

Jennifer Bate Memorial Concert

A long-awaited Memorial Concert in memory of EDOA Honorary Life Member Jennifer Bate OBE, who sadly died from breast cancer on 25th March 2020, took place at St. James Muswell Hill on Saturday 16th October 2021. Organised by the Society of Women Organists (SWO), of which Jennifer was a Patron, this venue was chosen because of its many links to Jennifer, who lived nearby for almost all her life and whose father, Horace A. Bate, had been organist at the church for 54 years, from 1924 until 1978.

This was my first visit to St. James Muswell Hill. The interior of the church and the organ are impressive, and they complement each other in the extensive use of wood - though the carpet doesn't do the acoustic any favours! The organ, which was designed by Jennifer's father, was built by Harrison & Harrison in 1955, and rebuilt by the same firm in 2010, following a successful fund-raising campaign led by Jennifer. Not only did Jennifer have her first organ lessons at St. James, but this was also the church and organ where she first met and played for Olivier Messiaen and later made some of her many recordings. Sadly, the organ – a large three manual instrument with 55 speaking stops and electro-pneumatic action – is no longer used for Sunday services (a worship band plays instead) but the organ is still very much appreciated by the church and is used for special services.

The concert, which was well attended, included pieces requested by Jennifer Bate and highlighted female conductors and organists. The majority of the performers (the trumpeter, the conductors and the organists, though not the singers) had either been close colleagues or students of Jennifer and donated their services for free. The programme is reproduced in full below.

Before the concert started, there was a welcome from the SWO co-Chair and EDOA Honorary Life Member Anne Marsden Thomas MBE and the SWO co-Chair Ghislaine Reece-Trapp. During the concert Jennifer Bate's partner of some 20 years, Air Vice-Marshal Andrew Roberts, received an RCO medal that had been awarded to Jennifer posthumously from the RCO President, Gerard Brooks. This followed a short, but very moving, tribute to Jennifer by Andrew, telling the audience the amusing story of how he and Jennifer met by mistake – or divine providence – when he travelled to Christchurch Priory to attend a recital that he thought was going to be given by Carlo Curley, but having got the dates mixed up he turned up to find that the recitalist was Jennifer Bate.

Although I had only met her once, it was clear from Andrew's eulogy that Jennifer was a remarkable person: professional, charming, quick-witted, kind and courageous. She was not one to criticise other organists, even in private, and never wanted to let people down, only ever once missing a performance (due to illness), which was a piano recital when she was aged 14, and on another occasion continuing a recital tour of Australia against doctor's orders whilst suffering from pneumonia. Preparation for a recital typically involved three days familiarising herself with the instrument. Even when she was being treated for breast cancer Jennifer was determined to honour her recital commitments, even though this meant that she would stop taking her medication for three weeks prior to a recital so that she could still perform. Although this may have had an adverse impact on her health and shortened her life, she said on more than one occasion towards the end of her life that she had no regrets.

Following the concert there was a retiring collection in aid of Cancer Research UK and the St James Muswell Hill Roof Appeal and a reception in the adjoining Church Hall, where many friends and admirers of Jennifer – including EDOA Honorary Life Member and Muswell Hill resident David Aprahamian Liddle, who knew Jennifer very well – gathered to share their recollections of this remarkable musician. Many of Jennifer’s concert dresses were on display at the reception and were generously available for people to take away with them if they wished.

The brief biography which accompanied the programme, appropriately entitled ‘A Life in Music’, and the many obituaries that have been published following her death, make clear what a star in the musical firmament we have lost. Her musical achievements in a career spanning more than 50 years, as an international concert organist, recording artist and teacher – including the establishment of the highly successful Jennifer Bate Organ Academy (JBOA) for young women aged 13-21 which has now been running for 16 years and will run again in 2022 – are remarkable, and are rightly reflected in the numerous awards and honours which have been bestowed upon her. A book about Jennifer Bate (part biography and part autobiography) is expected to be published next year.

At the time of writing, a recording of the concert is still available to view at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VIOQgtJlh5s>

N.B. The concert begins just over six minutes in, but the sound is missing for the majority of the first piece.

Dr Michaela Cottee

Programme

C.H.H. Parry: ‘I was glad when they said unto me, let us go into the house of the Lord’
Crispian Steel-Perkins (trumpet), Katherine Dienes-Williams (organ), St Giles Cripplegate Choir, Sarah MacDonald (conductor)

Georg Phillip Telemann: Aria (arr. Jennifer Bate) *
Crispian Steele-Perkins (trumpet), Anne Page (organ)

Olivier Messiaen: ‘Offrande et Alléluia final’ from Livre du Saint Sacrement
Anne Page (organ)

Ralph Vaughan Williams: ‘Lord thou hast been our refuge’ *
Imogen Morgan (organ), St Giles Cripplegate Choir, Sarah MacDonald (conductor)

J.S. Bach: Fantasia and Fugue in C minor *
Katherine Dienes-Williams (organ)

Ghislaine Reece-Trapp: In Paradisum
Anna Lapwood (organ)

Jennifer Bate: Festal Fanfare
Emily Nott (organ)

Charles Villiers Stanford: ‘Beati quorum via’ *
St Giles Cripplegate Choir, Katherine Dienes-Williams (conductor)

William Matthias: Processional *
Crispian Steele-Perkins (trumpet), Imogen Morgan (organ)

* Requested by Jennifer Bate

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