

RUBISLAW CHURCH

WILLIS ORGAN CELEBRITY RECITALS 2023

ROBIN BELL

Friday 30th June, 2023

PROGRAMME:

Bob Chilcott (b. 1955)

Sun Dance (from Organ Dances)

Flor Peeters (1903 – 1986)

Chorale Prelude (Op. 68) ‘How brightly shines the morning star’.

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685 – 1750)

Chorale Harmonisation ‘How brightly shines the morning star’.

Johann Sebastian Bach

Toccatà in F Major BWV 540

Johann Sebastian Bach

Pastorale Symphony, From Christmas Oratorio BWV 248

arr. Martin Setchell (b. 1949)

Scottish Pieces:

Robert Johnson (c. 1470 – after 1554)

Benedicam Domino

James Oswald (1710 – 1769)

Polwart on the Green (from A Sonata of Scots Tunes)

Geoffrey Atkinson (b. 1944)

A Little Liturgical Suite (1999)

1. Prelude: ‘Bonnie lass amongst the heather’

2. Plea: ‘I’ll bid my heart be still’

3. Postlude: ‘The Trumpeter of Fyvie’

James MacMillan (b. 1959)

Wedding Introit. Based on the Irish tune ‘She Moved Through the Fair’

French Organ Music:

Pierre Dumage (1674 – 1751)

Suite du premier ton

1. Tierce en taille

2. Basse de trompette

3. Grand Jeu

Eugène Gigout (1844 – 1925)

Toccatà (From Dix Pièces)

Review:

Robin Bell is currently organist at Stenhouse & Carron Parish Church, Stenhousemuir, Falkirk. He has taught music at Falkirk High School, Alloa Academy, Madras College and St. Leonards in St Andrews. He was administrator of the Scottish Churches Organist Training Scheme. He has been conductor of Cupar Choral Society for five years. In 2009 he received an honorary award from the Royal School of Church Music at a special service in Salisbury Cathedral in recognition of his contribution to Scottish Church Music. The programme for Friday's celebrity recital in Rubislaw Church lists so many more of his musical achievements. I have had to shorten that list in order to make room to discuss the mind blowing brilliance of his performance in Friday's concert. So far we have had six performers in the recital series, all of them first class, but along with Tom Wilkinson, I have to put Robin Bell at the top of the list, since every one of the ten items in Friday's programme had something truly momentous to recommend it.

Robin Bell himself said that his opening piece, *Sun Dance (from Organ Dances)* by Bob Chilcott was one of the most unusual introductory works he had ever used to open a performance. Although possibly not jazz in the full sense, it certainly was jazzy in the way Robin Bell described it. Rather like theatre or cinema organ music, I thought. The kind of music you would hear in the radio programme, *The Organist Entertains*, and entertainment was certainly at the very heart of Robin Bell's performance, from beginning to end.

Spiky stabbed chords were delivered through which emerged a rather seductive melodic line. As Robin Bell said, 'Now that I've got you all listening'. And he was right!

He went on to give us two splendid arrangements of the famous melody 'How brightly shines the morning star'. The first of these was the *Chorale prelude Op.68* by the Belgian organist and composer Flor Peeters. Sprite-like notes from both hands danced on flute stops to tickle the ears delightfully while the famous melody came through on the pedals. The pedals? Well, we were soon to hear far more from them. J. S Bach's *Chorale Harmonisation* was to follow with rich harmonies and fine counterpoints making the famous theme resound magnificently from the marvellous Rubislaw organ.

This was the first of three pieces by J. S. Bach which we were to hear. The second was the *Tocatta in F Major BWV 540*. It was in this piece that we were to hear, and thanks to the television monitor screen in front of us, to see the organ pedals driven to the full extent of their power. We had already experienced a tourbillon of fingerwork on the organ, then Bach's theme was performed as a pedal solo, no hands. If this had been heard on a CD or if we had not been able to see what was going on, we would have assumed that Robin Bell was using his hands to perform this section of the work. Not a note was missed. The rhythm ran steadily forward without a hiccup. The gentleman on my right said that he had been waiting for a mistake, but mistake, there was none. I was not aware that the organ could be used like this. It was amazing. I wonder if Robin Bell is adept at Irish step dancing? What he was doing on the organ was every bit as athletic.

