

RUBISLAW CHURCH

WILLIS ORGAN CELEBRITY RECITALS 2023

ANDREW FORBES

Friday 15th September, 2023

PROGRAMME:

Felix Mendelssohn (1809 – 1847)

Overture to Oratorio ‘St Paul’ arr. **William Thomas Best (1826 – 1897)**

William Byrd (1543 – 1623)

Fantasia in C

Grace-Evangeline Mason (b. 1994)

Where the Birds Sing (Scottish première)

Maurice Duruflé (1902 – 1986)

Prelude and Fugue on the name of **ALAIN**

Nico Muhly (b. 1981)

The Revd Mustard His Installation Prelude

J. S. Bach (1685 – 1750)

Chorale Prelude ‘An Wasserflüssen Babylon’ BWV 653

Louis Vierne (1870 – 1937)

Organ Symphony No.1 (op.14)

4. Allegro Vivace

5. Andante

6 Final

REVIEW:

This was the eighth in the series of ten celebrity organ recitals on the Rubislaw Church Father Willis Organ. I had read up on Andrew Forbes, Director of Music at Glasgow Cathedral. I knew he would be good. On my way to the recital, I thought, ‘This is sure to be good, but will there be anything new about it? We have already had seven top rate performers who have pressed all the surprise buttons. Can there be any more eye-openers?’ How wrong I was. Here was another top-ranking performer who had chosen a programme of music that was as sure to amaze as much as to delight the audience.

Andrew Forbes opened his recital with Mendelssohn’s *Overture to the Oratorio ‘St Paul’* in an arrangement for organ by W. T. Best. It begins with a slow hymn-like harmonisation of the tune *Wachet Auf*. Forbes shaped it nicely with attention to variation in dynamics. This led to splendidly flowing Bachian counterpoint where the music projected a feeling of seriousness and portent. The music demanded and got spirited pedal work. Overall as it developed, the music began to sound

quite orchestral with the use of different manuals. This was something that we were to hear more of in the final part of the recital.

Simpler in some senses but not in others was the next piece, the *Fantasia in C* by William Byrd. There were delicate flute sounds on the top manual, delightful in ornamentation. The music was enriched on the middle manual, a flowing performance with fast runs and lively dancing fingers. Andrew Forbes told us that the composer of the next piece, Grace-Evangeline Mason had dedicated *Where the Birds Sing* to all those touched by the Northern Irish Troubles. I discover that the music was inspired by the opening stanza of *Spring Quiet*, a poem by Christina Rossetti (1830 – 1894).

*Gone were but the Winter,
Come were but the Spring,
I would go to a covert
Where the birds sing:*

The birds were indeed singing in the complex fingering on the top manual – a pétillant passage of music. The birds were singing even more clearly from the middle manual. The music grew in contrapuntal complexity with a fine melody on the pedals. Here again the organ achieved an orchestral richness in this heartfelt music.

We moved on from a composer brought up in the West Midlands to the celebrated French composer Maurice Duruflé, a favorite of Andrew Forbes, he told us. This was the *Prelude and Fugue on the name of ALAIN*. Forbes demonstrated how the letters could be used as a five note musical theme. Within the piece there was also a melody by Jehan Alain (1911 – 1940) himself. From Alain's *Litanies* in fact. The music began with the organ playing in whispering tones with dancing hands and gentle pedals. The Prelude was overall a light-hearted optimistic piece played with sparkle by Andrew Forbes in dizzying trills. The theme from *Litanies* was explored and worked on and after a brief pause we were into the *Fugue*. The technical seriousness of the fugue was certainly all there but above it soared attractive melodic content. This was happy music and as it became more and more rich, Andrew Forbes made it swing. Of course, this was not jazz, but...

The American composer from Vermont, Nico Muhly sounded like good fun as Forbes described him. His piece, *The Revd Mustard His Installation Prelude* has nothing at all to do with Cluedo. Actually that was **Colonel** Mustard. The Revd James Mustard was a friend of the composer. He was Rector of the Church of St Mary the Virgin in East Barnet. Andrew Forbes told us to expect a piece full of perpetual motion and that is indeed what we got. The top part of the music was a complex twiddle-dance with a slow melody moving forward beneath. It was a real showpiece for organ and like its composer, good fun.

Andrew Forbes told us that he had chosen the next piece for a bit of relaxation. Well, surely not. You don't relax playing J. S. Bach. The title of the Chorale Prelude *An Wasserflüssen Babylon* translates as *By the Rivers of Babylon*. The clarinet stop on the lower manual was indeed absolutely delicious.

The final piece in the recital included the final three movements out of six from *Organ Symphony No. 1 Op. 14* by Louis Vierne. Once again I was delighted to hear some of this music having spent much time translating into English *La Musique D'Orgue Française de Jehan Titelouze à Jehan Alain* for the late Duncan Johnstone at Aberdeen University Music when I was in my early twenties. I read the detailed descriptions of this music without hearing it and not many recitalists choose to play it. But thank you Andrew Forbes for choosing to do so.

The fourth movement *Allegro Vivace* once again had those marvellous dancing hands and fingers. Melody stood out clearly and the organ as orchestra was there in abundance: flutes, reeds and bass changing from one to another. The *Andante* was quiet as promised. Strings possibly then

woodwinds and horn lower down? The *Finale* was marvellously exciting. Loud, fanfare-like and celebratory. A superb conclusion to a first-rate recital full of new music and fabulous new sound blends throughout. Just two to go. Nicholas Wearne on Friday 24th November and the amazing John Kitchen on Friday 8th December. Not to be missed!

ALAN COOPER