

St Albans International Organ Festival 2015

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The International Organ Festival Society (IOFS) runs the St Albans International Organ Festival every two years. It is twofold: there are two competitions running (the Interpretation Competition and the Tournemire Prize for Improvisation). Candidates have to be under the age of 33. As well as the competitions there are concerts every day (more than one on some days), some, but not all, connected with the organ. It was good to make acquaintance again with David Titterington, the Artistic Director of the Festival, whom NHOA members met when we visited the Dukes Hall at the Royal Academy of Music to play the new organ there in February 2014.

Competitions

For the preliminary round candidates had submitted recordings which were judged anonymously. Successful candidates went forward to the quarter-finals (17 for interpretation and 6 for improvisation, from Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, Russia, South Korea, UK and USA). At the semi-final there were 8 and 4 candidates respectively, and 4 and 2 at the final. The jury was composed of seven distinguished organists from Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, South Korea, UK and USA (the UK juror being James O'Donnell).

Five organs were used: the four-manual Cathedral organ (Harrison & Harrison, 1962 and restored by them in 2009), the three-manual organ in St Peter's Church, built by Manders in 2006 (visited by NHOA in 2007), the two-manual Peter Collins organ in St Saviour's, built in 1989 in the style of Andreas Silbermann, and this year for the first time, the organ at Christ Church, Spitalfields, originally built by Richard Bridge in 1735 and restored by William Drake earlier this year. The fifth organ was to have been another new organ by Peter Collins but unfortunately it was not completed in time due, I understand, to illness. The idea was that that organ should be used in the final round of the interpretation competition, which included a Handel Organ concerto; but instead they had to use a small box organ. (Traditionally there is an exhibition of small organs at the Festival). The works set for the interpretation quarter-final included Sweelinck (variations on Est-ce Mars), Bruhns, Bach (Concerto in A, BWV 593) and a new work commissioned by the IOFS, Volcano by Paul Patterson, inspired by the eruption of the Bardabunga volcano in Iceland in the autumn of 2014. (At least you can pronounce Bardabunga, unlike Eyjafjallajökull.) Paul's composition was written out conventionally on three staves with precise directions as to registration, unlike some of his earlier works which used unusual aleatoric graphic notation. Volcano seemed to me to make more sense when I was looking at the score, and Paul was kind enough to lend me a copy. I said that it seemed a bit of a brute to play and he replied that it was meant to be challenging. At the semi-final the set works included movements from Lionel Rogg's Incantations set for organ and percussion (marimba, glockenspiel, side drum, woodblocks, suspended cymbals, tamtam, set of orchestra bells and five timpani) and the two brilliant percussion players also deserved a prize, in my view.

The tasks set for the Tournemire prize included a number of pieces by Charles Tournemire himself and another piece by Paul Patterson, Games, commissioned for the IOFS in 1977. This piece was notated in graphical form so involved a great deal of improvisation. Another challenge, and one of the most exciting, was a three movement improvisation based on literary texts with improvised percussion (the same percussion instruments as in the Rogg piece but leaving out the timpani, so that there was only one player). The improvisers had a chance of discussion with the percussionist beforehand and one had the percussionist declaiming the first

line of the text (by Walt Whitman) at the start: "I hear the great drums pounding". The same player sang as part of his improvisation, a novel approach, I thought.

Concerts

And then there were the concerts: too many to describe in detail here, but including a memorable performance of Vaughan Williams' *Dona nobis pacem* and Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast* by the St Albans Bach choir; the three choirs' concert in which the cathedral choir was joined by the choirs of Westminster and Oxford Cathedrals and a smaller concert given by the choir of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, under their director of music, Geoffrey Webber, which featured the first performance of James Macmillan's *Noli Pater*, set for choir, organ and triplepipe, an ancestor of the bagpipe. There was to have been a lieder recital by Joan Rodgers but unfortunately she was taken ill and her place was taken by Elizabeth Watts, who won the 2007 Rosenblatt Recital Song Prize at the BBC Cardiff Singer of the World Competition among other awards. Elizabeth's programme consisted of songs by Schubert, Richard Strauss and Berlioz (*Les nuits d'été*). Elizabeth is a great singer: go to hear her whenever you can.

Winners

The winner of the Interpretation Prize was Johannes Zeinler of Austria. The second prize went to Davide Mariano of Italy, who also won the Peter Hurford Prize for the best performance of any piece by J S Bach. The Tournemire Prize for improvisation was won by a Frenchman, David Cassan. The Douglas May Award (for the best performance of a competition work in either the quarter- or semi-final rounds of either competition) was awarded to Thomas Gaynor of New Zealand. After all these male winners it is a pleasure to record that a female won the prize for the best performance of the commissioned work (Paul Patterson's *Volcano*): a Hungarian, Zita Nauratyill, who also won the audience prize for the most enjoyable performance. All these are names to look out for in the future.

John Mansfield