

'The Rise of the English Choral Tradition'

a talk by Peter Smith

Thursday March 13th at St Mary's, Ware

Those members of EDOA who found their way round to the back of St Mary's Church to the modern church hall were surprised to find a sizeable audience already seated. These were invited members of the church, who were obviously keen to hear what their acting Director of Music had to say about the history of choral music.

In England, Peter pointed out, we are apt to take for granted the plethora of opportunities to hear good choral singing, whether it be in cathedrals or concert halls and performed by professional or amateur choirs. But it was not always so. Peter's talk traced the history of sacred and secular singing in England from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century. A second talk will cover the remaining times up to the present day.

Singing, Peter said, might be an expression of emotion, or it might have the practical purpose of making the voice carry further. In early times singing might be encountered in churches or monasteries, at work, in aristocratic houses or at court. At every stage Peter illustrated the music he was talking about by playing examples. Orlando Gibbons' 'Cries of London' was used to depict the cries of street traders. Henry VIII's 'Pastime with good company' was an example of music at court. No account of the history of English music would be complete without a mention of 'Sumer is icumen in', the only piece of music in six parts written before the fifteenth century.



Peter went on to discuss madrigals, bawdy songs, verse anthems and the large scale choral works of Handel. In churches, Peter pointed out, the more elaborate music was sung by professional musicians; congregations sang metrical psalms, led by the parish clerk. In the eighteenth century volunteer choirs started in the west galleries of some churches, but in general the eighteenth century was a low point in church music, which was held in low regard

by clergy and gentry. Peter's next talk will show the upturn in musical standards which occurred in the nineteenth century with increased availability of transport links.

Of course most of the facts were not new to us. But Peter is to be congratulated on providing an interesting and entertaining evening through his choice of music and his engaging style of delivery.

Rosemary Knight

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Talk by Dr Peter St John Stokes

'Improvisation: Real Music or Ephemeral Trivia?'

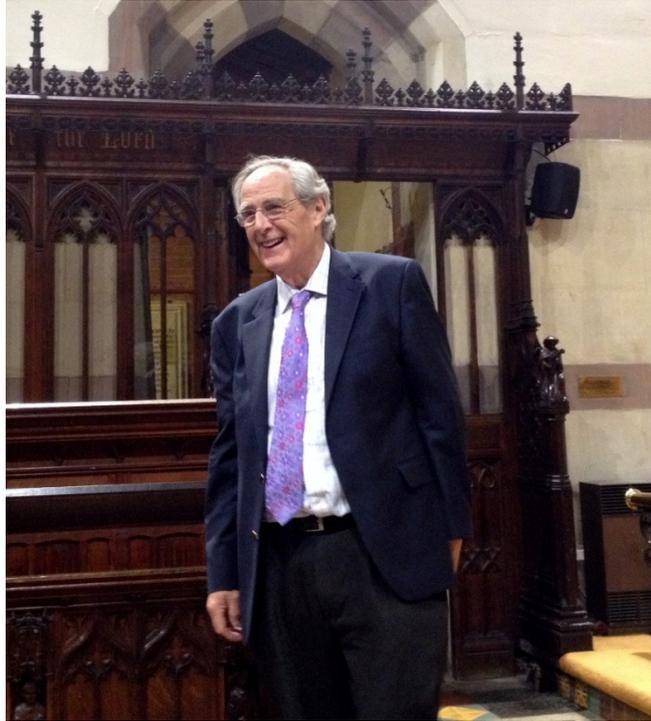
A dozen of us gathered in the beautiful surroundings of Barnet Church at the end of a sunny day on 15th May to hear Dr Peter St John Stokes' talk on Improvisation. The 3-manual organ, built originally by Hill, then rebuilt by Rothwell in 1924 and Mander in 1967 and 1987, served Peter well with some lovely solo stops and an impressive full organ, especially as enjoyed from the choir stalls.

Peter showed how much of the earlier music, before printed music became widely available, was improvisatory in nature. Bach's method of composing was like slow-motion improvising. With the arrival of great pianists like Liszt, virtuosity became incorporated in the main music so that improvisation arguably declined as a separate art form. Also, the German notion of 'Das Werk' gained ground: Beethoven is God and real music is the performance of a set work.

Peter began with a harmonised version of the Tonus Peregrinus melody followed by Bach's Fugue on the Magnificat to demonstrate the close relationship between improvisation and 'real' music. He also alluded to a seventeenth century painting by Jan Steen, 'The Harpsichord Lesson', in which there is no music evident and indeed no music stand on the instrument, implying that improvisation was the norm.

Peter continued to illustrate his well-researched talk with a melody by Sweelinck (1562-1621), showing how the variations could be built up with increasingly subtle and densely-textured harmonies. He next turned to a Partimento (Division) Fugue, demonstrating the seventeenth and eighteenth century practice of improvising melodies above a written bass. This was followed by extensive improvisations upon the Ave Maria (antiphon) plainchant ending with a complex fugue. Finally, Terence Atkins (President) was asked to choose a plainchant melody at random from a large collection for Peter to improvise upon, which the speaker duly did with great skill and to an appreciative group.

Peter alluded to 'The Improvisation Companion', a book written by his former teacher Naji Hakim, who succeeded Messiaen at La Trinité, Paris. The talk showed clearly the importance of improvisation to the creative activity of composers. An interesting supplement to the talk, perhaps on a future occasion, could be the role of today's great improvisors on the organ such as Olivier Latry and David Briggs, and the place of improvisation both in worship and in concert performance.



Dr Peter St John Stokes at St John's Barnet
Photo by Morwenna Brett

Meanwhile, Peter deserves our thanks for an erudite and well-planned analysis of early improvisation and its supreme importance. Thanks too to Terence Atkins for hosting the evening in the church where he is Organist and Choirmaster and to Morwenna for providing refreshments.

Colin Wharton