

Thursday 15 July Repertoire Evening

Twelve people attended the Repertoire Evening led by Simon Williams and held at St Mary Magdalene Church, in Enfield; four of those people were non members. However, those of us who did attend learned how music for the organ has changed over the centuries and how composers in other countries can influence the works of others. The instrument, too, has also changed over the years.

Simon told us how the instruments of the day influenced the music written and he gave us a chart outlining the musical periods and the composers influencing the music of the day. During his talk he used illustrations from CDs or performed on the church organ. His talk began with music from the Renaissance and ended with twentieth century works.

In England, serious organ music began in the Pre-Reformation period, in the sixteenth century with Redford and Preston when it was customary to hide Plain Chant within the texture of the music composed for church use, with a decorative theme superimposed. It could be said that the music lacked a sense of direction and harmony found in later compositions. It was common at this time for the organ and the singers to perform alternate verses. Simon played a part of William Byrd's Fantasia performed by Simon Preston on the organ of Knole House which was a good illustration of music that has phrases of regular length which gives greater shape and form - with one theme following another. Pedals did not feature in Byrd's work (he also performed and composed for the English virginals).

This was the time in history when Roman Catholics fled abroad due to the changes in religion; it was common for many to be two-way or Church Catholics - some members of the family would outwardly pay homage to the Established Church of the time to avoid paying fines and the loss of their property and others would follow the Old Religion in secret, going abroad to marry in the old Church and to perform baptisms. Those who went abroad would, naturally, have heard the music of France, Spain or Italy.

In the early Baroque period, Orlando Gibbons, Bull and Tomkins were composing for the English organ. Across the channel Germanic composers such as Sweelinck began to write music using more than one manual to provide echoes of the main theme in the work, and they began to use the medium of variations on a theme. In addition, pedals at 8ft pitch were used in a way similar to a keyboard. Sweelinck played the organ in a church in the 'red light' district of Amsterdam and frequently played to seafarers found along the docks. Based in Hamburg, his pupil Scheidemann used 16ft pitch pedal stops in his Chorale Prelude on the Lord's Prayer.

Music during the Baroque period featured elements of the prelude and fugue in a single piece entitled Praeludium which would eventually develop into the Prelude and Fugue we are familiar with today. Simon played short sections of Bruhn's Prelude in E Minor which uses pedal work into a florid start followed by a more regular section, going into a fugue, a maestoso variation of the original theme and eventually concluding with a very grand finish.

Buxtehude was another Baroque composer who has had great influence on our modern music. It is said that the great J S Bach walked one hundred miles to hear him play. Bach, of course, was a wonderful adaptor of other people's tunes and his harmonisations cannot be beaten.

In England, the word Baroque suggests Purcell who was influenced by European composers, especially the French. English organs of the time still did not incorporate pedals (and would not do so until the mid-nineteenth century). Purcell produced music to celebrate royal events, the most famous work being the music for the funeral of Queen Mary II, which was written for orchestra, but he was essentially an organist and composed pieces for use during divine worship, as well as little pieces for those learning the organ or keyboard. During the high baroque period the organ concerto was invented by Handel to be performed in between the acts of his oratorios.

Organs in France in the High Baroque were designed to provide colour in sound and most used two pedal stops. In fact, it seems that French organs were alike in their registration and the crumhorn or cromorne was introduced along with the Vox. Organs of both France and Germany were situated at the West End of the church in galleries, the intention being to make “a great noise” (unlike English Victorian organs, placed at the side of the church essentially to accompany the choir in its performance.). English cathedrals frequently possessed more than one instrument.

In Italy Frescobaldi composed the Canzone, to be played at the close of the Mass. Italian organs were small and only occasionally had pedals. Italian organ music was contrapuntal with a chromatic toccata during the communion, with very few cadences in the piece.

Moving forward in time to the Pre-Classical period in England we find composers such as Greene, Arne, Keeble, Stanley and Walond. John Keeble was the second organist at St George Hanover Square; he divided the voluntary into three distinct sections. Overall, however, music for the organ in this period is very sparse.

The Early-Romantics endeavoured to “express the inexpressible”, with contrasts in texture, sound and dynamics, and between virtuosity and simplicity. Mendelssohn combined Bach’s counterpoint with a greater virtuosity, as demonstrated by his Fourth Sonata (similar to a song without words for the piano) or his Third Sonata which is loud and florid. Schumann considered the organ to be the King of Instruments but only wrote a very small amount of organ music! Liszt’s work on the BACH theme features contrasts in changes of style and dynamics, the piece eventually developing into a fugue.

The Late Romantic composer, Max Reger, incorporated pedal trills etc., into his work. It is said that he wrote most of his music whilst severely under the influence of alcoholic drink, most of his work being loud and complicated. However, his Benedictus (and other short pieces) are nicer to listen to. Pièce Héroïque, composed by fellow Romantic Franck, is considered to illustrate the inner struggle to live a better life, and includes a Lutheran Chorale repeated between gentle sections; it ends, however, with a clamorous repetition of the main chorale theme. The music of Widor was represented by his famous Toccata - loud, insistent, and clamorous and frequently performed at the close of weddings. [*I remember the organist blanched when I requested it at mine in 1960.LG*]. In England Parry and Stanford were writing inspirational pieces, music where the organ sounds were weighty - often the equivalent of a full symphony orchestra. Who can fail to be impressed when one hears this strong, deep and hearty swelling echo around the walls of a cathedral?

In the twentieth century France Vierne produced his Pièces de Fantaisie, to set along with the great works of Dupré and Messiaen, the latter composer being a significant writer for the organ, his music full of emotion. Messiaen invented his own scale patterns and used unusual combinations of stops, hindu rhythms and bird songs. A section of Nativité was played on CD to illustrate his style. Alain experimented with unusual registrations. Other French composers included Duruflé and Langlais; in Belgium Flor Peeters brought an unusual style to his music along with Janáček (Czechoslovakia). Kodály (Hungary), Hindemith and Schönberg (both from Germany).

The names featuring in twentieth century Great Britain include Ireland, Whitlock, Howells, Maxwell Davies, Judith Weir, Judith Bingham and James Macmillan. Although to my mind Macmillan's symphonic music is defiantly weird, his ecclesiastical compositions are sweet, compelling and atmospheric and is an example of how the music of the past affects modern composition. Macmillan writes music for his local parish church, to be performed by the congregation and its choir (ordinary people) conducted by himself and accompanied by the organ, and he performs his specially written pieces for the organ each week. His work reveals influences from the fourteenth century, right through all the musical periods to the present day.

Lilian Gibbens