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Author(s): John Rowntree

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Renaissance of a Macclesfield Organ

Ohrmann & Nutt, 1803/1983

John Rowntree

St Alban's Roman Catholic Church, Macclesfield, is a fine building by Pugin, dating from 1841. The organ there now was however originally built in 1803 by Ohrmann & Nutt for St Michael's Parish Church, Macclesfield, at a cost of £431.16s plus £2.2s for 'ornaments'. Ohrmann appears to have been a Swede and foreman to Snetzler. In 1885 a local antiquarian, I.A. Finney, was largely responsible for the acquisition of the organ by St Alban's. According to the Sperling ms it had the following stops:

<i>Great</i>	<i>Choir</i>	<i>Swell</i>
Open Diapason	Stopped	Open Diapason
Stopped	Diapason	Stopped
Diapason	Dulciana	Diapason
Principal	Principal	Principal
Twelfth	Flute	Fifteenth
Fifteenth	Fifteenth	Sesquialtera
Sesquialtera	Cremona	French Horn
Mixture		Hautboy
Trumpet		

Ten Pedal Pipes

This specification would seem to date from after 1843. The pedal pipes had been added in 1835 and considerable work was done to the Swell in 1846. In 1925 the organ was rebuilt by Gray & Davison, including a new action and some changes to the stop-list. Sadly, in 1939, Gray & Davison mutilated the organ by dividing the case and placing the two halves, reversed, on either side of the gallery, with the Swell box sticking out of the top of one side. It was an acoustic and architectural disaster. By 1981 the state of the organ was parlous, the 1920s action was defunct and the case was collapsing.

Under the parish priest, Father Christopher Dwyer, the church interior was about to be restored and so, in 1981, the organ came under scrutiny. Examination of the interior of the organ by the present writer showed that a good deal of original pipework had survived and did not appear to have been changed in character or pitch. The surviving pipework was:

<i>Great</i>	<i>Choir</i>	<i>Swell</i>
Open Diapason	Stopped	Open Diapason
Stopped	Diapason	(a few pipes)
Diapason	Dulciana	Stopped
Principal	Principal	Diapason
Fifteenth	Flute	(part)
	Fifteenth	Hautboy

A report was therefore made by the author, as Hon. Secretary of the Organ Advisory Group of the Society of St Gregory, the Roman Catholic advisory body, proposing restoration. A further detailed study of the pipework was made by David Wickens, whose help throughout the project has been of great benefit. His survey confirmed the presence of the original pipework and its connection with the 'Snetzler school'.

With Father Dwyer's encouragement, and that of Richard O'Mahony, the architect in charge of the restoration, it was decided to restore all the Ohrmann & Nutt pipework and case, to replace missing pipes and to make a new action, console and wind supply. The contract was awarded to Nigel Church at around £30,000. The first problem was the stop-list. Great and Choir were straightforward: the Twelfth, Sesquialtera, Mixture and Trumpet were to be replaced, the Choir left as it was. No evidence remained as to the original Swell stop-list, other than some nine Open Diapason pipes, most of the Stopped Diapason and all the Hautboy, all from *g*. It was finally decided

to use the Open Diapason pipes as part of the Great Twelfth and to place the Stopped Diapason and Hautboy in a small swell box above the Choir and make them playable from the Choir key from *g*. The Gray & Davison Bourdon was also kept on the Pedal.

No evidence could be found of Ohrmann & Nutt's practice with regard to layout but the case suggested that the new Great and Choir chests be placed one behind the other on the same level. A new suspended tracker action of wood was made and the organ wound from two wedge bellows. The console was made to similar dimensions to those of the Snetzler organ at Rotherham. The new flue pipework was scaled to match the extant Ohrmann & Nutt material and the Trumpet was modelled on surviving Snetzler material at Heaton Hall and Rotherham. As so often in England the mixtures presented some difficulty. Finally the composition of the Sesquialtera III and Mixture III were derived from Snetzler material at Ludlow. A case could be presented for the Mixture's having either II or III ranks; it is however placed on two slides so that future generations may cut out one rank if they wish.

Wind pressure, pitch and temperament were arrived at empirically from the old pipes. The pitch is about normal at 50°, the working temperature in the church.



The temperament that emerged was very similar to the 18th-century English temperament given in the *British Institute of Organ Studies Journal* (1979, p.91). The wind pressure is $2\frac{2}{16}$ ". The organ had originally had mitres on the outer towers and a crown on the centre tower. By 1981 these were missing and it was decided to replace them with three new mitres. As 1982 was the year of the visit of Pope John Paul the centre mitre has emblems from his coat of arms, those on the outer towers having emblems from the coats of arms of the Shrewsbury Diocese, in which Macclesfield is situated, and of the Westminster Diocese out of which the Shrewsbury Diocese was formed.

