

## **OrganFest 2015**

*with contributions from Norman Ashfield, Nicholas Fanthom, Trevor Smedley and Alan Taylor*

In 2014, a collaboration between BIOS, IAO and RCO successfully brought together these three strands of the organ world for the first *OrganFest*, with the IAO taking the lead role in organising that event in Birmingham. The same collaboration this year, but with RCO taking the lead, was coincidentally also based in Birmingham because the RCO wished to incorporate into the festival its annual Organ Forum and chose the Elgar Concert Hall of Birmingham University as the venue. *OrganFest 2015* took place over a weekend in September.

The festival opened on the Friday evening with a choral concert in St Chad's Cathedral, but given by the choir of Birmingham (Anglican) Cathedral, as the current restoration work made it impossible to use the latter as a venue. The boys and men sang works by Schütz, Mozart and the cathedral's Director of Music, Marcus Huxley. Assistant Director of Music David Hardie played an organ interlude before the men performed Wesley's *Behold how good*, and the full choir came together for works by Mendelssohn, Josquin des Prez and - arguably the most exciting of the evening - Haydn's *Insanae et vanae curae*.

After a brief interval, the full choir resumed with a powerful performance of Bairstow's *Let all mortal flesh*, and more of Marcus Huxley's *Mass of St Henry & St Philip*. RCO president Philip Moore was in the audience to hear, apparently with satisfaction, a performance of his own work *Emmanuel*. It was then the girls' turn, performing Mendelssohn's *Lift thine eyes* and Dvorak's *Tu Trinitas*. The full choir ended the concert in lighter vein with Harberg and Atlen's arrangement of *Somewhere over the rainbow*.

The serious and more specialised business of the weekend was Saturday's RCO Organ Forum, opened by Henry Fairs, Head of Organ Studies at Birmingham Conservatoire. He began with an explanation of the Elgar Concert Hall's new organ by French builder Marc Garnier, which John Norman described in the June edition of *Organists Review* – not without some criticism of its console ergonomics. Henry explained that the organ was chosen to complement the other organs already available to his students, and to be particularly suited to early repertoire, while still needing to be capable of accompanying choirs & orchestras during concerts in the hall. It actually comprises two organs; the main 3-manual has a mildly unequal temperament at pitch A = 440, while the 5-stop single-manual "chair" organ ("Mitteltönigeswerk") is tuned in meantone temperament at pitch A = 415 and played via a separate keyboard with split accidentals.

The focus of the forum was composer Nicholas Bruhns, in the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of his birth, including earlier influences on his music, and subsequent music influenced by him. Bruhns worked as both an organist and violinist, and a surprise item at the start of proceedings involved co-presenter Thomas Wilkinson demonstrating a well-known "party-trick" of Bruhns, who apparently used to play the violin while accompanying himself via the pedals of an organ! Nicholas Wearne, organ tutor at Birmingham Conservatoire, joined Henry to present a lecture-recital entitled 'Transmission of the *Stylus Phantasticus* from Frescobaldi northwards'. The influences of Frescobaldi, Michaelangelo Rossi, Johann Jacob Froberger and George Muffat were discussed, until the story arrived in North Germany with the most familiar composer so far, Dietrich Buxtehude, represented by the opening of his *Preludium* in F. Thomas Wilkinson then spoke about North German choral music before Bach.

After a break for lunch, the afternoon session opened with a flourish provided by special guest Lorenzo Ghielmi performing the E minor *Preludium* to open his lecture-recital on '*Stylus Phantasticus*

in the two E minor *preludia* by Bruhns'. Professor Ghielmi teaches organ, harpsichord and ensemble music at the Milan *Accademia Internazionale della Musica* and has devoted many years to the study and interpretation of music from the Renaissance and Baroque periods. His published works include a book on Nicholas Bruhns. Amusingly, he described Frescobaldi as a "terrorist", because he totally broke with tradition in his style - "very unstructured with lots of surprises" - while Bruhns had a habit of including many words in his scores to explain precisely how the music should be played.

Tom Wilkinson then returned to talk about 'The influence of Bruhns and North Germany on the young Bach'. Both Bach and Bruhns were pupils of Buxtehude, and a comparison between them showed many similarities. The forum concluded with a masterly recital by Henry Fairs, designed to illustrate examples of what had been described, comprising *Toccata, Adagio & Fugue in C* by Bach, *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland* by Bruhns, and *Preludium in E (played in C)* by Bach.

