

## A musical week – Bremen, Lüneburg, Hamburg, Oundle and St Albans

The second weekend of July saw me beginning a fascinating musical week by heading to Germany for three days of listening to organs in Lower Saxony and Hamburg.

On Friday teatime I heard Hyunjoo Na give a recital of music by Bach, Sweelinck, Scheidt and Buxtehude on the organ of Unser Lieben Frauen Kirche in Bremen. The playing was very idiomatic, but I was unable to find out anything about the organ and would have thought that it was an old instrument had I not seen the rather modern casing. Whatever its pedigree, it had a singing quality and spoke well into the church. It was good to see a 5pm recital attended by at least a hundred people.

In Bremen again on Saturday, a guided tour of the Rathaus not only revealed the splendours of this building but also provided other interesting facts. It was the only building in the Markt to escape the war bombings, so the other nearby 'historic' buildings are very convincing reconstructions.

Bremen, as a city, gained its wealth in centuries past by trading with the Americas, whereas Hamburg and Lübeck gained theirs by trading with the east. It is, perhaps, not surprising that the St Petri Dom contains no less than six organs, including one by Gottfried Silbermann. This one-manual instrument, which stands in one of the crypts, has the Nasat and Sesquialtera stops operating from middle C upwards, rendering it possible to play a fair amount of repertoire with a right hand solo part. Markus Barth was due to give a recital on the Saturday lunchtime. I was looking forward to hearing a small Silbermann instrument, but, sadly, the recital had to be cancelled at the last moment due to a fault with the blowing equipment. There seemed a certain irony that an eighteenth-century organ was apparently rendered unplayable by a breakdown in a more recently added 'advancement'!

Saturday evening provided a relaxed opportunity to have dinner by the river in Buxtehude. As far as I am aware this delightful town, approximately half an hour from Hamburg, has no connection with the composer, but has many characterful buildings and a very peaceful air.

Sunday morning brought me to Lüneburg. J S Bach came here to the Michaelisschule and its associated church for two years when he was fifteen, coinciding with the early part of Georg Böhm's thirty year tenure as organist at the Johanniskirche. Interestingly, Lüneburg made its fortune exporting salt and, at that time, was also a centre for French culture, as it housed a Ritterakademie (which was a sister institution of the Michaelisschule), where young noblemen were sent to study the French language and social graces such as fencing and dancing. Being here afforded Bach the opportunity to become acquainted with French music.

I went to St Johann's for morning service and was surprised that there was no pre-service music. However, at 10am exactly, the organist began the Buxtehude *Prelude, Fugue and Chaconne* and the clergy processed in and sat down. This substantial piece formed the beginning of the service and preceded the first congregational chorale, which proceeded in the same key with no further introduction! The organist soloed the melody in several of the verses, but often in quite an ornamented form – were we experiencing what happened in Bach's and Böhm's time? There are two large organs in the church and we were hearing the one at the west end, originally built by Niehoff and Johansen in 1553. I believe the latest rebuild was carried out by von Beckerath and my feeling was that, although it retains a good

deal of its period character, the reeds in particular are rather loud and not particularly well integrated tonally.

Across town at St Michael's (aptly in the Johann-Sebastian-Bach Platz) I did not manage to hear the organ, but the building is rather more austere than the more elaborate St Johann's.

This is a city which survived the war unscathed and therefore is a treasure trove of beautiful old buildings and one to which I need to return to do it justice. It could also make a good base for anybody wanting to visit Hamburg or Lübeck, as both cities can be reached by rail in a short while.

The main purpose and focus of my trip was *Eine Orgel für Bach* in St Katharinen, Hamburg. This is an historical reconstruction by Flentrop of the church's ancient organ, an instrument of great historical significance. Some 520 pipes, which were recovered following the 1943 bombing, together with extensive old documentation, have been used as the basis of this reconstruction. Comprehensive details can be found at:

[http://www.stiftung-johann-sebastian.de/fileadmin/05-downloads/080612\\_broschuere\\_de.pdf](http://www.stiftung-johann-sebastian.de/fileadmin/05-downloads/080612_broschuere_de.pdf)

Scheidemann was organist here for more than thirty years, until sadly falling victim to an outbreak of the plague, and it was here that, in 1720, Bach played (possibly including BWV 542), to the aged Reincken, who was also organist here for many years. Bach is said to have been particularly impressed by the organ's reed stops.

