

postscript

Joe Riley

Is there any other British cathedral organist in a rock band? Ben Saunders (Leeds Roman Catholic Cathedral) is drummer with The Zillaz, an indie outfit who play The Clash, The Who and The Kinks for fans of “Scooter” music, supplemented by hits from present day bands Arctic Monkeys and Kasabian. All this helps to decide the shape and impact of his organ concerts – building excitement and tension in the same way as songs – with a no-holds barred approach to repertoire, incorporating jazz, ragtime and anything else suitably transcribable, including the *Samum Foxtrot*, signature tune of Blackpool Tower Wurlitzer legend Reginald Dixon, plus an outrageous concoction, *Hungarian Comedy Overture*, heard on a nearby fairground organ. So it’s not possible to pigeon-hole Warrington-born Ben, 40, raised on recitals on the Cavaillé-Coll at the town’s Parr Hall, before becoming organ scholar at Downing College Cambridge, studying with Peter Hurford, and returning to the by-then family home in Scotland and becoming final assistant to the late iconic Herrick Bunney at St Giles Cathedral, Edinburgh. A heady diet of near omnipotent Bach and Franck spurred Ben to evaluate the wider musical scene (and was it not Dame Gillian Weir in June’s *OR* who once more warned recitalists against isolationism and the dangers of a blinkered life of service voluntaries?) Ben had also heard Stephen Cleobury, addressing a conference on the Anglican choral tradition, saying we “spend an awful lot of time

preparing an awful lot of music that isn’t awfully good.” Organ-wise, Ben considers that our proximity to France has led to the disproportionate playing of Guilmant, Widor, Vierne, Duruflé and Dupré, large chunks of which are more about technique than notes. But he does have his own people to champion. He is about to record (for Brilliant Classics) the complete works of the late Tashkent-based composer, Georgi Mushel – at present only known in the UK for the dance-like *Toccata* from his *Uzbekistan Suite*. “My greatest discovery in the past few years has been the *Passacaglia and Fugue* by Kristopher Kushnariov (another Russian), which I played in Cologne Cathedral to an audience of 3,500”, says Ben. Then there’s Thomas Tallis of old, whose *Felix Namque* – “a substantial piece of pure music” can quite easily be played symphonically. “A programme of three minute ditties doesn’t appeal to me; it’s like serving tapas when the building and context call for a banquet”, he insists. But then adds: “I am also ruthless in ditching music that no-one responds well to”. However, the mixture of adventurism and self-discipline brings dividends: the mix of minimalist Arvo Pärt with the works of film and television composer, Philip Glass. Who would have thought back in yesteryear that you would be able to walk into a cathedral concert and unpack such delights as a Duke Ellington tribute to fellow American, Billy Strayhorn, or feature an *Air For Rock Organ* by New York jazz virtuoso Dick Hyman, once Benny Goodman’s

pianist and who wrote much of the music for the Woody Allen movies? Nothing could be further away from the incense-infused aisles of Notre Dame or Ste Sulpice. Perhaps that’s why they call Ben Saunders a breath of fresh air. In the next issue I shall be looking at the equally revolutionary work Ben is doing in Leeds, running England’s largest choral programme.

IT WAS good to catch up with my old pal Carlo Curley during his summer roundelay marking 40 years of UK organ concerts. As for the legendary “lost chord”...it can happen to the best. In a rousing finale – Sousa’s *Stars and Stripes March* – CC lost not one, but two chords, while busy unleashing the trompette militaire of Liverpool Cathedral’s giant Willis organ. “I wonder what happened to them?” he asked his bemused legion of fans. He then told a delightful anecdote of losing his place while playing a a movement from a Bach trio sonata for his teacher, Virgil Fox. It went on...and on...until Carlo regained his place. “Don’t worry, chicken”, the equally extrovert Mr Fox told his young pupil. “You did very well...it could have been written that way!”

I NOTE that James Lancelot has recorded the complete set of Mendelssohn *Sonatas* at Durham Cathedral (for Priory) confirming that although the pieces (like the Widor and Vierne symphonies, better described as suites), are of their time, they also have an enduring appeal. I only noticed when I recently reviewed the entire box set of the ground-



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breaking re-issued EMI 1960s *Great Cathedral Organ Series*, that all six sonatas has been recorded along the way – at Canterbury, St Paul's, Worcester, Chester, Lincoln and Exeter. One presumes it was to mark the centenary of their London publication, celebrating the fact that more and more British organs were featuring substantial pedal divisions. Everyone has their favourites – in my case, numbers 2, 3 and 6 – but it also depends on the performer and the instrument. In France, where the *Sonatas* still frequently feature as service voluntaries – Mendelssohn played recitals at several prestige venues over there, including Ste Sulpice – the same pieces sound very different than they do on a British instrument. Now James

Lancelot has brought the complete group together once more on a very fine organ in a delightful acoustic. Definitely a collector's item.

ORGANISTS at Riley base two in the Isle of Man, have put together a 27-track CD of miniatures in aid of a children's orphanage in Nepal. In doing so, John Riley (no relation!), of St Matthew's, Douglas, and his team (John Elliott, Michael Porter, Olga Stone, Les Harthill, Graham Kirkland, Gareth Moore, Hilary Sewell, Julian Power and David Greenwood) have chronicled 17 or the island's instruments – from a tiny box organ at Port Erin's Arts Centre, to the biggest, a three manual, 2,000-pipe 31 stop Hill, in St Thomas's, Douglas.

Top left: Benjamin Saunders, bottom left Carlo Curley. Right The pipes of Durham Cathedral

Repertoire runs from Buxtehude and Handel through to *Flourish for an Occasion* by former Liverpool Cathedral organist, Dr Noel Rawsthorne. A fascinating and worthwhile record. For copies email John at johnrileyiom@hotmail.com

Editor's note: As Noel Rawsthorne has been mentioned by Joe Riley again, I take this opportunity to apologise for the error in reproducing his photo two issues ago. This was caused by a simple error of focussing on the surname and forgetting the Christian name – no insult was intended.



Joe Riley is a journalist, broadcaster, author and adjudicator based in Merseyside and the Isle of Man. From 1974 to 2009, he was arts editor of the *Liverpool Echo*, interviewing, reviewing and providing programme notes for some of the world's leading musicians. In the realms of organ music, these included Olivier Messiaen, Pierre Cochereau, Jean Langlais, Fernando Germani, Flor Peeters, George Thalben-Ball and Gillian Weir. He is now on the reviewing panel for *OR* and continues to work as a freelance critic for a number of publications, to adjudicate music and drama festivals, and to write a general comment column for the *Liverpool Echo*.