The *Pastorale Symphony* from Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* was delightfully familiar. Also with fine pedal work, Robin Bell gave the music a joyous lilt that made the music sound really cheerful, perfect for putting across the Christmas message.

The next four pieces celebrated Scottish music from the sixteenth century right up to the present day. *Benedicam Domino* by Robert Johnson was originally a vocal work. It has been recorded by the Choir of Paisley Abbey conducted by George McPhee, who you will remember, was our last organ recitalist. The music on the organ had a happy dance like quality, especially as it developed and increased in speed.

The second Scottish composer was James Oswald, described by Robin Bell as the Scottish Handel. Oswald first came to my attention when his music was taken up enthusiastically by the local Scottish fiddle society. *Polwart on the Green* had a tune used by Allan Ramsay in his ballad opera *The Gentle Shepherd*. The organ arrangement had a two part feel, especially on the hands. It was

jaunty and it was dance-like. At one point I could imagine the boys swinging the girls off their feet. Robin Bell's performance had that sense of 'Come on, join in the dance' about it.

Geoffrey Atkinson was born and brought up in England and studied finance before coming to Aberdeen University to study music in the 1960s. Since then, he has stayed in Scotland and has become renowned for his compositions of vocal and instrumental music using Scottish folk tunes. *A Little Liturgical Suite* is in three sections using lesser known Scottish melodies although the third of these was very familiar to me. The initial *Prelude* had a happy song melody. The second, *Plea* had its melody beautifully swathed in attractive harmonies. It was the third section, *Postlude* that I knew well. *The Trumpeter of Fyvie* has a tune used in Eric Reid's Ballad Opera, *Mill O' Tifty's Annie*. I remember it being sung by the late tenor David Haggart. 'I'll Aye Ca' in By Yon Toon. And by yon garden-green again. I'll aye ca' in by yon toon, And see my bonnie Anne again'. Geoffrey Atkinson develops the tune brilliantly with fine imaginative harmonies. I was impressed by Robin Bell's choice of organ stops to give special expression to the melodies used by Atkinson in his *Suite* which so many in the audience told me they had enjoyed.

Sir James MacMillan composed his *Wedding Introit* for his own wedding. It uses the Irish song melody *She moved through the Fair*. As Robin Bell told us, the sound of Irish pipes is meant to come from the organ, and that was indeed true. The piece begins and ends with a simple rendition of the folk tune with rather uncanny harmonies developed above it. What a strange song to choose for your wedding, since the song is possibly about death and ghosts. Anyway I rather enjoyed this performance.

Moving from Scotland to France, we heard music by two French composers. The first was by Pierre Dumage. His *Suite du premier ton* is in three parts, with the traditional French request for special stop combinations and the placing of the melody in different parts. So many French composers use *Tierce en taille*. As Robin Bell said, the Willis organ, unlike Aberdeen University's Aubertin organ, does not have the required stop for *Tierce en taille*. However, with the tune in the tenor and with the edgy tune coated in tremolo flute sounds, I thought this movement worked brilliantly well. The *Basse de trompette* was perfect and the *Grand jeu* sounding fanfare-like and with an orchestral variety of sounds, it came across splendidly well.

The *Toccata* from *Dix Pièces* by Eugène Gigout was wonderfully exuberant, busy hands creating chimes and with rich forceful pedals. Was it not like what the French call a *Sortie* designed to send a congregation on its way rejoicing? I certainly enjoyed it. The gentleman sitting in front of me was absolutely entranced by this piece. He felt it was the best in the whole concert. Yes, it was good, but what I will not forget is the absolutely delightful Flor Peeters, and the Bach *Toccata* in F major.

ALAN COOPER