

Past Events

- **AGM Recital by Andrew Parnell**
- **32nd London Organ Day**
- **The RCO Academy Summer School**

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AGM Recital by Andrew Parnell

On Saturday 17th February I attended Andrew Parnell's recital at St Francis Church, Welwyn Garden City, and what a pleasure it was! Andrew was warmly welcomed by Robin Coxon, the resident organist, and he then spoke briefly about his programme, which was to be around 50 minutes long with no interval. Most of the audience sat in the chancel facing west; the organ at St Francis' is at the west end of the church divided and raised on the north and south sides. The north section houses the Great and part Pedal and the south side has the Swell and remainder of the Pedal division. The mobile console is generally on the south side. The instrument speaks very boldly into the church, so for those of us sitting in the chancel a balanced sound experience was enjoyed. Full organ at closer quarters can be quite devastating, but putting some space between oneself and the pipework does make for a more pleasing experience.

I've been involved in the music making at St Francis' over two spells for nearly 20 years so I know the instrument well, but I was entirely spellbound by some of the sounds and registration changes Andrew made, and got out of the instrument! Robin mentioned to me later that very heavy demands were made of a number of channels of divisional and general piston settings, and what Andrew achieved in terms of colour and drama from an albeit large two manual organ was remarkable.

The programme started and ended with passacaglias – Buxtehude to begin with, and Rheinberger to finish. Brisk tempo, exemplary articulation and bright registration came with the Buxtehude – an excellent start to the recital and showing contrasting choruses on Great and Swell to good effect. Vierne's *Adagio* (from the third symphony) contrasted very nicely and Andrew produced some delicious effects with the swell strings, and, particularly enjoyable for me, the Great 4' flute played an octave lower. Three movements from Ridout's *Canticle of the Rose* followed – a work obviously close to Andrew's heart and written for the dedication of the Rose window in the north transept of St Albans Abbey during Andrew's time as assistant organist there. Again, the colours and contrasts that Andrew coaxed from the St Francis' organ during the three movements were so impressive! Finally we had the pleasure of Rheinberger's 8th Sonata – a work written in 1883, and one of twenty sonatas, all of which are in different keys. There were to be 24 in total (covering all the key signatures), but alas, he ran out of time! As with all his music, the sonata is very romantic and challenging in places. Putting aside minor personal issues relating to his fugue writing, the sonata is hugely successful and hangs together really well when performed in its entirety. The individual movements are very effective as works in their own right too. The Passacaglia was wonderful – Andrew pulled us along with exciting crescendos and diminuendos, tempo changes and some delicious registrations, culminating in the final entry on full organ (including the posaunes 8' and 4' coupled, and the big brother on the pedal). The effect was cataclysmal in the best sense of the word! What a

dramatic end to the recital. The organ had been tuned a few days earlier, but sadly, some of the ranks had suffered a little during the evening due to the high temperature in the church – but this did not detract from what, for me, was a hugely enjoyable evening. Thank you Andrew, and please come again!

Richard Harrison

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**32nd London Organ Day
Saturday, 3rd March 2018
Notre Dame de France, Leicester Place, London**

A good number of participants braved the adverse weather conditions and were greatly rewarded for their efforts. A big thank you to all the contributors who gave up their day to provide an excellent day of talks, demonstrations and recitals.

Tom Bell greeted us in his relaxed style and was followed by a very comprehensive description and demonstration of the organ's capabilities by the *Organiste Titulaire*, Duncan Middleton.

[In 1986-7 the 1955 Walker organ was overhauled, tonally reconstructed and enlarged by B. C. Shepherd & Son of Edgware. The console was refitted with stop knobs replacing the horseshoe stop key layout. The original Gern stops were identified and other second-hand French stops were added, including some by Cavallé-Coll. Other stops were replaced by better second-hand ranks, and tonal additions were made to all departments including 32ft flue and reed stops, and a Chamade reed. Most reed ranks were re-voiced in the French style by Keith Bance, who also assisted with action work.] (*pnms.co.uk*)

William Whitehead then gave an excellent recital, including a variety of transcriptions of orchestral works and original pieces for the organ. It was particularly fascinating to hear one of the *Orgelbüchlein* project commissions by Loïc Mallié.