I attended the Sunday early evening recital given by Harald Vogel. He played a programme of music by Weckmann, Hassler, Scheidemann and Reincken, and finished with a stunning performance of the Lübeck D minor *Praeludium*. Flentrop have recreated a truly magnificent instrument and Vogel was an extremely eloquent advocate for both the organ and the music.

It was a good many years since I had heard him play, as opposed to lecture, but some quarter-of-a-century after the first of several times I studied with Harald, it was reassuring to conclude that I still find his performance of this music compelling and his solutions to many of the issues surrounding its interpretation more convincing than those of some organists better known in Britain. Harald often had an interesting way with words. When we students were grappling with the technical complexities of a piece, he would often say, "You just need to spend five minutes on that corner," when most of us thought that we would need at least fifteen! As he was playing this recital, I recalled him telling us on one occasion that the acoustic in the Marienkirche in Lübeck is not the same as in Buxtehude's time, "since the church *received your attention* in the early 1940's"! And no, I don't believe that he was making any political point, but a statement of fact, and probably observing that war has artistic, as well as human, casualties – a point which is equally valid in this particular instance in Hamburg.

The complete Bach organ cycle is projected for performance here by the resident organist, Andreas Fischer, in a project lasting until July 2016. I plan to attend the fourth of these recitals, which will be integrated into the 11pm service on New Year's Eve. I am sure this will be an enjoyable and different way to see in the New Year.

The food and wine in this region were excellent and, had I not returned to England at that stage, it might have been necessary to play Bossi's *Etude Symphonique* at least twice daily to restore my waistline!

By Tuesday evening I was in St Albans attending a concert given, as part of the International Organ Festival, by Brecon Baroque and Lorenzo Ghielmi, a member of the jury. Their stylishly played programme contained works by Vivaldi, Frescobaldi and Bach and offered the opportunity to hear Vivaldi's Concerto for Violin and Organ, RV 541.

Wednesday took me to the Oundle Festival. In a delightfully conceived idea, the evening started with a concert in St Mary's, Woodnewton, given by the choir of Jesus College, Cambridge and William Whitehead, who, as some of you may be aware, has instigated the Orgelbüchlein project by commissioning short pieces from contemporary composers based on the chorales which Bach never got round to setting in the original collection. He played some of the Bach preludes and some of the new pieces, which were fascinating to hear, but, I suspect, not easy to play. These were interspersed with a wide range of motets sung by the choir. Following a break for dinner (Glyndebourne comes to Northamptonshire!), the late night concert was given (entirely unaccompanied) by the very polished choir in St Leonard's, Apethorpe.

On Friday evening I attended the Finals of the IOF Interpretation Competitions back in St Albans. The four finalists were Anne-Victoria Baltrusch (Germany), Benjamin Sheen (UK), Seon-A Mun (South Korea) and Simon Thomas Jacobs (UK). This was a long evening, with each performer allowed a 45 minute programme, but with players of such a high calibre it passed quickly. Outstanding performances for me were Anne-Victoria's *BACH "Hommage à..."* by Zsigmond Szathmáry, Benjamin's *Andante espressivo* from Elgar's *Sonata in G*, Seon-A's Reger (*Halleluja! Gott zu loben*) and Simon's Messiaen (*Verset pour la Fête de la Dédicace*) and a beautifully controlled performance of Bach's *Sonata No. 4*. The results were announced at about 11.30pm, with Simon gaining the First and Audience prizes and Benjamin and Anne-Victoria joint Second Prize – a fitting conclusion to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Festival. Details of the other awards can be found on the Festival's website: <http://www.organfestival.com>

And so ended a wonderfully diverse week in which I had the opportunity to hear so many different styles of both organs and organists.

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