

## Tuesday 5 April: Talk on Jehan Alain by Stephen Farr

When Stephen Farr played Jehan Alain's 'Litanies' in a concert in Montreal, a critic there wrote that the music had been played too fast. It had whizzed by, blurring details as it went. In his fascinating lecture on Alain at St. Mary Magdalene's Church, Enfield, on 5 April, Stephen Farr recalled this critical review, but pointed out that Alain's own instructions were that the piece should be played as fast as possible. Even if some individual notes were obscured this music should be coruscating. It was not to sound like 'a jolly French toccata', but to reflect Jehan's grief at the death of his sister Odile in a tragic mountain accident in the early 1930s.

This account was one of many insights in Stephen's highly informative talk. We learned that Jehan had come from a highly musical family: his father had been *titulaire* at St.Germain-en-Laye, and Jehan himself had studied with Dupré at the Paris Conservatoire. His sister's death had contributed to the haunting, enigmatic quality of 'Les Trois Danses', with their highly complex rhythms.

It was interesting to learn about Alain's less well-known work, including the early 'Lucis Creator' variations of 1932. *La Suite*, a transcription for Les Amis de l'Orgue in 1936, showed his individual voice, and his two sketches 'Christe Eleison' and 'Amen' were fragmentary, beautiful pieces.

We learned that Alain was the organist at a synagogue in Paris, and there is a recording of him improvising there in 1938. He was influenced by oriental music, as is reflected in music such as *Deux Danses de Agni Yavishta* of 1934. It was surprising to discover that the theme on which 'Variations sur un thème de Clément Jannequin' was based was not actually composed by Jannequin, but by Alain himself. However, Stephen felt that the freshness and 'tenderness' of this work are more important than its provenance.

Stephen also referred to the difficulty of finding a reliable edition of Alain's work. Jehan revised and recopied his own work repeatedly, and Marie-Claire, who remains the authority on editions and interpretations of her brother's work, was 14 when he died in 1940. In addition Helga Schauerte retained the scores of several works, so no one person has been able to see all the MS. However, Stephen recommended the most recent Barenreiter edition of Alain's organ music. (January, 2011).

Stephen illustrated his talk by a careful selection of recordings of the music. The sound of one of Alain's most 'Gregorian' works, the 'Postlude pour l'office de complies' in the resonant acoustic of the Abbey of Somme was particularly memorable.

This was a fascinating and thought-provoking lecture, introducing much music that I, for one, was unfamiliar with. A most enjoyable evening.

*Stephen Jasper*

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## EDOA Organ Accompaniment Workshop Saint Francis Church, Welwyn Garden City - 21<sup>st</sup> May 2011

We were a group of four from Potters Bar; two participants and two to observe the session. On first entering the church we were met by Terence who introduced himself. "I play at the local lunchtime recitals in Potters Bar" he said. Then we noticed a lady reading a complex organ score with a formidable pedal part. "Oh dear" my colleague whispered "perhaps we should all become observers"

The introductions provided some slight relief as most of the candidates seemed to be in a similar situation to us, having basic keyboard skills and a desire to assist the local congregation with their hymn singing. As the first participant took to the stool, he sought advice about basic pedal technique. "At least I can do the pedals" I thought. "I should impress them with that!"

I volunteered next. I had chosen a very simple hymn so I would have the capacity to impress with my elaborate changes of registration and swapping of manuals. I even hoped to get a few changes of volume with the swell pedal. After all, I seemed to be one of the few who had actually received organ tuition in the past.

I commenced with what I perceived to be a perfect introduction and a flawless accompaniment. "What could be wrong with that?" I thought.

"Did you realize the congregation had little idea of what was coming after the introduction?" I was asked. "It was played differently to the way it would be sung".

"Why make all those changes to the sound when all that is needed is to keep time?" I was told.

Having made the right choice of a simple hymn well within my capacity, I had detracted from the attention to purpose by making it overly complicated in its performance. What an excellent lesson this was proving to be!

The session continued with the greatest encouragement for those who had the least experience and there were very valid teaching points for those who thought they had it just right. This was my first introduction to the EDOA being a relative newcomer to local organ playing. It really is the right place for enthusiasts and performers of all abilities and levels of interest.

Oh, it turned out that Terence was the President of the Association. And the lady reading the complex score....well, she was just looking at the score!

*Simon Wood*

Part time volunteer organist – Our Lady and Saint Vincent Church, Potters Bar

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### **A further comment on the workshop from our president Terence Atkins:**

Our 'Church Organists' Clinic', on the morning of Saturday 21 May at St Francis', Welwyn Garden City, concentrated on the basics of hymn playing. There is to be a follow-up session in the autumn and it is hoped that there will be further workshops of this kind.

Our last newsletter announced that it would be "friendly and supportive" and it certainly was so in the capable hands of Roger Carter, who cannot be thanked enough for his skilful tutoring. Simon Wood has written about his experience as one of the participants.

There were nine in all (a goodly number) and, thanks to Roger, all became satisfied customers. Not only was Roger patient and encouraging, but every point was explained with a clarity that could only be envied. Even those of us who were there as observers (and perhaps think we know a thing or two) will have benefited as Roger stressed such basics as "1-2-3-off-breath" [as appropriate] and "knees together".

This event was more than a success, it was the EDOA at its very best. As well as to Roger, thanks are also due to Robin for introducing the St Francis organ and to his wife Mary for the refreshments. By the way, the youngest player was 15, but the youngest observer was one year old Samuel Hennin, who was as good as gold!