

Royal Festival Hall Organ Gala Launch Concert – a personal impression

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There was a buzz in the air when we arrived at the Royal Festival Hall for the Organ Gala Launch Concert on Tuesday 18th March – a real feeling that organ history was being made, and I was going to be a part of it! The sense of anticipation and excitement was increased by seeing so many organists that I know – either personally or at least by sight and reputation – amongst the crowd in the foyer prior to this sell-out event.

I'm not sure quite what I was expecting, but I was a little disappointed that the concert did not begin with, or include, any grand speeches or ribbon-cutting ceremonies. Surely somebody of sufficient grandeur could have been recruited to declare the organ open? Instead the concert started, and progressed, much like any other, save for an introduction from the Radio 3 presenter, Sara Mohr-Pietsch, as the concert was to be broadcast live.

The concert programme struck me in advance as a curious mix of genres and styles, as well as organists (John Scott, Isabelle Demers, David Goode and Jane Parker Smith, in order of appearance). However, I was open and receptive to the idea of something different from your typical organ recital. Indeed, I ended up spending much of the first half on the edge of my seat – and not just because I was sitting so far back!

I particularly enjoyed the pieces where the organ was combined with other instruments, such as the *Grand Choeur Dialogué* by Gigout, arranged for brass and organ, which opened the concert, and Bach's *Concerto in D* for keyboard, arranged for trumpet and organ by the trumpeter Alison Balsom. I had mixed feelings about the two commissions, which featured voices as well as the organ. I rather enjoyed Sir Peter Maxwell Davies' *A Wall of Music* (an apt title!), though mainly as a result of hearing him talk about it so eloquently at the pre-concert talk in the Queen Elizabeth Hall. However, Sir John Tavener's *Monument for Beethoven*, at the start of the second half, made me think of the film *Groundhog Day*, as the piece alternated between chord-bashing on the organ and ethereal singing by the choir, in a repetitive and seemingly endless manner, but I guess it must have come to an end eventually.

The solo organ pieces were a curious selection. I was bemused by the absence of any British solo organ pieces for this most British of instruments. Instead we had three French pieces (by Gigout, Franck and Dupré, played by John Scott, Jane Parker Smith and Isabelle Demers respectively), three transcriptions (two of movements from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by Mendelssohn, played by Isabelle Demers, and one of Liszt's *Mephisto Waltz No. 1*, played by Jane Parker Smith) and a token piece of Bach (*Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor, BWV 582*, played by John Scott). David Goode didn't get to play a solo piece, which was a shame.

Of the solo players, I was most impressed by the young Canadian organist Isabelle Demers. I hadn't even heard of her prior to the concert! She played all three of her pieces from memory and particularly impressed during the Mendelssohn *Scherzo*, which required her to change several of the stops manually in order to achieve the many and varied sounds that were required. Indeed, the audience spontaneously burst into applause at the end of the *Scherzo*, even though she had another movement from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* still to play.

I must confess that, after the excitement of the first half, I struggled through the second half, and was more relieved than sad when it was all over. Whether that was because the pieces were not so interesting in the second half, or because my attention span for organ recitals is set, by custom and practice, at about one hour, I don't know. Certainly there didn't seem to

be so much variety in the second half, and by that stage I had a pretty good idea of how the organ was sounding. Maybe, having survived the Tavener première, I was mesmerised and distracted by Jane Parker Smith's glittering outfit, hanging down the back of the organ bench and obscuring the view of her feet, and by the time Isabelle Demers reappeared to conclude the concert with Dupré's *Prelude & Fugue in B (Op.7, No.1)* it was nearly my bedtime. The concert, which had started at 7.30pm, concluded at 10pm.

I never heard the RFH organ in its previous incarnation – my interest in the organ was born after it was removed. Although I'd heard many criticisms of the instrument – and of the Hall – the refurbishment of both seems to have been something of a success, and I very much look forward to hearing the organ again in the future – though perhaps in a more conventional recital. My conclusion? That the organ restoration has been 9 years and £2.3m well-spent!

Michaela Cottee

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A recollection of the RFH organ opening in 1954

A few months ago William McVicker invited some of us to note down what we may have remembered of the 1954 opening of the organ at the Royal Festival Hall. Having seen David Hemsley's piece in the current issue of BIOS Reporter about the recent reopening of the RFH organ, with a passing reference to its original opening, I thought that my own recollection of that significant occasion sixty years ago might be of some interest.

