

Past Events

The Organists' Clinic with Roger Carter Saturday 14th May 2016

Past 'clinic' events have made this a much looked forward to event in the EDOA calendar. Although I hadn't been to one of these events before, Roger Carter took some of the 'church skills' sessions on 2015 RCO summer course that I attended, so I knew that I would find this session enjoyable and helpful.

The venue was St Mary's, Welywn, where we started rolling up from about 9.45, ready for a 10.00 start (which gave me time to run off and find breakfast).



Ashley at St Mary's Welwyn

Photo: Paul Minchinton

My first impressions when I saw the organ were that it looked very slick, 2-manuals with 27 stops (each division being well catered for), divisional and general pistons and a very neat console layout. From looking at the National Pipe Organ Register, a survey in 1952 reports there was a Gray and Davidson organ that had been destroyed by a fire which also severely damaged the chancel. This was then replaced (c. 1953) by a 1917 Hill, Norman & Beard organ, moved from a college chapel in Wandsworth. The organ was then rebuilt in 1977 by the Cambridge firm of Norman Hall & Sons. No reason is given for the decision to build the new Nicholson organ, finished in 1993, though Ted Sharp mentioned that there had been a flood and water had got into some pipework. The current Nicholson organ incorporates pipework from the old organ and the 1860 Hill organ of the former church of St Paul, Luton. The tonal scheme was devised by Denis Thurlow, the church and Eric Pask. Ted also mentioned that Peter Hurford had some involvement. Full details of the current specification, past organs and photos can be found at <http://www.npor.org.uk/NPORView.html?RI=D02664>.

Back to the event! There were seven of us participating, of all shapes, standards and sizes, plus a handful of spectators. Ted Sharp got the ball rolling by showing us the hymn 'God whose love is everywhere' (Christingle Praise) (tune by John Barnard, words by Timothy Dudley-Smith), while we all sang along. None of us had heard this hymn before but we quickly found it to be delightful. I find the last line of every verse ('praise the God of love') particularly satisfying; I seem to remember this section beginning with a 9th in the melody. This tune can be found in *Sing Praise: Hymns and Songs for Refreshing Worship and Common Praise*. It has also been recorded by the Southwark Cathedral Choir for their CD *Timeless Love*. Regarding the hymn play-over, Roger suggested using a heavier registration and we discussed the possibility of using the 'cut and paste' technique (where you play the first few bars of the hymn then play the last few bars). Ted then played No. 1 from 'Trois pièces galantes' by Denis Bédard, composed in 2013; a lovely piece of light music with enharmonic shifts towards the end that sent grins all around. Roger suggested a slightly quicker tempo with greater fluidity at moments of interest.

Morwenna was next and had brought along Cesar Franck's *Panis Angelicus* arranged for small choir, which she would be playing at the end of the month. The rest of us had great fun filling in the choir parts. Roger commented on how well Morwenna led the choir, then offered some advice on where to redistribute parts between the hands to make life easier and suggested soloing out the melody at the beginning. He then remarked that when one is accompanying the choir it is a good idea not to just use 8ft tone as it can make it difficult for the choir to pick out their notes. Legato pedalling, whether to release common notes (in this case Roger suggested not) and leaving out non-essential notes in order to aid organ management (a real life-saver!) were also discussed.

To sit down at a new organ and play J. S. Bach's Prelude in D major (BWV 532) is something few organists would be brave enough to do. Nevertheless Paul Minchinton did exactly this and had come with a couple of things he wanted help with (pedalling, registration, speeds and variation in notation). Roger suggested using all toes for the opening D major pedal scale and that the opening section be played on a plenum. He also suggested that the crotchet pulse of the opening becomes the minim pulse in the *alla breve* section. It is always interesting when the topic of organ shoes comes up. Roger mentioned that some organ shoes might make the difference when tackling this piece's awkward pedal passages. I marvel at organists (such as Daniel Roth) who play fiendishly difficult repertoire in their everyday chunky shoes. It is something I can't do.

David Hainsworth brought along the hymn tune 'All people that on earth do dwell' (Old Hundredth). Roger offered help with registration as well as how to tackle the fermatas. He also brought along François Couperin's 'Plein Chant du Premier Kyrie' (from the *Messe pour les Paroisses*). This was played really nicely and Roger offered some helpful tips with registration. I had always been quite baffled by these French settings with the tune in the pedal before I heard Matthew Martin demonstrate some on the organ of Keble College, Oxford, where the *Plein Jeu* is colossal! I think that these settings really need a 16ft manual stop, on this occasion this was not an option; otherwise the texture seems very sparse. Finding a registration which worked was quite tricky and involved borrowing a reed from the great for the pedal part, so that that the swell was left for the manual parts.

Charlie Jenkins explained that he had learnt the organ for five years before moving school but hadn't played since. He wanted to get a feel for the organ again and also some help with registration for 'Nimrod'. I thought Charlie demonstrated some very musical playing

(especially at the beginning). Roger gave advice on organ management, and using certain pistons. We hope that Charlie takes up the organ again!

Next was Emmeline Lambert who wanted some help with the Gloria and Agnus Dei from David Thorne's *Mass of St Thomas*. Emmeline explained that she had some organ lessons 50 years ago but has now decided to take it up again! Emmeline noticed that this organ was stiffer to play than the one she is used to. Roger explained that this was because the organ has a mechanical action and the manuals were coupled. He suggested a method of repeating chords and adding stops to get used to the action.

