with fanfare sections that immediately set a festive, triumphant tone. The double pedaling, emphasized in these sections, adds to the grandeur of the piece. When "Heut triumphiret Gottes Sohn" emerges, the piece shifts into a toccata form, where the melody is carried in the pedal and the manual parts use wave-like

figures. This creates a striking contrast to the fluid, softer textures found in “Psalm 130,” symbolizing the contrasting emotions of prayer and praise.

Decker uses modern musical techniques to reinterpret the psalm texts. Elements like contrapuntal texture, fanfares, and double pedaling are used to express the dual themes of prayer and praise central to these psalms.

### Compositional Reflections

In Psalm 130, Decker expresses the emotion of a quiet and soft prayer, and in the latter part, the theme appears in three voices as passages of eighth notes and sixteenth notes, bringing the piece to a conclusion.

Figure 19: A Lyrical Introduction with a Soft Registration.

“Psalm 130” from *Two Psalm Paraphrases*, mm 1-6

I. Psalm 130: Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord  
AUS TIEFER NOT SCHREI ZU DIR<sup>1</sup>

Sw.: Flute 8', String 8' and String Celeste 8'  
Gt.: Principal 8', Flutes 8' and 4'  
Ped.: Foundations 16' and 8' to balance

**Molto adagio** ♩ = ca. 42

Manual

Pedal

Figure 20: The theme presented in three voices.

“Psalm 130” from *Two Psalm Paraphrases*, mm 19-27

The image shows a musical score for three voices (treble, bass, and a lower bass line) in 4/4 time. The score is divided into three systems. The first system (measures 19-21) features a treble clef staff with a melodic line, a bass clef staff with a supporting line, and a lower bass clef staff. A guitar part (Gt.) is indicated with a *mf* dynamic. The second system (measures 22-24) continues the melodic and supporting lines. The third system (measures 25-27) includes a pedal instruction: "Ped.: increase to *mf*".

For “Psalm 146,” Decker conveys a sense of praise from the outset with a strong registration. She specifically marks "Full with Mixture, Reed" for all manuals and the pedal, which creates a powerful and triumphant sound that underscores the celebratory nature of the piece. The use of mixtures and reeds emphasizes the grandeur and intensity, reinforcing the hymn of victory that Psalm 146 embodies.

Figure 21: Harmonies and Bold Registration for Praising the Lord's Victory.

“Psalm 130” from *Two Psalm Paraphrases*, mm 1-6

II. Psalm 146: I will sing praises unto my God while I have any being  
HEUT TRIUMPHIRET GOTTES SOHN<sup>1</sup>

Sw.: Full with Mixture, Reeds  
Gt.: Full with Mixture, Reeds, Sw. to Gt., Ch. to Gt.  
Ch.: Full with Mixture, Reeds  
Ped.: Full with Mixture, Reeds, couplers to balance

COMPOSER'S NOTE: The opening registration should be full and rich, but not turgid or unclear. The choice of specific reeds and mixtures should be made accordingly.

The musical score is for a harpsichord or spinet. It is in 4/4 time with a tempo marking of quarter note = ca. 96. The score is divided into two systems. The first system includes a Manual part (treble and bass staves) and a Pedal part (bass staff). The Manual part begins with a *ff marcato* dynamic. The Pedal part begins with a *ff* dynamic. The second system continues the Manual part with a *non legato* marking and features a rapid sixteenth-note passage in the right hand.

By contrasting these psalms, Decker provides a musical reflection of two vital aspects of spirituality, prayer and praise. Her paraphrases communicate the emotions described in the psalm texts, musically reinterpreting them with the introduction of Lutheran chorales to emphasize the sentiment of each one.

### Performance Considerations

As “Psalm 130” contains deep feelings of sorrow and supplication, the performer must carefully express these emotions. An expressive touch and relaxed tempo are essential to convey the emotional depth of the piece. The piece is primarily composed for a combination of soft flute and principal stops, without any significant tonal changes. Therefore, the dynamics should remain soft and introspective throughout, using the swell box to add subtle expression.

In contrast, “Psalm 146” conveys a message of joy and praise, so it requires a strong, energetic tempo that is not rushed. As in “Psalm 130,” the paraphrase begins with a full

registration using mixtures and reeds. Dynamics should follow the markings in the score, with changes made through the use of different manuals. The fast sixteenth-note passages should be played in a non-legato manner to reflect the toccata style. The rhythm must remain buoyant, with constant momentum. The use of the pedal in the lower register is essential for providing harmonic support and grounding the melody. The steady bass adds stability to the piece and enhances the overall impact of its joyful, celebratory character. By integrating these elements, performers can effectively convey the prayerful and jubilant emotions that define this work.

## CHAPTER 8

### *PSALM 139*

Recording at: [https://youtu.be/HqeG3-t\\_pZ8?si=jfGdK89zTdDvqNsQ](https://youtu.be/HqeG3-t_pZ8?si=jfGdK89zTdDvqNsQ)

#### Origins and Inspirations

*Psalm 139* is a programmatic work that musically expresses the content of the Biblical text. The work was published in 2017 by Wayne Leupold Editions. Utilizing the D-centered Phrygian mode, this piece richly conveys the themes presented in the psalm, particularly symbolizing the impossibility of separation from the Holy Spirit, as posed in the question, "Where can I go from Your Spirit?" This phrase is drawn from Psalm 139:7, which expresses the concept of God's omnipresence and the impossibility of distancing oneself from His Spirit.