I was present at the four recitalists' joint recital on Saturday the 27th March 1954 but heard the previous Wednesday's opening concert only on the radio. Even so, I well remember how refreshing I thought the Poulenc concerto and how absolutely delightful the registration.

It was the Saturday afternoon recital which seems to have remained a favourite memory for most of us who were around then. In some respects I have always recalled that Saturday event quite clearly but much detail of the performances now eludes me. After William's invitation I quite deliberately avoided reading any reviews from the '50s or looking again at *Baroque Tricks*; so what follows really is myself on that afternoon in 1954. (I had, though, spent time with Downes during my years at St Peter's Cranley Gardens and had learnt a lot during two unforgettable days with him in 1947 when he was working with Mr Davidson to transform the old Bishop at Brompton Oratory - the organ subsequently lost by fire, which led to his designing the Oratory's present thoroughgoing 'Downes' instrument.

There was a long build-up to the RFH organ's eagerly-awaited but delayed unveiling in 1954, including papers of one sort and another including the solemn piece by the editor of 'The Organ', endless discussion, the type-written stop-lists passed around organists' associations (in my case Gordon Phillips' London Organists' Guild), the correspondence in The Telegraph arising from Martin Cooper's 1950 article and of course Vaughan Williams' famous broadside in The Sunday Times the following year. The palpable excitement and tension as we assembled in the Hall that March were hardly to be wondered at.

The programme's opening group, played by the designer himself and comprising Sweelinck's 'Mein junges Leben' variations and RVW's Three Preludes on Welsh Hymn Tunes, was beautiful, and fascinating on this new instrument. One could see why Downes had programmed as he did - to demonstrate the organ's ability to handle authentically as wide a variety of repertoire as reasonably possible, and to include RVW, our then most distinguished

composer and this organ's foremost critic, as representative of the current English school. Nevertheless, one couldn't help feeling that this may not have been the most effective curtain-raiser on such an occasion. Indeed, afterwards in the Underground, we ran into my paperwork tutor, a pre-War Alexandra Palace recitalist, who appeared positively apoplectic at this 'missed opportunity'.

After the Vaughan Williams came Arnold Richardson's Vierne and the Bach D major Prelude and Fugue. I'm sure this was the occasion when Richardson, the only one of the four players who turned over for himself, sent a loose page flying across the stage but continued unperturbed, no doubt getting extra applause.

By now I'd had opportunity to form a view on what had probably been my main interest – the style and success of the organ's principal choruses. Would they be beautifully balanced with scintillating upperwork; or exceedingly brilliant; or strong and masterful as had been expected of the 4th manual 'Schultz' design afterthought; and how would they handle the much publicised acoustic, a subject aired quite extensively in the papers, featuring Malcolm Sargent, acoustician Hope Bagenal and the gun they used to test the hall's sound! In fact, what came across to me at that first hearing was dry, unexceptional – none of the things I had anticipated except the then general desire for clarity, which was certainly present but hardly new. I listened in vain, by the way, for the 32' metal. (We were seated about half-way back in the stalls.)

The programme's most immediate tonal impact was the effect of Louis-Eugène Rochesson's big reeds in Susi Jeans' Schmidt – shattering was my word for them at the time. Uninhibited, fierce, raw; exciting too, of course. I think these were the first stops in the organ later to be modified. She also played Bach's first trio sonata.

And then, perhaps in its way the most joyous moment of the afternoon: George Thalben-Ball's arrival at the console. He marched across the stage to the warmest applause. Here, we thought, was normality at last. He sat, looked around and decided to adjust the position of the bench. Both feet down on the pedals. But full organ had been left on, apparent to all in the hall from the large red warning light at the console. The result – again, shattering, only this time far more so than Lady Jeans, Schmidt and the French reed voicer had earlier achieved between them. GTB threw his arms up in the air in mock horror and the house erupted into laughter and cheers. The evening's tension was at last released and everyone was delighted. Had it been deliberate? I've heard several views and years later, when George was dining with us after an Enfield recital, I asked him. Either he dodged the question or I've simply forgotten his reply. Sorry.

GTB's Reubke Sonata was rapturously received but actually I thought it not up to his standard. He has said that the previous player's piston settings were not helpful. Certainly a later performance here was thought superior.

Well, that was sixty years ago and over that period we had enormous, if not consistent, opportunity to hear the organ in the hands of a great variety of organists. While of course played in a number of ways, it always retained its own unique character. Now, with the hall's more favourable acoustic, in which we all rejoice, to me at least that character seems less pronounced.

Eric Pask