

CATHEDRAL CHURCH OF St MACHAR, OLD ABERDEEN

Second of Four Summer Organ Recitals

RONALD LEITH

Sunday 30th July 2023 4pm

PROGRAMME:

Johann Kuhnau (1660 – 1722)

Toccata in G Major

J. S. Bach (1685 – 1750)

Pastorale BWV590

Felix Mendelssohn (1809 – 1847)

Three variations on Wie groß ist des allmächt'gen Güte

Ernst Richter (1808 – 1879)

Phantasie Op.19

Max Reger (1873 – 1916)

Sicilienne Op.47

Sigfrid Karg-Elert (1879 – 1933)

Alla Bach from 33 Portraits Op.101

Carl Piutti (1846 – 1902)

Elegie

Fest-hymnus

REVIEW:

The second of four Summer Organ Recitals in St Machar's Cathedral was given by Ronald Leith, Organist of St Mary's Roman Catholic Cathedral in Huntly Street and Assistant Organist of St Machar's Cathedral, Old Aberdeen. His recital programmes always have fascinating composer connections. At a recital in Rubislaw Church in February this year, Ronald's chosen composers were related to one another as teachers and pupils. At today's recital, all the composers had connections with the City of Leipzig. In his warm welcoming introduction to the recital, Dr Roger Williams informed us that Leipzig is around one thousand miles away from Aberdeen. I looked it up. By bus, this would take over 35 hours. Dr Williams thanked Ronald Leith for bringing all seven Leipzig connected composers to us in St Machar's Cathedral on Sunday afternoon. Standing to attention by the organ, was Mr Allan Bicket, organist of Rubislaw Church as page turner, a challenging and important contributor to the success of any recital.

The first composer in the programme was Johann Kuhnau, J. S. Bach's predecessor as Cantor of Tomaskirche in Leipzig. We were to hear his *Toccata for Organ in G Major*. A toccata usually has

many complex running patterns often over strong chords. Kuhnau's runs were related to scale or arpeggio patterns settling the music strongly within the key of the piece. As the work developed threads of jaunty melody began to take shape. The melody became more sturdy and clear with fine contrapuntal working. This was a grand opening piece to which Ronald Leith's firm secure playing ensured a rich celebratory force.

J. S. Bach was Cantor of Tomaskirche for around 28 years, from 1722 till his death. Ronald had chosen the four movements of Bach's *Pastorale BWV590*. It opened with a gently lilting movement that gave the *Pastorale* its overall title. Could this have been related to a *Sicilienne*? The second movement featured tightly woven counterpoint with Ronald making the upper melodic line really sing out joyfully. In the third movement, a reed stop was set against dancing chords and in the finale, lively flute counterpoints led into a splendid fugal passage marked by fine steady playing, a must for Bach's music.

Felix Mendelssohn's connection with Leipzig is in his founding of the Conservatoire which is still running successfully to this day. Ronald Leith let us hear, simple and unadorned, the tune of the German Hymn '*Wie groß ist des allmächt'gen Güte*' on which Mendelssohn has written *Three Variations*, all very complex. The spirit of Bach shines through in this music but clad in rich romantic robes. The fullness and elaboration of the music was thoroughly seductive in its appeal. The third variation in particular sounded outgoing and ceremonial. It provided a fine introduction to the next piece by Ernst Richter. He taught composition and organ and became Director across time in all the Leipzig Churches. His *Phantasie Op.19* opened with ringing chords. Here was marvellously extrovert music mirrored in Ronald Leith's fervent energetic performance. It led into a more gentle and seductive melodic passage then, speeding up and becoming quite orchestral with contrasting sounds on different manuals, its counterpoint was supported by exceptionally outgoing pedal power including solos.

'Something quiet for a change' interjected Ronald. This was the first of two shorter pieces, Max Reger's *Sicilienne Op.47*. This was a delightful lilting dance, followed by Sigfrid Karg-Elert's *Alla Bach from 33 Portraits*. Originally for harmonium, Karg-Elert imitates the styles of composers from Palestrina to Schoenberg. Is there a sense of humour in these pieces? I was impressed by Ronald Leith's firm secure playing in this piece. Max Reger and Karg-Elert both attended and later taught at the Leipzig Conservatoire.

The final composer was completely new to me but we were to hear two of his pieces. Carl Piutti also attended and taught at the Conservatoire and later followed Kuhnau and Bach as Cantor of the Tomaskirche. His *Elegie*, quite an extended piece, flowed beautifully, then there followed his *Fest-hymnus* described by Ronald Leith in his programme note thus: '*If Wagner had written any original organ music, it would probably have sounded like the opening and ending of his Fest-hymnus*'. Yes, this was a marvellous rip-roaring conclusion to the concert. There was even, towards the end, a glorious trill on the pedals. Thank-you so much Ronnie for a marvellous performance introducing us to some great music which we had not heard before and which we would really love to hear again!

Alan Cooper