

RUBISLAW CHURCH

WILLIS ORGAN CELEBRITY RECITALS

THE FINAL RECITAL IN THE SERIES OF TEN

Dr JOHN P. KITCHEN MBE

Friday 8th December, 2023

PROGRAMME:

Tylman Susato (c. 1510 – 1570)

La Mourisque and Basse Danse Bergeret from The Danserye

G. F. Handel (1685 – 1759)

Overture In Samson

Allegro – Adagio – Allegro – Minuet

J. S. Bach (1685 – 1750)

Two organ chorales for Advent

Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland BWV 659

Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland BWV 661

Johann Pachelbel (1653 – 1705)

Toccata in D

Chorale variations on ‘Alle Menschen müssen sterben’

Cecilia McDowell (b. 1951)

Church bells beyond the stars (2013)

S. S. Wesley (1810 – 1876)

Holsworthy Church Bells

Michael Thomson (1949 – 2016)

The Bard’s Ceremonial

Whirly-granny

On the square: quick march

Egil Hovland (1924 – 2013)

Toccata: Nu la oss takke Gud (Now thank we all our God)

REVIEW:

This final organ recital in the series of ten was given by the amazingly brilliant Dr John Kitchen. All ten recitals have been thoroughly accomplished. I hope I do not upset any of the other nine performers if I write that this final recital went way beyond what we had already heard. Some of this resulted from the choice of music that Dr Kitchen had chosen to play. It was a broad sweep of pieces from the seriousness of Handel, Bach or Pachelbel to the early dance music of Susato, colourful pictorial music by Cecilia McDowall or Samuel Sebastian Wesley, equally colourful and happily entertaining pieces by Michael Thomson and an absolutely crazy Toccata by the Norwegian composer Egil Hovland. Quite a few of these pieces had been chosen because they had been played on this very organ in the past. The Handel *Overture* and *Holsworthy Church Bells* by Wesley were performed by Albert Lister Peace (1844 -1912) in Rubislaw on 28th November 1890. Dr Kitchen himself gave a recital in Rubislaw Church on 17th September 1995 when he played the pieces by Susato, and the *Chorale variations* by Pachelbel. Can I mention here that Dr Kitchen gave us a very special encore, his own variations on *Auld Lang Syne*. This was glorious. He even got the audience to sing along at the end. Since sadly, it is possible that this was the last music that will be heard on this organ in Rubislaw Church which is now closed, the tune was a fitting farewell to the instrument which has delighted audiences throughout 2023. Many thanks to Allan Bicket and his team of helpers.

I was familiar with the opening piece in the recital, *La Mourisque and Basse Danse Bergeret* by Tylman Susato since it was regularly played by Aberdeen's Early Music Ensemble, the Kincorth Waits conducted by my good friend Dr Charles V. Foster. John Kitchen's version however was more extravagantly colourful. Absolutely suitable for playing on this fine organ. Dr Kitchen really made it shine. Middle and upper manuals gave us orchestral variety of sound. There were rich chords, a busy right hand and a wonderful crescendo of an ending with pedals ringing out.

Handel's *Overture in Samson* was gleamingly bright with a dance-like forward sense of flow, in a marvellously rich and lavish performance. The *Minuet* with flutes had a delicious delicacy.

Dr Kitchen informed us that Bach had produced a number of Chorale Preludes based on the tune *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland*. Today he performed two of those, BWV 659 and BWV 661.

These, he told us would be very different, and indeed they were. The first with lower manual and pedals at the opening had an almost playful quality. The tune was made to sing out as a solo as the piece progressed. It was very attractive. The second Chorale Prelude was a demonstration of Bach's finest and most joyous contrapuntal writing, brilliantly played, of course.

The short *Toccata in D* by Pachelbel played as an introduction to the composer's *Chorale Variations on 'Alle Menschen müssen sterben'* was less extravagant with hands close together on one manual but nevertheless with considerable complexity of fingering, very attractive. The *Variations* were marvellously varied, the organ having almost orchestral variety from delicate flutes on the upper manual, reed stops, with the tune and the right hand having busy almost capering music. The finale was nothing short of glorious.

What followed was the more modern piece by Cecilia McDowall, *Church bells beyond the stars*.

Dr Kitchen demonstrated how McDowall had written a certain rhythmic irregularity into the passages of bell sounds. I reckon that would be realistic if the sounds of the bells were created by people tugging on ropes. It was amazing. Absolutely pictorial from the tinkling of smaller bells to the fearsome tolling sounds at the end of the piece.

Holsworthy Church Bells by S. S. Wesley was overall a more gentle piece as if the bell sounds were coming to us across a lovely sunlit pastoral landscape.

There followed three pieces by Michael Thomson who used to be organist at St Machar's Cathedral.

The first piece, *The Bard's Ceremonial* did indeed have a celebratory quality and its sense of Scottishness was quite pronounced. The second piece *Whirly-granny* refers to a kind of spinning chimney cowl. Look up and you will see some of these on older Aberdeen buildings. This was a strathspey with more than a touch of humour.

Mike Thomson's final piece, *On the square: quick march* took me back to when I was a small boy and television had not yet come to Aberdeen. I used to listen to the radio and in the school holidays I would enjoy a programme called *Worker's Playtime*. They would sometimes have an organist

possibly Sandy McPherson. He was a theatre organist and I remember that Mike Thomson was keen on the theatre organ. I once heard him play on the organ in the Capitol cinema. That organ is still there, hidden behind a wall, but some silly so and so cut through all the wires so it would be almost impossible to get it going again. The point I am making is that Mike Thomson's *On the square* would have sounded absolutely at home on *Worker's Playtime*.

The final piece in the official programme was Egil Hovland's *Toccata* on the hymn tune *Now thank we all our God*. Wow! Now, this really was something else. Virtuosity hardly begins to describe what John Kitchen achieved. Hands feet and everything went flying everywhere. It was modern sounding, crazy really, but very attractive too. I only hope that other organists in the audience do not decide to just give up after witnessing this!

ALAN COOPER