

Past Events

- **Organ Stops: A documentary feature film about the crisis facing Britain's pipe organs - Thursday 15th September 2022**
- **"At home" with Ruth Lewis - Thursday 10th November 2022**

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**Organ Stops:
Saving the King of Instruments**
A documentary feature film about the crisis facing Britain's pipe organs
Thursday 15th September, 7:45pm
[Our Lady & St George,](#)
Enfield Town, EN2 6DS

On the table next to my computer, I have an excellent book by Martin Renshaw – *A B C of a Mediaeval Church*. At the end of this he has a section on the *Future of Organs*. This unsurprisingly deals with the problems around finding organists but is mainly concerned with encouraging the maintenance of pipe organs and preventing their disappearance. It was with a possible solution to this latter problem that this evening was concerned.

Our September meeting began with a showing of the 70 minute film, *Organ Stops: Saving the King of Instruments*. The director of this was James Dawson and it largely featured Martin Renshaw and his work saving and moving organs which are no longer wanted. The urgency of this is emphasised by the fact that, on average in the UK, one church is closed every week – in Scotland it is more like two a week. The premise of the film is that the best thing to do is to choose the best of these instruments and find homes for them in churches elsewhere, both in the UK and in Europe.

The film started with Martin going to Knole House to tune the organ which dates from 1590. The situation of organs in general was then discussed. Rather than being merely 'hymn boxes' the instrument was in fact a 'cultural icon'. England was described as the 'largest organ country'. Something which was not mentioned but is interesting to note is that, according to Martin Renshaw's own research, the rush of organ building in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods had a parallel with the years before the Reformation.

We were introduced to Blanche Beer, a sprightly lady who, for 70 years, had been organist of a chapel with a rather nice organ by the other less known but admirable Durham firm of organ builders, Nelson & Co, which was absorbed by Walkers in 1967. I was moved by seeing this lady going for a final play on her beloved organ in the deserted chapel, before its removal. It was evident that the work of finding, moving and reinstalling organs is not easy but is possible and involves equally an emotional response. It is necessary to keep in contact with the possible

sources of information about available instruments, hard work to dismantle carefully and even harder and more delicate to reassemble them with the complication of mechanical action.

The film then moved on to discuss the top end of the range of returning old organs to life in the example of Dominic Gwynn of Goetze and Gwynn's historical recreation of the organ in the Public Theatre of Trinity College Dublin. This fascinating recreation was made from the case and remaining front pipes of an organ from around 1700, with the rest effectively and skilfully created with a new/old instrument on the model of St Botolph Aldgate.

We then had a look at, and indeed listen to, the fascinating work by Claire M Singer with the Father Willis organ at the Union Chapel in Islington in its new life as a music venue and a centre for organ teaching and experiment.

Somewhat inevitably, we heard from David Mason of Viscount Organs who imports Italian electronic instruments, the purpose of this being to compare costs with that of a new instrument—somewhere around £30k and £350k respectively. The cost of transplanting a fairly small organ was said to be close to the lower of these two figures.

We then went on to see the effects of a transplanted organ in a church in East London which was fortunate enough to have an energetic lady who ran her own piano teaching school. The organ was described as being 'really bright – loud' and undoubtedly led to a great increase in enthusiasm and involvement in worship. This was matched by the desire of several young people to learn to play the instrument.

After this highly positive end to the film, the ensuing discussion showed agreement with Martin and his work. From this, and in my reflection afterwards, several inter-esting points occurred to me.

Perhaps pre-eminent among these points is that the arrival of pipe organ transplantation is now recognised by Pipe up for Pipe Organs, which is a new charitable trust designed to break the vicious circle of church redundancy and the loss of organs. Also we learnt that a considerable number of English instruments have been sent abroad: to develop this work Martin is setting up three teams in France, where twelve churches have been enriched by a rescued English organ. There was some interesting discussion about the recruitment of young people into organ building: the government had set up a scheme but it was quite inadequately funded. It also emerged that Martin believed in avoiding making changes to these instruments when they were moved.

