

Past Events

The Annual General Meeting Saturday 7th February 2015 at St Mary's, Ponsbourne

Within minutes of our arrival at St Mary's, Ponsbourne in the late afternoon of the first Saturday in February we were confronted with a tea so plentiful and sumptuous that it took, in due course, several calls to summon us from the combined pleasures of food, drink and convivial chatter to the taking of our pews for the formal part of proceedings.

Despite the occasional rattling of a teacup or stifled hiccup, this next part of the evening proceeded swiftly and efficiently through its reports and elections to its customary climax – the recital of organ music.

This year's recitalist was long-term EDOA affiliate and current committee member Robert Evans. Long recognised as a fine musician with a penchant for seeking out lesser-known corners of the organ repertoire, Robert certainly did not disappoint in his choice of programme. He and I found agreement many years ago in regretting the fact that so many organ recitalists – including many of the world's greatest players – have a tendency to overlook the digestive limitations of their listeners by stuffing programmes full of one long (and usually serious) work after another with little or no respite. This is akin to serving up a seven or eight course meal consisting entirely of suet puddings, dumplings, pies and pastries – often with overpoweringly soporific effect. I must confess to a habit of snoozing through hefty chunks of such offerings!

No such criticism could possibly be made of Robert's chosen programme for this occasion, however, for, apart from fairly substantial opening and closing pieces, the rest consisted of a delightful selection of more slender items.

The sense that this was a recital full of original touches was awakened from the outset by a sprightly performance of Bach's *Fantasia in G* (BWV 572), during which a couple of ciphers, first on C, later on E, added some extra harmonic piquancy to that envisaged by the composer. The following *Fugue in G minor* by Reincken (he who was astonished at the young Bach's improvisatory powers) included in its subject a series of quick repeated notes – as if warning the wickedly malfunctioning instrument not to misbehave again – or else!

The Tomkins *Voluntary* that came next was quite delightful – as is virtually all of this undersung composer's output – and allowed us to hear gentle 8 foot flue sound, and with a rest from pedal tone! Martin How's music, too, is always worth hearing, and his *Elegy*, a heartfelt memorial to Gerald Knight, has a warm romanticism and an improvisatory feel to it in the best traditions of composers from Stanford and Howells onwards.

A *Priere in D flat* by René Vierne, lesser-known younger brother of the famous Louis, proved a worthy little offering, especially since we were reminded beforehand of the writer's bold assertion of his Notre-Dame *titulaire* position during his sibling's absence on tour in America – an impertinence not appreciated by Louis!

Next came three pieces with a 'bell' connection, but from three hugely different composers: A *Carillon* by Louis Couperin (uncle of the more famous Francois), another of the same name by the Newcastle-on-Tyne based composer Arthur Milner, and lastly *Cloches* by

Marcel Fournier. The Fournier is a most unusual piece, with outer sections (framing a brief Aria for solo oboe) consisting entirely of a sequence of chords so designed that, when played on a four-foot flute (or, in the case of this recital, a gentle four-foot principal,) they produce overtones suggesting very strongly the sound of tubular bells.

Continuing his 'bet you've never heard this' theme, Robert played next a beautiful *Petit Canon* by Nadia Boulanger, formerly famous as a teacher and as one of the early 20th century pioneers in the revival of early music. Then, just before some well-known and substantial Mendelssohn, the recitalist slipped in a short piece of his own: the Robert Evans *Divertimento* did indeed divert its listeners with its whimsical and light-hearted bubbiness.

In conclusion, the fine first movement of Mendelssohn's *Sonata No.3 in A* brought this most enjoyable recital to a fitting end, even if the shortage of tone available in the lower register (due to the in-built restrictions of this historic instrument) did rob the texture of its wonted fullness in some places.

This welcome opportunity to hear again, and in such expert hands (and feet), the 1858 Walker organ so beautifully restored by Mander was warmly appreciated by the audience of EDOA members plus some of the regular Ponsbourne church community.

Our sincere and grateful thanks must go to Paul Minchinton, Canon Pauline Higham and the people of St Mary's for making us so welcome, with corporal as well as cultural sustenance.

After the recital, about twenty of us just about found the will and the energy to stagger next door to the 'Coach and Horses' hostelry, where a leisurely meal and much further lively conversation were enjoyed by the assembled company.

Now, where will next year's jamboree take place, I wonder?

Peter Smith