

The Organ in Stuart and Georgian England (1603-1784), Merton College, Oxford, 10-13 April 2008 – Conference Report.

DAVID SHUKER

With the exception of a brief torrential downpour while the conference delegates were safely installed in the chapel of Magdalen College, the second Oxford organ conference took place under gloriously sunny, but chilly, April skies. Following on directly from the highly successful first conference which covered a period that ended with the death of Elizabeth I, this conference moved on to a period that ended with the great Handel commemoration in Westminster Abbey in 1784.

The conservative architectural style of Oxford has its roots deep in the medieval origins of the colleges, with the result that the Palladian style usually associated with grand buildings of the period considered by the conference had little impact on university buildings constructed at that time. **Barrie Clark**, in the opening presentation of the conference pointed out that it was the rather more brash Baroque influence that was most likely to confront Oxford conservatism with its attachment to medieval gothic. Christopher Wren's first major building was the Sheldonian (1664-8) that was based on the design of Roman theatres. An organ was first installed there in 1669 for use in ceremonial and academic occasions — a role that was in many respects clearer than that for church organs at the same period. In the pre-Reformation church, organs had been used as a substitute for singing (if nothing else to avoid vocal exhaustion). However, as **John Caldwell** amply demonstrated, in the post-Reformation world new roles had to be found for the organ. Innovation came from the Chapel Royal or the Cathedrals and the use of organs for accompaniment slowly developed. As parish churches began to acquire organs more varied styles of accompaniment developed, sometimes attracting adverse comment (such as that in *Musicks Monuments* of 1676 by Thomas Mace). At a distance of almost 300 years the practices of congregational singing of the period around 1700 really do have the characteristics of a foreign land. Delegates found the singing of Psalm 100, very ably introduced and led by **Terence Charlston**, at considerably less than snail's pace a disconcerting experience.

The gradual appearance of organs in parish churches from the end of the seventeenth-century onwards was as much a sign of the great changes in the relationship between church and society rather than a manifestation of liturgical intentions. Prominently displayed organs were, according to **William Jacob**, a status symbol for the urban gentry. Church building and rebuilding projects were accompanied by investments in comfortable fittings and seating arrangements that reflected contemporary preoccupations with status and hierarchy. The fashions of City of London churches were soon reflected in provincial cities as the increasing industrial prosperity followed its course throughout the eighteenth-century.

Between 1650 and 1800 a gradually increasing prosperity allowed enquiring minds to explore both the inner, as well as the wider, worlds. In fact one was facilitated by the other – great voyages of discovery became easier once reliable chronometers allowed the determination of longitude. The elaboration of isochronous oscillations as a characteristic of pendulums, by Hooke, Huygens and others led to the development of hairspring movements that allowed the manufacture of robust and portable timepieces. This in turn led to the concept of musical pitch defined as a number of oscillations of waves in both strings and air. In his usual effervescent style, **Allan Chapman** described how Robert Smith, the Master of Trinity College, Cambridge measured the frequency of a Dallam *d'* pipe in the college chapel. His value of 262 cycles per second is somewhat low by modern standards (equivalent to $A=409$) but the mathematical derivation of the result is nonetheless impressive. Smith's mathematically challenging *Harmonics* of 1749 was in many ways a groundbreaking book and inspired at least one young musician, William Herschel, to follow a track that ultimately led him out of music into astronomy.

The first day of the conference was rounded off by a splendid concert of English organ music given by members of BIOS on the restored 1790 John Donaldson organ in the Holywell Room. Voluntaries by John Stanley and Jonas Blewitt and concertos by Stanley, William Hayes, Thomas Arne and Handel were played with consummate skill by **David Ponsford, Anne Page, Stephen Farr** and **Peter Williams**. The concertos were supported by an excellent and disciplined small band of strings and woodwind. This was a unique opportunity to experience eighteenth-century organ concertos in a venue that was functioning as a concert hall, one of the first of its kind when it opened in 1748, at the time when many of the items in the programme were composed.

