David J. Smith is renowned for his organ improvisations in various styles. We were to hear two examples of these in today’s concert. Since the first was in the Baroque style, it was fitting that David opened his recital with two pieces by the undisputed King of the Baroque, J. S. Bach. The Praeludium et Fuga in G Major BWV 541, opened with a rather pointed melodic line that seemed to jump like a flea over the keyboard. Beneath it, a series of full bodied chords also followed a staccato pattern while the top line grew in speed and complexity till it began to sound almost like a carillon. The theme of the fugue was also played staccato giving the entire work a sense of wholeness and continuity. I admired the steadiness of David Smith’s playing as the denouement of Bach’s fugue was worked out leading to a wonderfully full bodied conclusion.

David followed this with a chorale prelude, Nun komm’ der Heiden Heiland BWV 659. The firm tread of the low bass supported a beautiful singing tenor-like melody which David embellished with the use of a tremolo. I thought it sounded absolutely delightful.

Moving quite a bit back in time David had chosen three pieces by the Dutch composer and teacher Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck. David explained that one of the exercises demanded of organ pupils at the time was the copying out of scores which is why much of Sweelinck’s music has come down to us today and as Roger Jacob used to tell us, “Sweelinck taught Scheidt” – being careful to pronounce the d as well as the t in case we got the wrong idea.

The pedagogic purpose of the first piece, a Toccata (C2) came through clearly in its scalar passages designed to teach correct fingering. Towards the end, the piece developed a quite attractive dance-like momentum.

This was followed by Paduana Lachrimae, a Pavane based on a piece by the English composer Dowland. David chose a combination of stops that nicely underlined the intimate nature of this music. It was followed by Die flichtig Nimphae, a set of variations based on a popular song opening with high flutes and then filling out. I know this is not correct but the repeated motif kept suggesting to me the word hal-le-lu-jah.

David followed this with his own improvised variations, six Versets on komm’ der Heiden Heiland. The changes of stops, including high flutes, nazarde, tremolo and finally a magnificent full organ exposition of the theme added to the colourful movement of the chorale melody to different parts of the organ – a wonderfully imaginative improvisation.

Moving on to the early 20th Century David played two pieces by the French composer Louis Vierne. Scherzetto number 14 of 24 Pièces en style libre Op 31 was as David suggested a joke-like piece in which the spirit of the dance was brought splendidly to life in this performance. It was followed by a smooth sinuous Arabesque (No.15) in which shifts in stops were smoothly accomplished in this delightfully reflective piece.

We were still in the 20th or perhaps we should say the 21st Century for David’s final piece, another improvisation based on notes chosen at random by members of the audience. The opening could almost have been incidental music for A Midsummer Night’s Dream with its fairy-like use of high flutes. It moved on into pastoral mood an almost yodelling section and so much more. I wonder if anyone has recorded these improvisations or written them down. There would surely be a market there?