

LIR CLASSICS

LIR004 - PROGRAMME NOTES

Music for Organ from the Tower of London

To show off the remarkable new Letourneau organ in the Tower of London, Colm Carey has put together a wonderfully varied and attractive programme, first and foremost chosen to suit to the instrument's character, but representing the best of British organ music as befits its location. Naturally, many and varied stop-combinations are used, so one might believe the instrument to be rather larger than is actually the case. But just as importantly, the charming beauty of the single registers is exploited, and to be relished.

Last in a line of famous Wesleys, being grandson of Charles the hymn-writer, great-nephew of John the founder of Methodism, and son of Samuel who also composed for the church, Samuel Sebastian Wesley is best known for his anthems and a handful of very lovely hymn-tunes. He is also renowned for certain aspects of his life-story: besides being the progeny of his father's liaison with his house-keeper, he was evidently a difficult and unreliable man, and 'got through' no fewer than nine organist posts at various churches and cathedrals.

The majestic Choral Song and Fugue was the third of a set of three pieces for chamber organ (1842-3); this recording is based partly upon the expanded version for grand organ with pedals by Walter Emery. The procession-like Choral Song has become one of the great tunes of the British organ repertoire, and is complemented by a sprightly double fugue of the structurally informal fugato type, whose parallel motions and busy inner voices demand great dexterity of the player, and which also indulges the composer's love of extreme harmonic progressions.

The seven Renaissance Dances, some of whose titles or composers are especially apposite to the circumstances of this recording, come from an era when there were not the distinctions we now make between song, instrumental ensemble music and compositions for the various keyboard instruments of the time (such as the Virginals, a kind of harpsichord which was the standard domestic keyboard instrument). For instance, an important manuscript dated around 1610 and now known as The Fitzwilliam Virginal Book contains many songs and consort pieces arranged for keyboard.

In that spirit, our selection begins with Colm Carey's own adaptations of three songs by King Henry VIII. Henry was a great music lover who is known to have played the organ himself, and on one trip to Venice he sat and listened to the organist of St Mark's Church for some four hours. Although his compositions are influenced by others' work almost to the point of plagiarism, it is believed that

they genuinely are his own handiwork. So too are the words of the songs, in which Henry tells us that Pastime with good company is a good distraction against mischief; he wishes that Love now reigned instead of giving way to jealousy; and in the Pavane Hélas Madame relates a dialogue between a gentleman and the object of his undying love, who initially protests that she is happily attached but eventually admits that it may profit him to carry on wooing her.

Were it not for the 'Fitzwilliam' book compiler's enthusiasm for Giles Farnaby, all but two of his keyboard compositions would have been lost. Tower Hill, like the anonymous Why aske you and My Lady Carey's Dompe, is a descriptive piece rather than a song setting. A 'dompe' is simply a mournful melody (the term occurs in Shakespeare and is related to the modern 'down in the dumps'), and the one written for or about Lady Carey has a repetitious insistence reminiscent of the Fandango but in duple rather than triple time. Finally, Muscadin is a setting of the standard tune for the Allemande-like dance of that name.

Although nowadays overshadowed by his famous father, Carl Philip Emmanuel Bach was the most successful of J.S. Bach's many musical relatives, and was Europe's outstanding keyboard player in his day, publishing many hundreds of keyboard pieces, from the easily playable (and therefore readily sellable) to the utterly inspired — Haydn once insisted on playing through a whole volume of the sonatas at one sitting. Bach junior was an educated and idealistic man, of a generation fond of theorising and explaining and, like his flautist colleague Johann Joachim Quantz, wrote perhaps the most important and thorough treatise ever on the art of playing his instrument. But ultimately he preferred doing things to studying and analysing them. His spontaneous and overtly emotional side was borne out in his playing, in which he would become intensely absorbed and animated. His preferred instrument was the Clavichord, an intimate touch-sensitive instrument that predated the fortepiano and piano by some 300 years. The organ sonatas were written around 1755, intended for Princess Amalia of Prussia, younger sister of Bach's employer, Frederick the Great. The princess was a proficient keyboard player who admired the 'learned style' — i.e. fugues and contrapuntal writing — though there is nothing of this in these sonatas. In the D major work, as in most of the set, the bright outer movements have a binary form with an extended second section that points very much towards the full Sonata form, while a pensive slow movement takes a simple ritornello form. However this deliberate simplicity and predictability of structure clear the way to an appreciation of the composer's delightful wit and inventiveness in other respects.

J.S. Bach needs no introduction. 'Partita' simply means a set of variations, and 'Sei gegrüsset' was a widely-used hymn in 17th/18th century Lutheran Germany. Symmetrically organised, like many of Bach's great works, the partita has a theme and eleven variations. The first and climactic final movements present the chorale melody straightforwardly but harmonised in Bach's inimitable fashion. The first and penultimate variations are extensive and intricate, no.1 being a very rich coloratura treatment of the theme above a haunting, simple 'cello accompaniment, and no.10 having three distinct layers: the accompanying bass-line and inner parts; the 'pre-imitations' of the theme, played on a solo register and so decorated as to sound like the main event; and then the chorale itself played in stark, bold single notes on yet another sound. In between are eight conventional (though far from ordinary!) variations, with the melody sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit, sometimes 'on top', sometimes in the tenor or bass part, in

different metres and styles and with different numbers of voice-parts in play. There is something rather intimate and personal about the work, as if articulating the sentiments of one coming face to face with the Saviour.