There is nothing quite like being where it happened to appreciate the real significance and problems of piecing together the archaeological fragments that often characterise the history of British organs. The history of the organs of Magdalen College Chapel from 1597 to 1736 provided **John Harper** with several problems to resolve. The organ had been at all the cardinal points of the compass various times, finally coming to rest over the screen the early eighteenth-century, having been located at one time in a purpose-built organ house on the south wall. These movements have often been associated with changes in appointments, and consequent views, of Visitors, Presidents and Organists of Magdalen.

The history of some of the non-collegiate organs of Oxford was revisited by **Harry Johnstone**. Ralph Dallam built a small organ for the Music Faculty (*Schola Musicae*) in 1667. Bernard Smith built a small organ for the Sheldonian Theatre in 1671 and this was used for annual music lectures from 1678 onwards. Smith also built an organ for St Mary's Church in 1681. Harris built a new organ for the Sheldonian in 1725 and the keyboards of this instruments were discovered in the museum of the Royal Military School of Music at Kneller Hall.

The ability of some of the Oxford colleges to maintain rituals and music that ran counter to prevailing trends was amply illustrated by **Alex Shinn** in his account of the seventeenth-century organs in the chapel of Corpus Christi College. Thomas Dallam's organ for the college was installed in 1618 as part of the college's centenary celebrations. Prior to that music in the college chapel had survived the turbulent 1560s. However, eventually the outside world did intrude into the largely Laudian rites of the small chapel and the organs were removed under Parliamentary Accord in 1654. In Cambridge, the *realpolitik* of the early seventeenth-century was no less problematic. The entry of Elizabeth I into King's College was in 1561 accompanied by vocal and organ music but the organ was removed in the late sixteenth-century by Provost Goode. **Nicholas Thistlethwaite** recounted the subsequent to-ings and fro-ings of the King's College chapel organ culminating in the removal of the Dallam organ in 1643. The vicissitudes of the seventeenth-century could however be seen as encouraging an interesting phase in the development of the British organ. The move of the Dallam clan to Brittany in the early part of the century was in itself nothing unusual. However, the Dallams thrived as organ-builders in their new location and built many organs. Indeed, as **Martin Renshaw** suggested, the question might be posed as to whether the Breton Dallam organs are English or rather that the post-Restoration Dallam organs are French in their conception.

The working practices of eighteenth-century organ-builders can be quite difficult to establish. It takes perhaps the insight of a working organ-builder to appreciate the significance of the fragments of information that we do have. Taking as his example Thomas Swarbrick (1679-1752), **Dominic Gwynn** worked through the key stages in the life of this organ-builder. Swarbrick appears to have spent quite a bit of time working on his own, although he did have several employees at one stage in his career. The necessity of having sufficient capital to build one's first organ provides a major hurdle to progress. Being part of a network of artisans in the Midlands appears to be one way in which Swarbrick advanced his career.

Unraveling the origins of the St Mary Matfelon Organ Trophy may indicate links between organ-builders and other craftsmen. The Trophy that is currently on display in St Botolph Aldgate had been recovered from the ruins of St Mary Matfelon following a disastrous fire in 1880. **Benjamin**

Hebbert summarised the iconographical and stylistic evidence that suggests that it was carved in the seventeenth-century. The detail and pose of the central figure of King David is almost identical with a known Grinling Gibbons carving. The musical instruments depicted on the panel are clearly seventeenth-century. Unfortunately, in the absence of independent evidence of its provenance none of the above is conclusive. Nonetheless the dimensions and style of the Trophy suggest that it once formed part of an organ case. The seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries were probably a 'Golden Era' for British organ case design. **John Norman** explored the origins of the inspiration for some of the early stages noting, for example, the remarkable similarity between the case of the organ at St Savin-en-Lavedan (one of the oldest organs in France) and the Dallam case for the 1631 Great Organ at Magdalen. In the eighteenth-century a more distinctive British style of case designs were developed. For example, Renatus Harris developed a highly individual style of case decoration based on reclining angels over the cornices.

Whatever organ-builders did to decorate their cases, it is clear that organists had to deal with changing roles for organs during the Commonwealth and after the Restoration. **Christopher Kent** explored some of changes in performance techniques during this period. Notably, figuring of bass lines began to appear in organ parts in the latter half of the seventeenth-century, leading to the development of the organ as *basso continuo* in some parts of the repertoire. Throughout the eighteenth-century the well-known form of the English voluntary became well-established. Although arising from extemporisation, a number of organists found that there was a market for fully written out compositions published in sets that made use of the conservative tonal palette of the growing number of parish church organs. **John Collins** exemplified this with a overview of the various formats and compositional styles in a set of voluntaries published by Bristol organist Robert Broderip. A number of provincial organists published sets of voluntaries with the indomitable John Marsh being one of the most prolific.