During the evening, delegates had been invited to share an event promoted by Birmingham Organists' Association at Broadway United Reformed Church in nearby Walsall. The 4-manual organ here could not have been in greater contrast to the university's new Garnier, tonally and contextually, with pipework from organs by Nicholson of Worcester and Nicholson & Lord of Walsall that were originally constructed in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For this small church with limited financial resources had taken the bold decision, 25 years ago, to reverse an all too common modern trend and to replace its electronic organ with what has become a 51-stop pipe organ, created at minimum cost by using second-hand parts from redundant local instruments.

Its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary recital was given by Daniel Bishop of Liverpool Cathedral, who opened in lively fashion with an arrangement of Antonio Soler's *Menuet* from *Concerto VI for two organs*, followed by two melodic, gentle works by Joseph-Hector Fiocco. Written in 1945, *Saraband (in modo elegiaco)* by Herbert Howells portrayed the anguish of war followed by the celebration of victory, and all these pieces served to demonstrate the organ's wide-ranging tone palette. Percy Whitlock's *Fanfare* made good use of the organ's two high-pressure reed stops, Bach's *Fantasia in G* followed, after which Elgar's *Nimrod* was heard with a beautifully managed *crescendo/diminuendo*. For his finale, Dan turned to an arrangement of William Walton's *Crown Imperial*. Much applause demanded an encore, and the audience was clearly delighted to hear Dan's own composition, *Reflections*.

The Sunday morning of *OrganFest* arrived with September sunshine illuminating the lofty interior of Pugin's Metropolitan Cathedral and Basilica of St Chad to great effect. The cathedral's 3-manual 1990 Walker organ can amaze listeners with its ability to deliver authentic representation of many differing schools of the organ repertoire from its relatively modest specification. This was ably demonstrated by Nigel Morris, Assistant Director of Music, who played music by Krebs and Buxtehude before the service, and by Director of Music Professor David Saint who gave an exciting performance of Reger's *Introduction & Passacaglia in D minor* at the end of the Mass. During the service we heard the instrument in its liturgical role and were transported chorally to 16<sup>th</sup> century mainland Europe with Victoria's *Missa Quarti Toni* and *O Sacrum Convivium* by Gabrieli.

After lunch, there was something completely different again: Richard Hills in a recital of light music at the Compton Cinema Organ in Fentham Hall, Hampton-in-Arden. This delightful village situated south-east of Birmingham is mentioned in the Domesday Book, and its central part was designated a Conservation Area in 1968. The 12<sup>th</sup> century parish church of St Mary & St Bartholomew houses a traditional 2-manual organ, but taking a short walk down Marsh Lane opposite the church leads to the 1935 Compton 3-12 + Melotone organ in Fentham Hall, a concert/community hall overlooking the Warwickshire countryside managed by the George Fentham Trust. This is the fourth home for

the Compton, which was originally installed in the Tower Cinema, West Bromwich, where it remained until 1960. It was purchased by the Cinema Organ Society and moved to the recreation suite at Marston Green Hospital (Birmingham). When the hospital authorities required the building for other purposes, the organ was restored and moved to St Martin's School, Solihull, where it gained a reputation as one of the finest Comptons in the country. In the year 2002, the organ was on the move to its present location. It was restored again and rebuilt into two chambers either side of the stage, which echoes its original layout and is an ideal location in terms of comfort, facilities and acoustics. It comprises the following pipe ranks: tibia, tuba, trumpet, clarinet, vox humana, diapason, flute, violin, violin celeste, cello and orchestral oboe, plus a Melotone unit and MIDI piano.

Richard Hills is one of those amazing "cross-over" organists (to borrow a phrase from motoring journals), who has truly bridged the divide between classical and theatre organ worlds, having held organ scholarships at Exeter College Oxford, Portsmouth Cathedral and Westminster Abbey. He now has a freelance solo career with continuo, choir-training & teaching work, and is Organist of St Mary's, Bourne Street, London. In the theatre organ world he has received numerous prizes and awards both here in the UK and in the USA and has made many appearances on both TV and radio, including from the BBC Proms. We heard music by Eric Coates, Ernest Tomlinson and Sir Edward German interspersed with two medleys from Sullivan's *The Mikado* and the 1956 musical *High Society* (Cole Porter). There were also items from two "cross-over" organists of yesteryear: *Parade of the Sunbeams* by Quentin Maclean and *The ABC March* by Reginald Foort. All were played with great panache and a quite amazing number of registration changes effected by Richard, who obviously knows this console very well. After a brief "tour of the pipe ranks", the recital ended with an arrangement of the *Poet & Peasant Overture* by Suppé. Finally, Richard Hills disappeared beneath the stage – yes, the console is on a lift in typical cinema organ style – to the strains of *Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag*.

So concluded *OrganFest 2015*: truly a celebration of the organ in all its different guises, facilitated by many outstanding musicians.