An Englishman living in Ireland, Andrew Johnstone currently holds the post of Assistant Organist at Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin. In addition to his work as a composer, Johnstone is active as a performer, teacher and arranger, and he continues to research into 16th century English music. Most notable among his compositions are the Concerto for Uilleann Pipes and Sonata da Chiesa for trumpet and organ. The Irish Airs and Dances on this disc are a response to a request from Colm Carey for a piece that would sound quintessentially 'Irish' – choosing two Airs, a Gig and a Reel, Johnstone demonstrates how the organ is a perfect vehicle for the melismatic lyricism of the airs and the rhythmic vitality of the dances.

The evergreen Prelude on Rhosymedre was written in 1920, by which time Ralph Vaughan Williams was settled into the dual role of cutting-edge symphonist and very willing writer of pleasant, consciously down-to-earth pieces for church services and other occasions. Rhosymedre is another much-loved treasure of the British organ repertory and has been orchestrated to good effect. With a structure that pays homage to Bach and a degree of harmonic invention to match, but in a language that is totally English-pastoral, the tune is simply presented: first in the tenor register, then as the top line with a lush accompaniment, framed fore and aft by the gentle melody that forms the thematic basis of the whole piece. A real gem which leaves one sorry that Vaughan Williams, one-time church organist and FRCO diploma-holder, wrote nothing else of the same quality for the organ.

Dr Francis Jackson spent his career in the service of York Minster: as chorister, pupil and assistant to Sir Edward Bairstow, then for 36 years as Organist. At the same time he composed and was an organ recitalist of considerable prowess and repute. Now in his eighties he composes as prolifically as ever and his playing is still magical to listen to – his fifth organ sonata was premiered by him in May 2003. He is also the most pleasant, gentle and humble person one could wish to meet, whose magnanimity of spirit sits quite happily with an impish sense of humour. He often writes appreciative letters (by hand) when his music is performed or broadcast, even though the piece may have been standard repertoire for half a century.

In the 1950s publishers Novello & Co. came to him requesting a work for their Organ Music Club series, which could be anything he pleased so long as it filled 18 pages of printed score! The first offering was rejected on account of its technical difficulty, giving the composer time to reflect; Chorale and Toccata re-emerged as a more satisfying Toccata, Chorale and Fugue, with a highly arresting slow introduction which is later metamorphosed into a bridge from the Toccata to the Chorale. Novello did publish the finished work, along with a new trio of pieces to fulfil the OMC commission. By turns dramatic, driven and virile, or pleasantly meandering, and sometimes cleverly complex, it contains the whole gamut of the composer's style in a nutshell. Dr Jackson finds it impossible to define who or what influenced and inspired him stylistically, so let us not try to second-guess him here. However the present Triptych was dedicated to Healey Willan, composer of a stupendous Introduction, Passacaglia and Fugue; it shows the composer's love of the church modes, and not just the predictable ones; and it generally sounds proud of its vintage, with rhythms that could have been by Walton, or parts of the fugue by Hindemith. Thematically the sections are tightly linked – all the melodies in the

introduction and Chorale clearly derive from the Toccata, e.g. the rising octave leap and dotted rhythm figure. In the Fugue, what seem like several themes all definitely originate from the opening fugue subject — listen out for this re-appearing in double-length notes, and for some touching final reminiscences of the Toccata.

Jonathan Lilley, March 2003

A note on the organ

The history of the organ at the Chapel Royal of St Peter ad Vincula was until fairly recently somewhat confused despite the existence of a corpus of documents and materials relating to the original instrument and subsequent restorations. The installation of this new instrument by Fernand Létourneau has at last permitted an exhaustive and definitive investigation into the design, construction and history of this rare organ case and a speculative view on the original instrument it once housed. What is certain is that the present organ case dates from 1699 when it was built under royal warrant by Bernhardt Schmidt (sic) — later more commonly known as 'Father Smith' — for the Banqueting House, Whitehall which was at that time serving as a Chapel Royal to the court of William and Mary. Whilst at the Banqueting House Smith's organ was relocated several times; during James Wyatt's refurbishment between 1811 and 1815 the organ was both moved and worked on by the English organ builder, Thomas Elliot and again in 1844 and 1877 by William Hill.

In 1890, the Chapel Royal Commissioners were granted permission to discontinue worship in the Banqueting House and, with the consent of Queen Victoria, the organ was moved to the chapel of St Peter ad Vincula at the Tower of London. Over the following century it was rebuilt and enlarged on several occasions, and by 1999 this resulted in an organ some three times larger than that for which the original case had been designed.

All the pipework in the present organ is new; most of the metal pipes are of 70% tin whilst the wooden pipes are made from the finest Canadian timber. The 300 year old case has been meticulously restored to its original dimensions and many decorative details made to replace those long lost, e.g. the carved brackets on either side of the case and the reconstruction and completion of the four pedal towers. The gold leafed prospect pipes are new and constructed to a design and measurement determined by the case and extant prospect pipes of Bernard Smith.