The second day concluded with a splendid concert of verse anthems and voluntaries in Jesus College chapel. The chapel organ was built by William Drake in 1993 and is broadly based on the style of Abraham Jordan with some concessions to modern requirements (full compass swell and pedal division). Verse anthems by William Croft, John Weldon, Maurice Greene and William Boyce were given spirited renditions from the west gallery by **Emily van Evera** (soprano), **James Bowman** (countertenor), **Daniel Turner** (tenor) and **Gregory Skidmore** (baritone). The organ was played by **John Wellingham** who also provided interspersed voluntaries by Greene and William Walond.

Of the many innovations that Handel contributed to the musical canon, one of the most remarkable is his single-handed 'invention' of the organ concerto. The first to appear (HWV 290, Op. 4 No. 2 in B \flat) was an immediate success and, with a number of others that soon followed suite, has never been out of print since its appearance in March 1735. It is something of a mystery why Handel decided to compose the organ concertos but **Graham Cummings** reviewed the available evidence to suggest that it might have been a way to tip the scales in Handel's favour in the context of a highly competitive atmosphere for Italian opera in London theatres in the 1730s. Mystery also surrounds the instruments that Handel used but surviving evidence suggests that the early concertos were composed for organs of modest size, most likely chamber organs. It appears that Handel directed operas and oratorios with his back to the audience. The scale of London stages leading to a quite substantial separation of choruses from the conductor led **Peter Holman** to suggest that an organ with a 'long movement' would have been required, where the organ itself sounded at the rear of the stage to keep everyone in time. Furthermore, the clear requirement for both organ and harpsichord accompaniment in many works seems to imply a claviorgan-type arrangement where a coupler of some sort would permit a rapid transition from one to the other. 'Long-movements' were used in several situations outside the theatre, not least in the Westminster Abbey Handel Commemoration concert in 1784.

Perhaps the greatest mystery, and the one which will never be completely resolved by its very nature, relates to the realisation of the *ad libitum* passages in Handel's organ concertos. In 1988 **Peter Williams** published an edition of the Op. 7 concertos with full realisations but suggested that he would do things quite differently today. As demonstrated during his talk, and during the Holywell concert, Peter Williams based his realisations on other sketched works by Handel that require the elaboration of plain chords into fantasias. The possibility of some communication between J.S. Bach and Handel, however indirect, is also indicated by episodes in the concertos and possibly facilitated by the networks of London-based German community – this latter aspect is deserving of greater study.

The legacy of Handel's invention of the organ concerto is more than 200 concertos by British composers between the 1730s and the early nineteenth-century. **Peter Lynan** examined the reasons why so many organ concertos came to be written and why the form disappeared by about 1820. Again, Handel's precedent set the tone when it came to publication, with recognisable versions that were published in a form that was accessible for the competent amateur but leaving the professional performer scope to embellish a concert version. As the pianoforte became more popular towards the end of the century the concertos became more virtuosic and the concerto genre moved into the wholly professional domain. The rightful place of Handel on the musical Pantheon was underlined by **Pierre Dubois** in his imaginative description of the ideological semiotics of the organ concertos. With reference to contemporary quotations Dubois uncovered four categories of 'signs' that might explain why Handel's concertos were so influential, namely, their theatricality and religiosity (the latter in a very eighteenth-century latitudinarian sense), that Handel was seen as a 'natural' genius and that the concertos added a higher dimension to the words of the operas and oratorios (homiletics).

The contemporary association of organs with churches makes it difficult to appreciate that 300 years ago there were probably many more organs in homes, theatres and taverns. These chamber organs have been a focus of **Michael Wilson's** interest for many years. This lecture concentrated on the design of chamber cases and highlighted the influence of Chippendale's *Directory* of 1754 on Snetzler's case design with glazed doors serving both to keep out dust as well as creating a piece of fine furniture. By the late eighteenth-century makers such as Samuel Green and James Davis made cases that could be simple almost to the point of austerity yet based on designs that were attractive and balanced.

