

Competing in the Northern Ireland International Organ Competition (NIIOC)

I heard about the NIIOC at some point during last year and ever since then it has been a goal of mine to enter. The competition is for organists under 21 and draws competitors from various countries. (This year we had performers from England, the Republic of Ireland, France, Germany and Poland!)

The deadline for applications was the 29th July and I had to submit two recordings of myself playing (unedited and totalling not more than 10 minutes). The pieces I chose were J. S. Bach's '*Dies sind die heil'gen zehn Gebot*' (BWV678) and Reger's Toccata in D minor (Op. 59 No. 5). I would later play these pieces in my competition programme along with the *Allegro Maestoso* (1st movement) from Vierne's 3rd Symphony for organ.

I found out that my application had been successful during my choir's residency at Worcester Cathedral at the beginning of August. I was absolutely delighted and was also informed that this year they had decided to accept 14 candidates (rather than the usual 12) due to the excellent quality of applications. I decided to prepare as thoroughly as I could and set about memorising my competition pieces. Though I did manage this, I decided to play with the music in front of me.

About a week before the competition the order of the performers was announced. I was No. 8 at 17:00, meaning that I closed the afternoon session. (There was also an evening session from 19:00–21:30.)

I got up early on Sunday 21st August to catch my 09:40 flight from London Heathrow to the George Best Belfast City Airport. I then caught 2 buses to Armagh, checked in and had to go straight to my practice session in a local church and then straight on to the Cathedral. Disaster! I had gone to the Catholic Cathedral in Armagh which is also called St Patrick's. Luckily the Anglican Cathedral is not far away and the competition organisers let me have my full practice time. Each candidate was only allowed 1 hour and 30 minutes at the console to set up their registration for their programme, run through their repertoire and consult with the page turner/registrant. The organ is a large 3 manual instrument and the specification can be found on the competition website at <http://www.niic.com/organs.html>. It was originally built in 1840 by JW Walker & Sons and was most recently restored in 1996 by Wells-Kennedy Partnership, Lisburn. The organ includes two 32ft pedal stops, a floating solo division (with an annihilatingly loud tuba) and a cimbelstern (I am very proud as I believe I was the only performer to use this). The only thing which I found disappointing about the instrument was the choir division as it is placed very far back in the organ case and speaks very poorly into the Cathedral. It was much, much quieter than the other divisions.

The opening concert was at 20:00 and included performances from the vocal group 'Dublin Voices' and the choir of the Jury, Martin Jean, who played Duruflé's amazing *Prélude, Adagio et Chorale Varié sur le 'Veni Creator'*. Dublin Voices are one of Ireland's leading professional chamber choirs and presented an eclectic programme of incredibly challenging repertoire. After this there was an opportunity to meet the rest of the competitors in a local pub. They were all extremely pleasant.

On the day of the competition (Monday 22nd August) I decided I was going to take things easy. I had a lie in, went to a local bakery for breakfast and did some practice in a local

church. I also decided that I was not going to listen to any performers before I had to be at the Cathedral. Everyone prepares differently for these things but I decided that I would be most relaxed if I had nothing to base my performance on. In the end I was largely pleased with my performance other than the odd mistake here and there. Talking to the judges and members of the audience after the feedback was very positive.

After I had performed I listened to most of the other performers. I cannot stress enough that the standard was mind-bogglingly high. Talking to other competitors who had competed before, they agreed that the standard this year was the highest it has ever been. The jury (Martin Jean, David Hill and David Adams) would later confirm this and said that in the end their verdict on the prizewinners came down to small details.

One competitor that particularly stood out for me was Raphael Oliver from the Paris Conservatoire. He played the Bach 'Great' A minor Prelude and Fugue from memory before playing two of Thierry Escaich's 'Poèmes'. The Escaich was one of the most incredible pieces for organ I have ever heard! You can listen online to a performance (though not his) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nVd2ld5HORU>. The tuba on the competition organ has a separate blower and there was one instant when he went to use it and discovered it had not been turned on (though this was rescued).

The prizes were as follows: 21-year-old Mona Rozdestvenskyte, a student at the Detmold Academy of Music, Germany, won 1st prize. 2nd and Bach Prize - Lukas Euler (Germany); 3rd Amelie Held (Germany); Highly Commended - William Fox (UK) and Makoto James (UK).

I had an amazing time competing although it was also very intense. I hope to enter for the competition again next year.

Ashley Wagner

Performance criteria (as specified in the programme): A balanced 20-minute programme, consisting of at least three pieces and including a major work of J.S. Bach (or part of). The programme should demonstrate stylistic and textural variety, and be of Diploma level. *Ed.*