

From EDOA Newsletter Dec 2007

President's message
December 2007

I am sure that I am not the only organist who feels a sense of relief on playing the last Noël and returning the carol books to the shelf until the following Christmas programmes have to be planned. I hope you all enjoyed your music making, whether as players, singers, or listeners, and have managed to have a rest too. 2008 has now arrived and with it come new opportunities. For organists (and other musicians and music lovers) the centenary of the birth of Olivier Messiaen will dominate the year, if only through the prominence the media, CD companies and recital planners will give to it.

I expect that, as elsewhere, EDOA members will be divided in their reaction to Messiaen's music. Surely all will acknowledge his importance – he wrote more for organ than any other first-rank composer since JS Bach – but some may find it hard to come to terms with his style, while others will eagerly anticipate any opportunity to hear and play the music. Whichever category you fall into, 2008 provides a wonderful opportunity to re-assess Messiaen. EDOA is leading the way by promoting a two-hour lecture by Jennifer Bate on Thursday 31 January at 7.30pm at Trinity-at-Bowes Church. Jennifer Bate hardly needs an introduction: she is one of the world's leading concert organists and worked closely with Messiaen on performances of his works, not least when recording the complete works. Indeed, she plays from copies annotated by the composer. She also happens to live pretty close to Enfield so she is almost one of our own!

Digressing for a moment, I remember preparing 'Transports de joie' from 'l'Ascension' for a recital at St Giles Cripplegate about 20 years ago. Somebody who happened to be in the church at the time said to me 'you're surely not going to play that!' – it was obviously just noise to them. Hearing the piece played at my own church last May as a voluntary I was struck by how much less surprising (I was going to say shocking) the music seemed, yet it had lost none of its vigour. I wondered if my secret auditor in the 1980s would have thought the same.

I urge all members to prioritise Jennifer Bates' talk (along with all other EDOA events in the year, of course) and to use it as the starting point for a year of re-discovering Messiaen's unique musical language. If, from time to time, it all gets too much you can always turn to the music of Vaughan Williams, the 50th anniversary of whose death falls in 2008, for something more different!

With best wishes for a happy and healthy 2008.

Simon

Simon Williams

EDOA Events

Associated Board Exams

On 10th October, a group of us met at Trinity-at-Bowes Methodist Church for a session on Associated Board examinations, with particular reference to those for the organ, led by Daniel Moulton, himself an examiner.

After a general introduction, Daniel went on to talk about the marking criteria applied for the various grades, and keeping focus during performance, playing under pressure, motivation and explaining what qualities a generalised examiner looks for in a candidate's performance.

We were then invited to put the published criteria into practice as Peter Dann and Lilian Gibbens bravely played pieces by Dupré, Walton and Kelly. Following some discussion of our marking assessments, Daniel then revealed what mark would actually have been awarded in each instance. As is often the case, Peter and Lilian had been much harsher judges of their own playing than an AB examiner would have been!

Other aspects of exams, including scales, sight reading and aural tests, were also touched upon.

The session was concluded by Daniel giving us some very helpful thoughts and insights into the important area of performance psychology. These came under headings including:

- Be musically prepared
- Healthy mind = healthy body
- Be physically prepared
- Rehearse the occasion
- Visualise the occasion
- Record yourself – regularly!

and

- Challenge your thinking errors.

We were most grateful to Daniel for giving us such an informative and enjoyable evening and to Joyce Beaumont and her team for providing refreshments.

Roger Carter

Autumn Blessings

As one grows older, and with the benefit of hindsight, the blessings of Providence become ever more obvious. Such blessings have recently been mine, where my organ playing has taken me to several musical events that have both gladdened the heart and educated the mind.