Decker's music conveys the deep philosophical meaning and emotions of the psalm. She highlights the symbolic significance of the number 7, often regarded as a symbol of divinity and completeness in Biblical contexts, exploring these concepts through her music.

#### Compositional Reflections

In personal mail, Decker mentioned that in *Psalm 139* there is a Bulgarian dance rhythm. She employs various compositional techniques for each verse. To intensify the musical narrative in the 14th verse, "I am fearfully and wonderfully made," she uses chromaticism and Bulgarian dance rhythms. As seen in Figure 13, the  $\frac{7}{8}$  meter communicates a sense of celebration and energy, allowing the audience to feel the majesty and awe of God through the music.

Figure 22: The energetic dance pattern in 7/8 time signature.

*Psalm 139*, mm 53-63

The image shows a musical score for Psalm 139, measures 53-63, in 7/8 time signature. The score is written for guitar (Gt.) and piano (p). The guitar part is marked with a forte dynamic (f) and a *simile* instruction. The piano part is also marked with a forte dynamic (f) and a *simile* instruction. The score is divided into three systems. The first system (measures 53-56) shows the guitar playing a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes and quarter notes, while the piano plays a similar pattern. The second system (measures 57-60) continues the rhythmic pattern. The third system (measures 61-63) is marked with a *Reeds* instruction and shows a more complex rhythmic pattern. The score is written in a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a time signature of 7/8.

Decker emphasizes the programmatic elements of the music, using repetition and variation to help the audience connect more deeply with the message of the psalm. Toward the end, the pedal part has a passage of swirling patterns that symbolically represent the Holy Trinity, portraying the brilliance of light overcoming darkness. This approach offers the audience an opportunity to contemplate and experience the biblical message through the music. The emphasis on beats 1, 5, and 7 creates a sense of a lively celebratory dance, enhancing the energetic atmosphere of the psalm setting.

The number 7 is significant in many biblical contexts, symbolizing completion or perfection, as seen in the seven days of creation, where God rested on the seventh day. It also sometimes represents the integration of the four corners of the Earth with the Holy Trinity. A section that starts in 7/8 features a descending fifth in the right hand, followed by a descending third, leading to a three-note rising chromatic figure symbolizing the Trinity. This theme repeats and is cyclically interrupted by sections in 8/8.

In the final section of *Psalm 139*, the theme appears in the pedal part, concluding with a grand *fff* passage. Decker explains in her preface that the dance intensifies and returns to  $\frac{3}{4}$  meter, with the opening theme reappearing, slightly altered in harmony and theme, allowing for a hopeful statement of praise overcoming darkness. The theme transitions into the pedal, accompanied by sweeping patterns of half steps and fourths in the upper voices, spiraling towards the central progression of the Trinity, but without the earlier tight chromaticism. The piece concludes with three powerful chords that are elaborated by the low pedal, symbolizing the victory of light over all darkness through the Trinity.

Figure 23: Triumphant Pedal Theme and Concluding Chords of the Trinity.

*Psalm 139*, mm 113-121

The image displays a musical score for three systems of music, measures 113 through 121. Each system consists of three staves: a treble clef staff, a grand staff (treble and bass clefs), and a bass clef staff. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major/D minor). The time signature is 3/4. Measure 113 shows a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes in the upper voices and a simple bass line. Measure 116 features a grand *fff* dynamic marking and a more complex bass line with sixteenth notes. Measure 119 also features a grand *fff* dynamic marking and concludes with three powerful chords in the upper voices, with the bass line providing a steady accompaniment.

## Performance Considerations

Decker indicates the timbres she conceived for each variation. The opening section features a solo reed accompanied by Flute, String, and String Celeste stops. The swell box enables the player to create dynamic contrast, and additional tonal layers can be added to enhance the musical intensity. The presence of 16' and Pedal 32' stops on the organ enables performers to faithfully reproduce the *fff* registration instructions as indicated by the composer, fully reflecting Decker's intentions.

This piece demands a high level of skill from the organist, presenting challenges with its intricate passages and dynamic contrasts. The variations differ greatly in texture and tone, one exploiting soft, lyrical tones, another played on loud intense registrations. In this way, the organ provides a soundscape for the emotional shifts in the psalm text.

## CHAPTER 9

### CONCLUSION

Pamela Decker has created a personal compositional style for the organ that is rooted in tradition. The works recorded here reflect her use of historical themes, such as Gregorian chant and Lutheran chorales, and historical genres, such as the toccata and passacaglia. They also demonstrate the influences which have contributed to her personal reinterpretation of tradition. These influences are both musical and extra-musical, including the dance rhythms of tango and flamenco, different modal patterns, spiritual symbolism and geographical associations. I was honored to have the opportunity to speak with Dr. Decker about her organ music and to interpret it on the Richards-Fowkes organ at Pinnacle Presbyterian Church in Scottsdale, Arizona, in the midst of the Arizona desert which is such an important theme in her organ music.

This document accompanies the recording to include a discussion of the historical background, compositional techniques, and performance considerations for each work. Through this selection of her oeuvre for organ, I have attempted to showcase Decker's creativity in infusing tradition with contemporary associations and musical techniques, offering to the listener and reader some insights into her unique style of composing for the instrument.

Celebrating Decker's contributions is part of a larger initiative to recognize the work of female composers. By making women's compositions more accessible through publications, public performances, and recordings, more people will have the opportunity to hear their music. By presenting her works through this recording, a wider audience will be exposed to the richness and diversity of contemporary organ repertoire, hopefully inspiring future performers and listeners to engage with the invaluable contributions of women.

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