

MUSIC IN THE UNIVERSITY: CONCERT SERIES 2017 – 2018

TOCCATA!

PROFESSOR DAVID J. SMITH: Organ

KING'S COLLEGE CHAPEL

Thursday 12th October, 2017

Professor David Smith's organ recital on Thursday evening was specially well attended. The Chapel was almost full to capacity. At the end of the concert, David received a hugely enthusiastic ovation for his performance, loud cheers as well as clapping. All the young, and not so young, members of the audience left with broad smiles of satisfaction on their faces. I can't remember that at many other organ recitals!

The recital began with what is possibly the best known work ever composed for the instrument, J. S. Bach's Toccata and Fugue in d minor. David Smith pointed out that some modern musicologists suggest that Bach did not actually compose this piece. If not, then who? Its earliest source is an undated copy by one Johannes Ringk who was a student of Johann Peter Kellner, himself a pupil of Bach. Whether or not it is by Bach, it is a brilliant piece. I remember first hearing it at the opening of the 1962 film 'The Phantom of the Opera' starring Herbert Lom. What research I have managed to carry out suggests that Lom himself actually played the piece – in fact he appears playing organ in at least three different films, two of them playing this very piece. However, as they say in Aberdeen, 'I hae ma doubts' - but maybe he did play, he was a very gifted man.

In today's concert we had the advantage of a television screen on which we could see all sorts of details of David's performance which would otherwise have been hidden up in the organ loft. I was fascinated by the use of the three different manuals on the organ and the pedals as well which allowed instant changes of timbre to be used in bringing the music to vibrant life. The very pauses themselves in the music were part of the excitement and David played the piece very fast. It was above all a hugely theatrical performance full of organ colour, drama and excitement.

This great work was followed by the first of two organ improvisations, a special talent for which David is famed.

This improvisation was a set of Variations on the chorale melody Ach, was sol ich Sünder Machen, which was one of the chorale melodies set by Bach. David Smith's improvisation was in three parts. The counterpoint in the first was well developed suggesting perhaps the influence of Buxtehude? Flute variations were followed in the third section by reed stops with the feeling of dance coming through teasingly. Was there a sense of the French school here? Certainly I thought of that when I heard the final section using full organ (plein jeu). However Kyle McCallum sitting next to me warned me not to let my imagination run off with me. The music, he said, is 99% Smith!

Away from the world of improvisation, the next piece was the Organ Sonata IV by Mendelssohn. I have heard David Smith play Mendelssohn's music on this organ before and I have been amazed by the sounds he is able to get from the Aubertin for Mendelssohn because the Aubertin's voices are not really aimed at the romantic repertoire. The opening section of the first movement, Allegro con brio, showed the influence of Bach and then there came dramatic chiming like an organ carillon. It was splendid. The second movement marked Andante religioso used a fascinating blend of stops very much like the church organs I heard when I was a boy. I had not heard those sounds on the Aubertin before. David had suggested that the third movement 'just bubbles along' and this was a good description. The organ tones were soft but this movement had great motive force and a strong irresistible pulse. I loved the rhythmic contrast between upper and lower musical lines.

The finale was magnificent – a big blast of sound with great pedal work and the change of rhythmic shape in the coda was fantastic.

David continued with five chorale melody settings mostly by earlier composers plus one from the late nineteenth, early twentieth century.

Jan Sweelinck's four variations on Allein Gott in der Höh sei Ehr began with a hymn-like section in which harmony was king. The second variation was more ornate followed by a scalar variation with an even more ornate upper part and then a fanfare-like variation in which the chorale melody sang out richly.

There followed two chorale preludes by Buxtehude, the first, Ach Herr, mich armen Sünder in which the chorale melody itself was elaborated though its core was still clear and then in Eine Feste Burg ist unser Gott a single upper melody line was an elaborated version of the chorale melody set against a two part tenor line and a more simple pedal bass, all of which we could see unfolding on the TV screen.

Bach's setting of Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme is another great favourite in which two great melodies are set against one another, with the chorale tune singing out strongly on reed stops – a great performance from David – strong and steady.

Karg-Elert's Freu dich sehr, O meine Seele was hymn-like clean and flowing. It was modern yet firmly fixed within the great traditions of what had come before.

Following on from these pieces David took us back to the world of the toccata and to the second of his improvisations. This was modern, dramatic and wonderfully exciting, the very exemplar of the late twentieth or early twenty-first century toccata. An explosive ovation from a very enthusiastic audience brought forth a very special encore. It was great fun. It made me think of some of the music in Walton's Façade. All right, not really Walton, just Smith!