

LONDON ORGAN DAY 2014

Stars and Stripes
St George's Hanover Square

“Cacophonous nonsense” and a “squandering of talent” according to some commentators – this year's London Organ Day at St George's Hanover Square on 1st March certainly raised the hackles. Billed as the *Brave New World of American Organ Music*, it began in a fairly traditional manner with an entertaining introduction to the church and the 2012 organ (US builders Richards, Fowkes & Co) from Simon Williams, and a recital as part of the *RCO 150* series from eighteen-year-old Anthony Daly. US organist Kimberly Marshall had been asked to follow this with some early American organ music, on the little 1998 Goetze & Gwynn organ – she apologized that “the colonies” didn't produce much organ music in the 18th century, but nevertheless entertained us with sparkling performances of music from Francis Hopkinson's *Colonial Organ Book*. Hopkinson styled himself “the first American composer” – his *Lessons* contains mainly arrangements of music from European sources and popular music, and we are not sure, said Kimberly, whether he did the arrangements himself, or simply copied them.

Tom Bell then made the case for the next piece on the agenda – “you may not think you like long, loud pieces of avant garde music, but you will think this is amazing” he announced, introducing William Bolcom's *Black Host*, for organ, percussion and tape. It was certainly long, and loud, with a demented boogie-woogie middle section which became overwhelmed by the noises of the tape, and a 30 second diatonic chord at the end.

After lunch James McVinnie gave us another skirmish with the avant garde – pieces by US composer Nico Muhly (b. 1981) – including *Reverend Mustard his installation prelude* (Reverend Mustard being, of course, Rector of St Mary the Virgin, East Barnet).

Hackles could then relax a bit, while Matthew C Glandorf took to the chancel with a choir of eight, in performances of American choral music – from William Billings, David Hurd (*A Stable Lamp is Lighted*, now, I think, on many choir directors' wish list), Calvin Hampton (“Ravel meets Paul McCartney”), Charles Ives, and teacher of Ives, Horatio Parker, who died in 1919. Matthew is Artistic Director of Choral Arts Philadelphia, as well as an organist and educator. US choral music started in the English west gallery choir tradition, he explained, exported to America with the Puritans. It developed its own traditions: in particular shape note singing, or Sacred Harp singing, now enjoying a revival in the US amongst the young (and also in Germany). The shape of the note indicates the pitch – the music is mostly pentatonic – and it's a good way of getting amateur singers singing well, quickly. We were invited to join in, and did.

Finally Ann Elise Smoot (born in the USA) gave us a recital of American organ music. As she said in her programme notes, she tried to provide a slice of some of the many different music cultures and outlooks that make up the patchwork quilt that is “American Music” including Barber, Philip Glass, Dan Locklair, Calvin Hampton again, and my own favourite from this recital, *Albarda* from *Flores del Desierto* by Pamela Decker – a formidable virtuoso organist and composer who is also Professor of Organ at the University of Arizona.

A great line-up of performers, some ear-popping moments: the day did what Tom Bell promised – provide an overview of the American organ scene in a few short hours. Those who would have preferred some good tunes can relax in the knowledge that next year's

London Organ Day promises *Transcripts and Edwardiana*, and will be held on 7th March 2015, at Methodist Central Hall.

Morwenna Brett



St George's Hanover Square
photo by Hilary Bailey

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THE EDOA AT HARPENDEN (AGM Event)

The Association's meeting in Harpenden on Saturday 8th February proved a happy and well-attended occasion despite the appalling weather. Our thanks to Secretary Michael for his tight but in the event perfect timing throughout the day. On arrival at St Nicholas' Church we were greeted with afternoon tea and were joined by the Revd Dr Dennis Stamps, the affable American Rector, who welcomed us more formally at the AGM which followed, expressing his appreciation of us organists and our world.

The AGM was attended by 15 members and several guests. The President's elegant report recalled the many events of our Golden Jubilee year, some shared with other organisations, many home-grown. We remembered the loss during the year of long-standing members Chris Garrett and Alan Beaumont; and Terence warmly thanked the office holders and committee for their fruitful labours on our behalf. The Secretary outlined the programme for 2014 and elections were duly held.

The Treasurer's accounts were adopted, together with his proposed increase in members' subscription (the first increase since 1993) by £5 to £15, unanimously agreed despite some light-hearted discussion on how we were going to spend it. After meeting the 75 members' IAO capitation fee of £294 and other direct costs, the year ended with a modest overall cash deficit of £15. The AGM minutes will soon be available online.

Then, over to the church for Peter Hopkins' recital, for which we were joined by members of the congregation and other local music-lovers, an audience of some seventy, quite remarkable in view of the weather outside. Peter is in his second year as director of music and organist of the church. The organ, situated with the choir at the west end, is a 3-manual, 40 speaking stop instrument by Binns/Walker/HNB in a case re-designed by Herbert Norman.

The programme of 'Organ Music by the Romantic Greats' was slightly unusual in its balance. Commencing with a bravura performance of Franck's *Choral in A minor*, it was dominated by Liszt's colossal *Ad nos* Fantasy, the rest of the music comprising mostly lighter fare, concluding with *The Swan* and *The Blue Danube*, no doubt strategically placed to follow Liszt's 33-minute offering. A notable feature of the playing was its almost pianistic virtuosity. Peter very briefly introduced each piece and I quite liked his description of Brahms' A flat minor fugue as 'German counterpoint in an inconvenient key'. The collection of £272 was shared between the church's current organ appeal and the EDOA.

Then out into the cold for the short walk to the local Prezzo, the last of our party of 21 arriving at seven o'clock as planned. Dinner was a three-course Italian meal, inexpensive but enjoyable; everyone chatted and we had a pleasant room to ourselves with two long tables. Away by nine, ready for Sunday.

Eric Pask