The final specification is:

<i>Great</i>	<i>Choir</i>
Open Diapason	Stopped Diapason
Stopped Diapason	Dulciana
Principal	Principal
Twelfth	Flute
Fifteenth	Fifteenth
Sesquialtera III	Stopped Diapason (in Swell)
Mixture III	
Trumpet	Hautboy (in Swell)

Pedal
Bourdon

Couplers Great to Pedal, Choir to Pedal, Choir to Great

Mixture compositions
Sesquialtera C 17.19.22
c' 15.17.19
c'' 15.17.17

Mixture C 22.26.29
c 15.19.22
g' 8.12.15

The intention of restoring the original case and pipes, completing the stop-list (insofar as it seemed feasible), and providing new windchests, action and wind supply in harmony and sympathy with the original material of Ohrmann & Nutt has been fulfilled. The result is an organ able to fulfil its role in the liturgy of today with a gentle ease. Its warm, unforced tone is indeed 'sweet and melodious', its action is responsive and its case handsome. The outcome is surely one of which St Alban's can be proud, one from which much can be learnt and one which amply confirms the statement in the Constitution on the Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council: 'Preference is to be given to the pipe organ, for it is the traditional musical instrument which adds a wonderful splendour to the church's ceremonies and powerfully lifts up man's mind to God and higher things'.

the singers never sound overwhelmed in the vigorous D major choruses with trumpets and drums. On the contrary, the orchestra could often have been placed further forward, at the risk of exposing some passages of less than perfect intonation.

Perhaps a Compact Disc would be the most appropriate medium for transmitting this compact performance, but Nonesuch's digital recording is on the whole excellent; I cannot applaud, though, their retrograde step of putting sides 1 and 4 on the same disc. The performance itself will engender much discussion, but if it causes conductors and performers to think afresh about the nature of this all-embracing masterpiece its influence can only be beneficial, even if one is left with the suspicion that it would all have sounded even better – and no less authentic – with three or four times as many singers.

MALCOLM BOYD

Schütz Psalmen Davids, vol.2. Soloists/
Dresdner Kreuzchor/Capella Fidicina/Flämig
Philips 9502 047

This is the second record of a projected set of four devoted to the 26 psalm settings published in Schütz's *Psalmen Davids* (1619). It includes several massive double-choir and polychoral concertato settings in the Gabrielian manner (e.g. *Zion spricht* swv46; *Nicht uns, Herr* swv43) as well as a couple of more modest but very expressive motet-like pieces (*Ist nicht Ephraim mein teurer Sohn* swv40; *Die mit Tränen säen* swv42). All these are early works, acknowledged by the composer as being 'auff Italienische Manier', and many are monumental and magnificent; but they lack the edgy brilliance that one might expect from a Gabrieli pupil, showing instead a more solemn approach to the serious business of praising God.

Schütz's instructions (in his preface to the volume) for the distribution of vocal and instrumental parts among the choirs are complex and open to a number of interpretations, but Martin Flämig has risen apparently undaunted to the challenge and provides a pleasing variety of instrumental colour to support both the massive blocks of choral sound and the more transparent solo vocal writing, involving cornetts, trombones, recorders and lutes, as well as string and brass choirs. The members of Capella Fidicina, the insert tells us, are from the musical instrument museum of Leipzig University and, although it is not made clear whether their instruments too belong there, the characteristic subdued string tone, natural trumpets and sombre trombones can leave us in no doubt as to their authenticity. Although the boy soloists are occasionally disconcertingly out of tune, the Dresdner Kreuzchor otherwise lives up to its fine historical tradition and gives splendid performances. The recording balance – specially important in antiphonal music – is generally good, though more prominence might have been given to the softer instruments, which often disappear beneath the rest.

JUDITH NAGLEY

RECORD REVIEWS

Bach Mass in B minor BWV232. Soloists/Bach Ensemble/Rifkin
Nonesuch 79036

Regular MT readers will be familiar with Joshua Rifkin's challenging and controversial theory that Bach's chorus at Leipzig normally included only a single voice to each part: four singers in all for most of the cantatas, five for the *Magnificat* and eight for the *St Matthew Passion*. He may be right (though I happen to think that the contrary evidence has yet to be effectively marshalled), but this new recording of the B minor Mass, in which Rifkin the conductor puts into practice the theories of Rifkin the scholar, hardly amounts to a convincing presentation of his case. The mass is, in fact, a strange choice for a piece of practical scholarship of this kind. Not only is it virtually certain that Bach never performed it complete (he may never have even envisaged such a performance), but the general thrust of Rifkin's arguments depends on a study of the original performing material (especially voice parts), and this exists for only two of the mass's four sections.

The recording may best be judged, then, on its own very considerable merits. Rifkin has that rare ability to transform scholarly insight into a clear aural conception, and the still rarer one of communicating this to his performers. Leav-

ing aside the question of vocal forces, his interpretation convinces by frankly acknowledging the secular origins of much of the music. Tempos are sprightly (injuriously so in 'Laudamus te', I feel, but invigorating elsewhere), rhythms are well sprung, and the spirit of the dance is never far away. The five main singers, expanded to six for the Sanctus and to eight for the Hosanna and 'Dona nobis pacem', blend well in the choruses (if one may still use that term) and are generally equal to the demands Bach makes on them in solos and duets. I would not quibble about Rifkin's decision to use women's voices for the soprano parts, especially when the women are Judith Nelson and Julianne Baird, who both cultivate an appropriate vocal style and sing exceptionally well. The alto parts are sung by countertenors, with Jeffrey Dooley contributing an expressive 'Agnus Dei'. Frank Hoffmeister has an effortless and pleasing tenor voice, and Jan Opalach (bass) lacks only the roundness of tone that would have made his singing a perfect match for the unusually assured bassoon and horn playing in 'Quoniam tu solus sanctus'. The instrumental playing, on original instruments, is in fact one of the chief delights of this recording. How an orchestra of 20 would balance with such a small 'choir' in the Leipzig churches or at the Dresden court is, of course, something that cannot be judged from a modern recording, but