

New Year's Eve in Hamburg

As mentioned in my previous article, I had planned to be in this extremely musical city for New Year's Eve and the December edition of 'Kirchenmusik in Hamburg' listed no fewer than thirteen concerts, recitals and services taking place between 5.00 and 11.30pm that day!

For the earlier part of the evening I chose to return to the Jacobikirche and its magnificent Arp Schnitger organ, which, it is worth noting, is probably the largest baroque organ in northern Europe and also played a pivotal role in the organ reform movement beginning in 1925, as a series of conferences taking place at historical organ sites in Germany and Alsace was inaugurated there.

My friend and I arrived fifteen minutes early for the recital by the resident organist, Rudolf Kelber, and found ourselves queuing to get into the church – I estimated that there were at least four hundred people in the audience! The programme included a set of variations in D minor and some musical clock pieces by C P E Bach, which showed off a good many of the organ's wonderful smaller scale sounds, and works by J S Bach, including the fifth Trio Sonata and a group of chorale preludes to mark the turn of the year. This instrument sounds, like so many other Arp Schnitger instruments, approximately a tone sharp to modern concert pitch and is tuned in a modified meantone temperament, rendering certain keys too extreme to play in. Kelber therefore finished his programme by performing the Bach Prelude and 'Wedge' Fugue in E minor transposed into D minor. (A few years ago I heard him similarly play the B minor Prelude and Fugue transposed into A minor.)

Following some hearty German food, I returned to St Katharinen and Flentrop's spectacular historical reconstruction of its organ (as detailed in my previous article) for the 11pm Watchnight service. This incorporated Andreas Fischer's fifth recital in his complete Bach cycle. Again, we arrived with time to spare and found the large church packed (it was impossible to estimate numbers due to its shape) and finished up joining others squatting on the sanctuary steps. This was an unusual format, as it felt not quite like either a service or a recital. Fischer began by playing the Toccata and Fugue in D minor (BWV 565). This was followed by a bible reading, some seasonal chorales (sung by the church's choir) interspersed with the relevant preludes, the 'Gig' Fugue in G, a sermon, the 'Nun danket alle Gott' chorale and prelude, some prayers, the Prelude and Fugue in D (BWV 532) and then a short silence to wait for the chimes of midnight. The service concluded with saying the 'Vater unser' and everyone singing the chorale 'Grosser Gott, wir loben dich'. This was a somewhat different and interesting experience.

The service and walk back across the city to our hotel were punctuated by many Hamburgers letting off fireworks anywhere and everywhere in the streets – they seem to have a relaxed attitude to the health and safety implications of this, but everyone was obviously enjoying themselves and it certainly made for a free spectacle.

I was left wondering whether such musical events, if staged in Britain on New Year's Eve, would generate anywhere near such overwhelming support.

Roger Carter



Fireworks in Hamburg