It was at this last point that I was less than convinced. I remembered how the rather uniform dullness of many organs at the time of my youth led many of us to welcome joyfully the appearance of brighter sounds when the organ reform movement somewhat belatedly reached our shores. Fashions change and it is now more in vogue to praise these late Victorian and Edwardian instruments but I always have in my mind their limitations of tonal variety and consequent lack of suitability to much repertoire—in fact smaller organs were like larger ones with the interesting bits missing – 'hymn machines' indeed! It brought to my mind [Maurice Merrell](#) of Bishop and Son declaring the intention of providing every organ with a pedal reed.

While I enormously admire this work, I cannot help thinking of two particular very small, five stop, organs in Hertfordshire which I have enjoyed. One is the organ by Nigel Church at St Paul's Walden; the other is in the Lady Chapel of St Albans Cathedral. It is the now unused

(still in place but side-lined by an Allen) Sweetland organ which was much revised and altered by Peter Collins at Peter Hurford's request.

I also cannot help wondering how many French *orgues de chœur* are no longer used or loved—the French have a remarkable way of building small organs which sound incredibly grand.

Congratulations indeed are due to James Dawson and Martin Renshaw for their splendid work. Thanks are also due to the church for the use of an excellent room and projector, as well as to its distinguished organist, Michael Hennin, for his arranging of the event.

St. Paul's Walden

Pedal

Subbass 16

Manual

Rohrflute 8

Principal 4

Wald Flute 2

Mixture II-III

St Alban's Cathedral, Lady Chapel

Pedal

Subbass 16

Manual

Wood Gedact 8 old, revoiced

Principal 4 new

Blockflute 2 old 4ft flute
 remodelled

Mixture II

Peter St John Stokes

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"At home" with Ruth Lewis Thursday 10th November 2022

Nine EDOA members accepted Ruth's invitation for November 10th, so counting Ruth herself there were ten of us. How appropriate, as the theme was '10'!

Once we were sitting comfortably, with a glass of wine or a soft drink, the evening began. Probably we all expected to hear 'Dies sind die heil'gen zehn Gebot' at some stage during the evening and we were not disappointed as it was the first piece played. Jonathan brought a recording he had made of himself playing it on the organ at St John's Chipping Barnet. Jonathan pointed out Bach's use of canon in this piece.



Ruth and guests after the meal

Rosemary brought a recording of a Grace written by Herbert Howells for a dinner at 10 Downing Street; on the occasion of William Walton's seventieth birthday. This was when Edward Heath was Prime Minister, and the Grace was sung at many dinners hosted by Heath at Number Ten.



EDOA members listening to music

Terence brought a hymn. This was *Ten thousand times ten thousand* to the tune *Alford*, written by Henry Alford (1810-1871). This tune is not often heard nowadays but deserves to be heard more.

Susan brought two pieces. The first was *Blow up the trumpet in Sion*, a ten-part anthem by Henry Purcell which is Z10 in the Zimmerman catalogue. The other piece was No. 10 of Twelve Short Pieces for Organ played by Margaret Phillips on the James Davis organ at Wymondham Abbey. This set includes the more frequently heard Air and Gavotte.

Pavlos's choice was Choros No. 10 by Villa-lobos conducted by David Robertson and played by the BBC Symphony Orchestra at the Last Night of the Proms in 2009. This work for chorus and orchestra was written in Rio de Janeiro in 1926 and caused uproar at its first performance.

Roger's contribution was a most unusual arrangement of the so called "Albinoni Adagio" by Turkish performer Gürol Ağırbaş. This conjured up visions of whirling dervishes. The Adagio was of course actually written by Remo Giazotto, who was born in 1910.

It was surprising to find the number of ways in which the set theme of '10' could be interpreted. Hilary even brought a chord of ten notes – the first big chord at the start of César Franck's Choral No. 3. I think we all heard some things that were new to us and others that were familiar and well loved. Apart from the music the evening was an opportunity for socialising and enjoying a splendid meal provided by Ruth. We are most grateful to Ruth for extending her hospitality to us again.

Rosemary Knight

There are more photos on the website. Look under Gallery. Ed.