In an accomplished lecture-recital **Terence Charleston** introduced delegates to the unjustly neglected Albertus Bryne, whose career spanned to turbulent decades of the mid 1600s. One of Bryne's innovations was the composition of a Suite in A minor comprising 'Allmaine, Corant, Saraband and Jigg Allmaine' – one of the first of its kind – that survives in at least four copies and his music was still being played into the eighteenth-century. Bryne was organist of St Paul's but his tenure in that post suffered from the various catastrophes that befell the cathedral in 1642 and 1666. His command of keyboard technique was held in high regard by contemporaries

The delicate balance required for successful cohesion between the seventeenth-century chamber organ and consorts of viols became apparent during a workshop/concert held in Merton Chapel. **James Collier** has undertaken the task of reconstructing the Dean Bargrave organ that survives in part at Canterbury Cathedral. Whilst the project is not yet complete, two ranks of pipes (all wood) are now playable. The difficulties of rediscovering the techniques used by seventeenth-century organ-builders were underlined by **Dominic Gwynn** who demonstrated the problems of voicing the narrow-scaled pipes that must have been used in the Bargrave organ. Nonetheless, when it works the effect is very subtle with the organ blending in extremely well with a consort of viols. The performance of a Lawes fantasia illustrated how the availability of the reconstructed organ allows some informed discussion of the likely performance practice of this important seventeenth-century repertoire.

The third day concluded at Merton with a splendid meal and after-dinner speech outlining the distinctive features of the English cathedral choral sound by **Edward Higginbottom**.

There is a lot of information about registrations and tempi used for British organ voluntaries in the eighteenth-century but it is widely dispersed. **Calvert Johnson** has gathered together the available data from a range of sources to construct a series of databases which will provide fertile resources for future research. There is little information available on registration or tempi before 1730 but from that point early practices quickly became somewhat uniform and are to be found in several compilations of recommendations published in the later years of the century, notably those by John Marsh, Jonas Blewitt and Francis Linley.

In situations where information is scarce or hard to find, the tenacity of researchers can often pay handsome dividends. **Joan Jeffrey** presented some of what is known about organs in Canterbury Cathedral in the years following the Restoration, including an example of finding an important document relating to an organ built by Lancelot Pease only to see it disappear into 'the system' and then to re-emerge only by making frequent requests as to its fate. The Dean Bargrave organ described earlier is likely to have been used for the installation of Archbishop Juxon in 1660. Bills and correspondence have yielded important clues about the intense activity in Canterbury to enable business to return to something like normal as quickly as possible after the Restoration.

One of the characteristics of British eighteenth-century organ is a lack of pedal organs. However, one exception to this is to be found in accounts of the organ at Westminster Abbey in the later decades of the century. **David Knight** provided evidence to show that the Abbey organist Benjamin Cooke was writing music on three staves as early as 1771 and that this is also the likely date for the organ to have pedals. It is also possible that Cooke may have been aware of some of the music of J.S. Bach. The Westminster Abbey organ may be particularly significant with respect to the introduction of separate pedal organs in late eighteenth-century England.

The final lecture in the conference was given by **José Hopkins** with the able assistance of **Martin Renshaw** in an entertaining demonstration that organ-builders and their families knew how to have a little fun. René Harris junior (?1678-1737) is known to have composed a number of songs and was a well-known figure in the London theatres of the 1720s. One of Harris songs – 'The Charmer' – was given a spirited rendition by Martin Renshaw accompanied on the organ by José Hopkins, showing that twenty-first century organ-builders can sing too!

John Brennan organised a post-conference tour of three Oxford college chapel organs – Queen's (Frobenius), Jusus (Drake) and St. John's (Aubertin).

The second conference was a blend of scholarly research and music-making that brought some of the organs and the organ repertoire of the Stuart and Georgian eras back to life. Katie Pardee and Melvin Hughes deserve a huge vote of thanks from BIOS for their sterling efforts in organising this conference. The third conference in the series will be held in April 2009 at Wadham College, Oxford, and will bring us to the nineteenth century.