The first was on Saturday September 8 when I was invited to play for an hour in the Annual Organ Marathon in St Peter's Church, which is in the centre of the Suffolk market town of Sudbury, made famous by the painter Gainsborough. This redundant Church is used for many local activities and it houses a large, three-manual organ by T C Lewis which is kept in superb condition and is a joy to play. (The nearby URC has a fine organ too, visited by the Eastern Branch a few years back)

Two weeks later the Chelmsford & District Organists' Association visited organs in Hertfordshire, starting at St Mary's Church, Birchanger. Here is the only organ built by Augustus Gern (workshop foreman of Cavallé-Coll) that survives unaltered, and has a BIOS Certificate to give it both authentication and protection. Here one can play music by French composers using the specified registration – and hear the difference! One also experiences a typical French-style reversed console.

A few miles south, in the heart of Bishops Stortford is St Michael's Church, with a very large

three-manual organ in a generous acoustic. This gave the chance to play in a variety of styles. A chamber organ was also available,

It was just a short walk to Water Lane URC (founded in 1662) which has a medium sized organ dating from 1850. The building has recently been completely restored (without being reduced in size – the two galleries are still there!) and the organ has been admirably modernized to suit. Here one felt immediately “at home” with everything easy to cope with on a first visit.

The next week brought an outing arranged by the Suffolk organists’ Association – first to All Saints’ Church, Brandeston, a small church at the gate of the former Hall which now serves as a preparatory school. The organ is of the early English style, recently restored by local craftsman Peter Bumstead. It has a single manual, with extra notes at the bass end. The pedal board is strange by modern standards and permanently coupled to the lower end of the manual so that the bottom note, a G, is a trap for the unwary expecting it to be C. However, with eight full ranks, including a reed, all of them split at middle C, it was excellent for suitable music of its period.

A few miles to the north is Framlingham, with St Michael’s Church just down the hill from the Castle. In the Church is the only surviving organ built by Thomas Thamar. He built it in 1674 for Pembroke College, Cambridge. When the College acquired a new organ in 1707, as Patron of the Living, the College translated the Thamar organ to St Michael’s. Much has been written about this worthy survivor, there are many recordings, and world-famous players make pilgrimages to see, to inspect and to play. Even to a non-expert the visual appearance is stunning; to be able to ascend to the console and to play is a unique, exciting experience!

Just a short walk down the hill one came to the United Free Church, a recently re-modelled former Congregational Chapel which now has the sanctuary at the previous gallery level. Here a Cedric Arnold organ (from Thaxted, not far away in Essex) has been beautifully adapted to the new situation. Again it was a joy to play.

The following Saturday brought a visit to London, to the Church of St Botolph-without-Aldgate. Those who attended the London Organ Day here last May, or anyone that read a copy of the Handbook for the Day will know of the open invitation to return privately, by arrangement, to play this unique, historic instrument. It has recently been restored (at a cost of some £300,000) to its original state as built by Renatus Harris in 1704 – the electric blower is the only concession to modernization. By arrangement with John Bamford, the organist, I was allowed some two hours there. My old English music sounded as never before on the “correct” instrument using the “right” registration – the experience of a lifetime!

Finally, on the next Saturday, a five-minute walk took me to the URC, New Street, Great Dunmow. After lots of time and expense the re-ordered church has re-opened, and there was an Open Day for everyone to come to see this excellent achievement. In the gallery is a beautiful Hill organ that cost £300 in 1870 and is unaltered apart from an electric blower. It is in fine condition, and I was invited to provide background music while the visitors enjoyed their guided tours and refreshments.

By now you may wonder why I have written this essay about my activities. My purpose is twofold:-

- a) to tell you about the wide variety of organs that are within easy reach of my home.
- b) to advise that you too could enjoy the same delights. You have only to make arrangements with the appropriate custodians.

If you need help with contact details, I will be glad to help you.

Marcus Knight

EDOA member John Peacham writes . . .

As some of you will know, most of my church playing is, and has been for many years, in various German-speaking congregations in England. Since a number of our organists do not speak or read the language I issue from time to time a short English-language newsletter which contains reviews (not always by me) of German music (not entirely chorale preludes!) and relevant books which come my way which I think may be of interest to colleagues. If any EDOA member would like to be on the mailing list for this newsletter please contact me.