

# ***CATHEDRAL CHURCH OF St MACHAR, OLD ABERDEEN***

## ***THE THIRD OF FOUR ORGAN RECITALS***

***BAS WESTERHOF***

***Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> August 2023***

### **PROGRAMME:**

**J. S. BACH (1685 – 1750)**

*Wir danken dir, Gott BWV 29*

*Air from Suite No.3 BWV 1068 (Air on the G String)*

**Charles Marie Widor (1857 – 1934)**

*Organ Symphony No. 8 Finale: Tempo giusto*

*Moderato Cantabile*

**Jean Sibelius (1865 – 1957)**

*Finlandia Op. 26 (arranged for organ solo by Bas Westerhof)*

**Percy Whitlock (1903 – 1946)**

*Divertimento; Folk Tune (Four Extemporisations)*

**Louis Vierne (1870 – 1937)**

*Organ Symphony No. 1 Finale*

### **REVIEW:**

Bas Westerhof comes from Koog aan de Zaan, a suburb of Amsterdam. He plays regularly at the Church of the Apostolic Society, Zaanstad Region, Amsterdam. Being on holiday in the Aberdeen area, he offered to give a recital on the Willis Organ of St Machar's Cathedral in Old Aberdeen. For me, this was a very special recital indeed since it included music from two composers of French Organ Symphonies, Charles Marie Widor and Louis Vierne. I was familiar with the mention of these Symphonies because back in 1967-68, I wrote a translation of Norbert Dufourcq's *La Musique D'Orgue Française de Jehan Titelouze à Jehan Alain. (1949)*, for the late Duncan Johnston, an Aberdeen University organist, whose son is a minister in Aberdeen. I was delighted to find that Bas Westerhof gave the music its full Cavallé-Coll treatment. It worked astonishingly well on St Machar's fine Father Willis instrument.

However, it was with two pieces by J. S. Bach that Westerhof opened his recital with Dr Roger Williams standing by to help refine the stop changes. *Wir danken dir, Gott* comes from a Cantata which Bach composed for a large string orchestra with the addition of three trumpets, two oboes and kettle drums. Today's organ version was tremendously high-spirited and exciting. There were lively runs against forward moving chords chiming enthusiastically. The pedals told or should I say tolled their own musical story beneath the stormy manuals soaring magnificently above them. Bas Westerhof made the St Machar's organ tell out the separate yet beautifully well matched lines of music so clearly. It was a thrillingly complex performance. Simpler and totally lovely was the next

Bach piece, known popularly as *Air on the G String*. There are numerous versions of this music including a transcription for orchestra by Leopold Stokowski and a version sung without words by The Swingle Singers. Westerhof's version was delightful with the gently throbbing rhythmic pulse and tender string backing over which the famous melody rang out splendidly.

*Tempo giusto* from the Finale of Widor's Organ Symphony No. 8 had marvellous staccato chords over which capered chiming sometimes scalar runs. The organists of this period were trying to use the organ as an orchestra and I was amazed to watch Bas Westerhof's hands as they leapt from one manual to another, often for just one or two notes to give the impression of changing orchestral instruments. Overall, this music had a vast spacious feel to it. Has St Machar's organ ever sounded like this before. Yes, Ronald Leith's performances last week were fast and loud but to that, Westerhof's playing added a vast sweep of sound which surged over our heads and throughout the Cathedral. I understood what Norbert Dufourcq had been trying to say to me. The *Moderato cantabile* was simpler, gentle and alluring. Sound changes were longer lasting yet still with an orchestral sweep and Westerhof's control of dynamics shaped the piece splendidly well. I felt that with Widor's music Westerhof had made firm friends with the St Machar's organ and was thoroughly enjoying what it was able to do for him!

Possibly the most famous piece by Sibelius is *Finlandia Op. 26*. It was not composed for organ but Bas Westerhof with his own special arrangement proved that it could well have been. We heard the growling brass, the sweeping orchestra and the voices in the choral anthem. Once again, here was the organ as orchestra and even choir. I'm sure everyone in the audience enjoyed this as much as I did.

So, we had heard organ as orchestra. What about organ as organ. Well, Westerhof had this for us too in *Divertimento; Folk Tune* by Percy Whitlock. Busy yet gentle flutes and a delicate journey through four extemporisations (variations) sounded relaxing, calming and delightfully seductive. For his closing piece, Westerhof returned to the French symphonic organ school with Louis Vierne's *Finale from Organ Symphony No. 1*. It was not so full of multiple complex sound changes as the Widor, but it was still orchestral in breadth and hugely celebratory; a marvellous conclusion to a wonderfully entertaining recital.

There is one more concert to go in the series. Next Sunday, again at 4pm, Kamil Mika will be guest organist. He is absolutely brilliant, let me assure you, so his recital is definitely not to be missed!

ALAN COOPER