

The IAO 24th London Organ Day March 6

25 years ago I was on the editorial team of *Anglican Praise*, (*The Anglican Hymn Book's* answer to *100 Hymns for Today*), meeting at St Anne's, Limehouse, and was given the opportunity to play the Great Exhibition organ there. Its beautiful console and tierce mixtures made a lasting impression on me, so I was quick to sign up to this year's London Organ Day there.

There was a good turnout, though I couldn't help noticing a certain lack of delegates in the under-50 age bracket. Vicars notice these things. The Rector welcomed us and spoke warmly of the organ's restoration by William Drake - and particularly how little tuning it had needed in the 4 years since. Vicars notice these things too!

The day's theme was 'The Wonders of the Victorian Organ'. We began with a brilliant presentation by Gordon Stewart revealing the parlous state of church music when Queen Victoria came to the throne in 1837. Cathedral organists generally played 'manuals only' and the St Paul's Cathedral Choir would typically sing the Hallelujah Chorus with 8 boys and 2 men. Only Methodists sang hymns until the grossly underrated John Stainer came on the scene. He invented Choir Practice and Processing, and an Organ Tutor that's still worth a look. No one played Bach until the great Mendelssohn reintroduced it, and it took Ouseley to resurrect proper organ composition. (Did you know that Lefébure-Wély wrote 'ad-lib' over his more difficult bits of pedal, meaning 'play what you can'?)

This was also the 'Big Machine' era. Cavallé-Coll symphonic organs in France would never have worked without the English Mr Barker's 'servo assistance' invention. Along with the big new Town Hall organs in England, this was essentially a new instrument with no music written for it (this being before the transcription era). This distinction the Big Victorian Organ shared only with the saxophone.

Unfortunately as cathedral music standards improved, the Oxford Movement ruined parish churches with chancel organs and robed choirs that tried to ape their cathedral counterparts.

We were then led to expect a recital of Victorian songs by soprano Emma Walshe, accompanied by, perhaps, a drawing-room piano. But in fact Daniel Moulton accompanied her on the St Anne's organ, demonstrating its wonderful expressiveness (trigger swell pedal!), varied *pp* effects and silent tracker action - the perfect foil to Emma's lovely voice. I particularly liked a couple of C.H.H. Parry songs.

Then Gordon Stewart again for the best master-class I've ever sat in on - full of witty criticism and fulsome praise where due. Made you want to clap spontaneously and throw hats in the air 19th-century style as his pupils responded to his suggestions, and the music came to life. I scribbled lots of notes (these are worth cutting out and keeping):

- 1) Don't rush: you always have more time than you think (Nicolas Kynaston)
- 2) No need to impress with how fast you can jump: think how it would be *sung* (Wesley's Choral Song).
- 3) Every phrase has a right to time for a beautiful ending.
- 4) *Sing* the tune to see how it should be played.
- 5) Decide tempo before you start - not in the 3rd bar like most organists.
- 6) Most fugues have a 2-section melody: show it by pausing in the middle.
- 7) Don't release high notes before the pipe can speak. Horrid noise!
- 8) Record yourself often. Ask yourself: does it sound nice? This will save a fortune in organ lessons (sorry, teachers).
- 9) Organists use their brain more than just about anyone else - left and right side to capacity (didn't we all know that already?)

- 10) Listeners should always sense *this* piece is your favourite.
- 11) Victorian music is all about heart-wrenching chords - so let them wrench hearts.
- 12) The more you've got to say, the slower you should play. If you've nothing to say, go fast, so no one notices. So - Bach always slow.
- 13) Copy Margaret Phillips - piano arpeggios and scales every day before breakfast until you can trill with fingers 4 and 5 as well as you can with 2 and 3.
- 14) When choosing a piece to learn a) ask 'is my technique strong enough?' b) listen to the same composer's orchestral music c) learn it, d) forget a-c and think only of your audience (Lionel Rogg)

[I found some of these points very liberating having done most of my organ learning in the late 1960s when 'rubato' was the dirtiest word of all. Though having said that, I still like my Boëllmann Toccata to hammer along like a relentlessly accelerating express train].

After lunch, Nicholas Thistlethwaite spoke of Mendelssohn and Gauntlett (who played the almost-unplayable Birmingham Town Hall organ for the first performance of 'Elijah' from a full orchestral score). These two mutual admirers revolutionised organ design and Mendelssohn showed English organists for the first time how to play Bach. This was an hour-long address, a bit heavy going for the 'graveyard hour' and not a few nodded off.

However, all were reawakened for Daniel Moulton's film of the search for 'The Elusive English Organ' - the rare instrument that had escaped Victorian 'improvement'. (In the event there were some late 17th Century Dallam organs found in Brittany, where Victoria had no jurisdiction).

Now I never knew this: we have no great Alkmaar or Haarlem organs because the Dutch have one church per town (invested with much civic pride), while English towns have several, with relatively pipsqueak organs installed.

We heard Adlington Hall, an atypical, country house organ, but an incredible feat of restoration by Mander from what anyone else would have regarded as a pile of scrap. Then to the chapel of Packington Hall, designed by Handel. Then St Botolph's Aldgate, the oldest complete church organ in England, and the 1829 Bishop organ in then-wealthy Bermondsey. This was the first modern organ with keyboards to C and full pedals. Only people couldn't play the pedals, so Bishop provided an extra offset manual for a second organist to play the pedal part (let's have a look at L-Wély's ad libs again...)

Unfortunately during the afternoon something had gone awry with a thermostat - the church got progressively hotter and more airless, and delegates were diving for the doors for a gulp of fresh spring air. By the time we got to the grand finale Victorian-style recital by Andrew Dewar, no amount of magnificent playing could disguise the fact that the instrument was now horribly out of tune. He began with Handel arr. W T Best, and ended with the Liszt BACH in its Mk I version. The drama of the piece sounded even more frenzied than usual due to the tuning, with an extra burst of drama when the ivory flew off a stop-knob as a climax approached. A real shame that having waited all day to hear the organ let rip, neither it nor Andrew Dewar got a fair hearing. Ironic, given the Rector's opening comments.

The highlight for me? The pearls of master-class wisdom. I must practise more.

James Spanner