Gerald Brooks' Masterclass on Improvisation with two students from the Birmingham Conservatoire was an exemplary model of a well-thought-out presentation. We all learnt a lot. The final *pièce de résistance* was a duet between the two students, who managed to swap sides several times!

Jonathan Allsopp then gave a very clear presentation on how to approach Messiaen's music, aided by Tom's practical demonstrations.

Newsround then followed – a good idea and I think we were all inspired to help with the *On Organ Fund*, which exists for the purpose of supporting the provision and restoration of pipe organs in the British Isles, as well as any other educational projects. Both speakers (Alan Thurlow and Tom Daggett) conveyed a great deal of enthusiasm for the tasks with which they are involved.

The final recital by Thomas Ospital (Organiste Titulaire of Saint-Eustache, Paris) was magnificent. What a gifted player! The *Trois Danses* by Jehan Alain was a *tour de force*,

followed by an improvisation of monumental creativity. We were then even given an encore in contrasting mood. (Apologies, but the title eluded me!)

I am certainly very much looking forward to next year's London Organ Day in Christ Church, Spitalfields.

Ruth Lewis

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The RCO Academy Summer School – a personal reflection

The annual summer school for organists started over 20 years ago, as part of the St Giles Organ School teaching programme under the inspired leadership of Anne Marsden Thomas. This residential course is based at St Giles, Cripplegate, but many other local churches nearby are also used for teaching purposes and for student concerts. In recent years RCO Academy has taken over the organisation of the course. It has retained Anne's successful formula – individually tailored timetables which allow each student to create the course they want or need in a friendly and nurturing atmosphere. This year the course director is Simon Williams. EDOA members will appreciate that both Anne and Simon are past presidents of the EDOA and remain members of this association, Anne being an honorary member.

My own experience, having attended 6 courses, has been that the more you get involved in playing, volunteering, putting yourself forward as a guinea-pig, attending/playing/singing at the church services, asking questions and 'having a go', then the more you get out of the course. Sessions include regular favourites – sight-reading techniques, keyboard skills, approaching a new piece, repertoire, masterclasses, RCO diploma guidance (practical and theory), pedalling, registration as well as time for private lessons and practice. I generally concentrate on church music options, including conducting and hymn playing but have also enjoyed improvisation classes and insights into Kodaly methods of teaching and learning. Students are all ages and all abilities; groups are small to ensure the standard within groups is pretty uniform, ranging from complete beginners to FRCO. There is much to learn from excellent tutors, but also fellow students. I have had several explanations of harmonic progressions and figured bass on the back of a beer mat!

The church services held on three evenings bring students of all abilities together - accompanying anthems, playing hymns or liturgical items and students are encouraged to form a choir leading the singing under Roger Carter's excellent direction. For many it is a time to sit down and relax and reflect on the day.

Personal highlights for me include visiting historic churches and playing a wide variety of instruments – often entrusted with a key or 'entry code' to visit in the early hours of the morning or late at night. I had the privilege of accompanying Wood's anthem 'O thou the central orb' with the *ad hoc* choir and playing in student composite recitals in St James, Garlickhythe and St Lawrence Jewry as well as St Giles, Cripplegate, the 'home' of the course.

I took on the role of organist and choirmaster at St Mary's Northchurch in 2011 with few credentials except a lot of enthusiasm for the organ and a love of church music. I was soon struggling with the weight of the commitment and I wasn't sure I could carry on but the summer course of 2011 was a complete revelation. The homily at the closing service was on the

Transfiguration. How apt! I felt I had climbed the mountain and seen the light: magnificent organs, beautiful city churches, wonderful playing by advanced students and tutors, friendship, support. I was overcome with emotion – I just didn't want to leave. But of course none of us could stay. It was time to go back to the mundane and ordinary, be that our parishes or our preparation for RCO or ABRSM exams or whatever it might be; but the course had given me new insights, knowledge and skills, and most importantly, the inspiration and will to carry on, to learn, improve and serve others. I go back each year and recapture some of that magic, bottled up and brought home to see me through the challenges to come!

Jenny Hoare, St Mary's, Northchurch

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