

Inaugural Recital at St Mary's, Ponsbourne (Newgate Street)

Tuesday April 29th

The survival of high quality pipe organs from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is generally something to be welcomed as a valuable part of our musical and cultural heritage, and all the more so when an instrument has been fortunate enough to have escaped unwise or unwarranted alteration to its original tonal and mechanical structure.

Such is the case at St Mary's, Ponsbourne, where the charming J.W. Walker organ of 1858 has just undergone a complete and sensitive restoration by Mander Organs.

The specification is as follows:

GREAT (C-g'' 56 notes)

Open Diapason 8

Dulciana 8 (tenor C)

Stopped Diapason Bass 8 (12 notes)

Stopped Diapason Treble 8 (tenor C)

Gamba 8 (tenor C)

Flute 4

Twelfth 2 $\frac{2}{3}$

Fifteenth 2

SWELL (c-g'' 44 notes)

Double Diapason 16

Open Diapason 8

Stopped Diapason 8

Principal 4

Fifteenth 2

Oboe 8

PEDAL (C-e' 29 notes)

Pedal Open 16

3 Composition Pedals to Great Organ

COUPLERS

Swell to Great

Great to Pedal

The work on the organ in 2013 has involved full restoration of action and soundboards, a new pedalboard, and painstaking rejuvenation of the artwork on the case pipes. The bass pipes of the Great Gamba have also been moved off the main soundboard, enabling the swell shutters to open fully.

The result is the reinstatement of a charming mid-nineteenth century instrument, though retaining a few later stop changes.

William McVicker's recital programme for the organ's official inauguration showed many of its sounds to advantage, and attempted to include the kind of music that might have been played on it in its earlier life.

Beginning with the ubiquitous 'Bach' *Tocatta and Fugue in d* (the essential 'crowd-pleaser'), to which a few stylish accretions were added, the programme continued with Hollins' *In*

Spring-Time – a piece richly imbued with the composer’s charm, and showing off some of the lighter colours of the organ.

At this point John Mander stepped forward to describe some of the work recently carried out on the instrument, couched in terms that would avoid baffling or boring those non-organists and non-musicians present.

William McVicker’s next musical offering was a *Fantasia on Old Welsh Airs* by William Faulkes – a onetime popular organist-composer whose larger-scale Organ Sonata in d is well worth investigating. The piece included, perhaps inevitably, *Men of Harlech* and *Ar hyd y nos*, although the remaining two Welsh melodies used in the piece were well-nigh impossible for non-natives to spot, let alone name!

Then came a piece of bombastic froth by Claude Balbastre entitled *Cannonade* (sounds like a fizzy drink!) As William explained, Balbastre was one of a number of Parisian church organists suddenly made redundant following the French Revolution, and reduced to writing comic baubles for public dinners. Such a piece is *Cannonade*, which cries out for a large organ with rasping and rudely-voiced reeds to draw out its full potential. Despite the player’s best efforts, the Ponsbourne instrument made the intended gunfire effects sound more akin to childish burping, and the entertainment value was indeed brief.



Dr William McVicker and John Pike Mander
at St Mary’s, Ponsbourne
Photo by Morwenna Brett

It was much more pleasurable to hear the *Five Portraits* by William Lloyd-Webber (to my mind, a much more interesting and gifted composer than his elder son). Each of the five well-contrasted pieces was a musical portrait of a named person (or animal), and featured ‘Carol’,

who got a Lyric Piece, 'Imogen', represented in a Fairy Tale, 'Elizabeth' and her Valse de Ballet, 'Justine', with a Romance, and lastly, and most entertainingly, 'Mandy and Dula' – Burmese Blues. This quintet of short pieces gave ample opportunity to demonstrate a range of softer sounds on the organ, as well as full ensembles, and was much appreciated by the audience.

Before the final piece, John Mander again came forward to entertain us with some recollections from former years in the history of the family firm. Particularly amusing and memorable was his account of finding, and then damaging, an illicit key to the Sultan of Oman's palace

The recital then concluded with a rumbustious, though well-wrought, March which, coming from the pen of the well known astronomer Patrick Moore, bore the understandable title *Halley's Comet*. With the ear-tickling sounds and effects of this piece, and its sometimes almost Elgarian/Waltonian harmonic and melodic touches, the official part of a most enjoyable evening came to a close, and both organist and organ builder were greeted with warm applause from the assembled company. Wine and nibbles then provided a more than fitting accompaniment to social chatter, during which I found myself engaged in a lengthy and absorbing conversation with a former member of the Mander team, Dennis Wells.

Peter Smith



Organ console at St Mary, Ponsbourne
Photo by Morwenna Brett