I was on last and had brought along a Fugue in f minor by Mendelssohn, which I am learning for an exam. Roger gave me some helpful advice on tempo, fingering and also told me a little about the piece's history, which to my shame I hadn't already researched. The piece I had learnt was the original 1839 version, however there is also a revised 1844 version which is quite different (the manuscript for the revised version is in the Bodleian library). There is an account from a lady who was a registrant at an organ recital Mendelssohn gave in 1840 at St Peter's Cornhill. She suggests the registration he used for this piece although it is possible that she could be confusing the fugue in f minor with the Prelude and Fugue in c minor, which he also played in this recital. More information on this and other pieces by Mendelssohn can be found in the book *Mendelssohn and the Organ* by Wm. A. Little.

Ashley Wagner

* * * * *

The London Organ Day

*from the Essex Organists' Association Newsletter, reprinted with permission
from the author*

Saturday 5th March saw the 30th annual London Organ Day take place at Southwark Cathedral. This year was entitled 'German Masters', with a particular focus on the works of Max Reger, and those composers who influenced, and were influenced by him.

The day began with coffee in the Cathedral refectory, before Tom Bell (artistic director) welcomed us all. He then handed over to Peter Wright, the Cathedral's Director of Music, whose presentation opened with a performance of J. S. Bach's Prelude in b minor BWV 544. The organ's brilliant chorus influenced Peter's opening choice, and he was keen to point out that Lewis was highly influenced by the German builder, Edmund Schulze. The organ is certainly 'foreign' in comparison to all the others that were being built at this period in history in the British Isles, and was a superb choice for showcasing music of the 'German Masters'.

Peter then continued with the Introduction and Passacaglia from Josef Rheinberger's Organ Sonata No. 8. Rheinberger's music is unjustly neglected, but Max Reger adored his work, and was known to be his second biggest musical influence after J. S. Bach.

Peter then spoke further about his work in the Cathedral, and that of the Cathedral Choir. Peter was keen to point out that, like Chelmsford Cathedral, there is no choir school. The boys and girls are sourced from a variety of schools in the area, which can have a defining impact on both rehearsal time and service content. Peter closed his talk with Max Reger's *Dankpsalm*, with its outrageous harmonization of the German Hymn, 'Lobe den Herrn'.

It was time for another coffee break, before Henry Fairs' recital. Henry is Head of Organ at Birmingham Conservatoire. He performed Max Reger's arrangement of J. S. Bach's Prelude and Fugue in b flat minor BWV 867 from the *Well Tempered Klavier*. This was just one example of the many keyboard works that Max Reger transcribed into symphonic masterpieces. This was followed by a short piece, 'Melodia', from Reger's set of 9 pieces, Op. 29. Henry was then due to play Felix Mendelssohn's Prelude and Fugue in d minor, but because of a stomach bug the previous week, he had to change this at the last minute. In its place, he performed J. P. E. Hartmann's 'Allegro Moderato' from the Sonata in g minor Op. 58. He followed this with Robert Schumann's '4 *Skizzen für den Pedalflügel*'. Originally composed for the Pedal Piano (a piano with pedals!), they are now traditionally performed on the organ. To finish, he performed Max Reger's mighty *Phantasie und Fuge* on BACH. Henry had described this piece as a handful before his recital, but his performance was utterly magnificent, and left us in good spirits going into the lunch break.

After lunch, Tom Bell presented a recital of music by Johannes Brahms. He opened with an incredibly virtuosic performance of the Prelude and Fugue in g minor, before following with four of the eleven chorale preludes Op. 122. These are very intimate works, and were the last compositions that Brahms worked on before his death in 1897. To finish, he presented the second Prelude and Fugue of Brahms, this time in a minor. His performance was met with rapturous applause.

The next presentation was given by Graham Barber, who gave an in-depth analysis of Reger's life and work. Graham discussed the moods and emotions that can be found in Reger's music, emphasizing these with musical examples. His life was full of highs and lows, and this is certainly reflected in his music. We then received a brief glimpse of Fugue State Films' latest project, a DVD on the life of Max Reger, in which we got to hear Reger playing his own music on one of the famous Welte Organ roll systems!

The final presentation before the coffee break came from Tom Daggett of St Paul's Cathedral. Tom runs various outreach projects in London and further afield, with the aim of introducing school children to the organ and its repertoire. Tom showed great enthusiasm for his work, and took great pride in sharing the results of the numerous projects he has undertaken over the past few years, which in turn has inspired thousands of young people to try the organ. He spoke of how he plans to develop his work on a national level and how he hopes that his work will encourage a new generation of organists.

Following the final coffee break of the day, we were all set for Bernhard Haas's much anticipated recital. Bernhard is Professor of Organ at the Munich Conservatory, and is a leading expert in the music of Reger. He certainly didn't disappoint. He opened with a thrilling performance of Reger's Second Organ Sonata, which was followed by the hauntingly beautiful Praeludium in e minor, from Reger's Op. 80. The performance was all the more impressive for his ability to circumnavigate the music, and the Southwark organ, with nothing more than a notebook to remind him of his registrations. He continued with César Franck's *Fantasie in A*, and two of Robert Schumann's Fugues on BACH. To finish, he performed Franz Schmidt's highly virtuosic Toccata in C major. This piece, in trio form, is hard enough on any organ, but those who know the Southwark organ well, will know that the distance between the console and pipes is significant enough to cause problems, even with the adjacent choir organ coupled through. His performance was nothing short of a miracle, and drew extended applause from the highly appreciative audience.

Next year's London Organ Day will be held at the Dutch Church, where we will learn about the music of Sweelinck, Buxtehude, Bach and Frescobaldi.

Richard Brasier

* * * * *