



PIPE LINES

As noted elsewhere in this issue, Henry Fairs won both the first and special prizes in the Odense International Organ Competition held earlier this year. Studying first at Birmingham Conservatoire, he later went to France and Germany for post-graduate work, picking up an FRCO somewhere on the way. Here he talks to Simon Williams about his early influences, his education, experiences of entering competitions, and getting established as a concert organist.

When and how did you become interested in organ music?

It all began at Leominster Priory where I was a chorister and heard the organ for the first time. My late grandfather had been an organist and I knew fairly early on that I wanted to do the same.

Where and with whom did you study?

I had piano lessons from an early age before learning the organ in my teens with John Martyn in Hereford. I then went to Birmingham to study organ with David Saint and piano (second study) with John Humphries at the Conservatoire. After graduating, I studied in Paris with Susan Landale, at the Musikhochschule in Cologne with Thierry Mechler, and in the UK with David Sanger.

When did you take your RCO Diplomas and do you have any particular memories of the experience?

I took both diplomas during my student days in Birmingham. The diplomas were good for me as they helped me to focus on important skills that needed work. I enjoyed playing the pieces but remember finding the written papers and tests hard going. My main memory is the feeling of relief when I passed!

What made you decide to study abroad and how did you decide where to go?

As an undergraduate I went on study trips to France, Holland and Germany with the Conservatoire organ department, and this whetted my appetite. I had already met and played to Susan Landale before deciding to audition for a place at Rueil-Malmaison, and the wealth of instruments and organ tradition in Paris made studying there a must.

How did you feel as a British organist arriving in Germany and hearing German organists of your age studying alongside you?

Germany was a very steep learning-curve—it was quite overwhelming to start with and I spent several months getting to grips with the language before auditioning at Cologne. Many of the German students in the soloist class with me had already studied on the church music course for six years where they received thorough training in organ and improvisation, choral and orchestral conducting, music theory and history, singing, second study instrument, liturgy and hymnology—quite different from our hands-on approach with organ scholarships, experiencing all the ups and downs of the job straight away. Being abroad allowed me to see things from a different perspective, and it was only when I returned home that I realised how much I had learned.

How have you benefited from the experience of entering competitions and what advice would you give to young organists about to enter their first competition?

Competitions have played an important part in my musical development since leaving music college and have helped me to get established. I have learned a great deal about every aspect of organ playing by preparing and performing new repertoire, experiencing new instruments, talking to jury members and hearing others play—as well as making some good friends. My advice to young organists would be: be really well prepared and give several performances of the programme before the one that counts; always listen to registrations in the building; and stay focused on the music throughout the competition.

Did you ever think of following the traditional British route as an organist into the world of church/cathedral music?

Yes, but having held several cathedral and church posts, I decided in 2004 to concentrate solely on playing and teaching. I still keep my hand in though, and do some service playing with the Birmingham University Singers on their cathedral visits and annual weekend at St Michael's, Tenbury. I also share an organist post with my wife at All Saint's, Bromsgrove, which houses an unusual, small mechanical-action instrument by Tamburini.

Could you describe a typical week in your professional life?

During term, my time is usually divided equally between teaching and practising/performing. I combine recital playing with working at the University of Birmingham as University Organist and teaching both at the Birmingham Conservatoire and at the St Giles International Organ School. I also teach piano and organ at the Conservatoire Junior Department on Saturdays where we have some promising youngsters coming through. I find the combination of teaching and playing rewarding, and enjoy having the freedom to travel and the time to think about music.

Are you optimistic about the future of organ music, both in and out of church, in this country and abroad? What should players, promoters and, indeed, the RCO be doing to attract the next generation of organists and audiences?

I am optimistic. There are so many young organists coming to study in Europe from countries such as South Korea, and more courses and competitions on offer than ever before. In this country I think

we need to reach more children in state schools and give them the opportunity to play the organ. It is important that youngsters understand that the organ is an instrument with a repertoire like the piano or violin, and not just a machine in church that accompanies hymns and provides background music. Education projects and courses like the RCO Bridgwater Hall project and Oundle for Organists are already doing a fantastic job in educating young people from all backgrounds, and the St Giles Organ School is doing great work in raising standards in organ playing in all age ranges too.

Do you have a favourite style of organ, and which instruments have particularly inspired you?

Probably Romantic and late Baroque organs in France, Germany and Holland; particularly organs by Cavaillé-Coll, Spaeth, Hildebrandt and Schnitger. Though very different, I also enjoyed playing the Marcussen organs in Denmark.

Could you share some of your future plans with us?

I have recitals coming up in Poland, France, Germany and the UK (St Albans) and, next year, I will be playing a complete Messiaen cycle in Birmingham. Plans for 2009 include ten recitals in Scandinavia.

What do you enjoy doing in your spare time?

I enjoy being with family and friends.

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