

RUBISLAW CHURCH, ABERDEEN

WILLIS ORGAN

CELEBRATION CONCERTS 2023

PROFESSOR HENRY FAIRS

Thursday 23rd March 2023

PROGRAMME:

Johan Peter Emilius Hartmann (1805 – 1900)

Allegro Marcato, from Sonata in g minor Op.58 (1855)

Edward Elgar (1857 – 1934) arr. by Herbert Brewer (1865 – 1928)

Herbert Howells (1892 – 1983)

Psalm Prelude set 2, no.1 “De Profundis”

Robert Schumann (1810 – 1856)

Four Sketches Op. 58

Charles Tournemire (1870 – 1939) trans. Maurice Duruflé (1902 - 1986)

Percy Whitlock (1903 – 1946)

Fidelis and Fanfare (from Four Extemporisations) Nos. 3 and 4 (1933)

This, the second of ten celebrity organ recitals, was given by Henry Fairs, Professor of organ at the Universität der Künste Berlin. His programme was made up of works ranging in time of composition mostly from the middle of the nineteenth to the early part of the 20th centuries. Therefore, from Romantic to early modern (tuneful) music. The programme choice could nearly all be designated concert pieces, perhaps entertainment music, even the Herbert Howells ‘Psalm Prelude’ although its title ‘De Profundis’ does suggest ecclesiastical inspiration. The result, for me at least, was an evening of thoroughly enjoyable listening. Professor Fairs did tell us that he had chosen music that he himself particularly enjoys. I was more than happy with that. I should point out too that this did not mean that the pieces were at all easy to perform. There was an abundance of thrilling virtuosity throughout the performance.

Professor Fairs opened his recital with the first movement ‘Allegro marcato’ from the Sonata in g minor by the Danish composer Johan Hartmann. A succession of powerful chords kept the music striding forward, set against delicate fast decorative motifs that gave the music its promised merry, could I say almost dance-like sensation. The words ‘marcato’ and ‘allegro’ were both vividly projected in this opening performance – a great choice to bring ‘sit up and listen’ vitality to the recital.

The second choice was a tremendously well-known piece. It was an organ arrangement of a piece that always appears on recordings entitled ‘Elgar’s Greatest Hits’. This was ‘Chanson de Matin’ arranged for organ by Sir Alfred Herbert Brewer. Some of the French school of organ composers wanted to use the organ as a kind of replacement orchestra and this was certainly how this piece

worked. Changes of stops, including flute and oboe solos were there and Professor Fairs use of rubato, changes of tempo and dynamics certainly gave this piece a seductive orchestral feeling. How many of you remember the BBC 2 radio programme, 'The Organist Entertains'? This performance would certainly have been at home there.

We moved on, in more serious mood, to the 'Psalm Prelude set 2 no.1' by Herbert Howells. The opening was light and mysterious, then the pedals came in strongly, suggesting the title 'De Profundis'. The music grew in power and emotional intensity. Henry Fairs certainly made the Willis organ sing out magnificently. It could almost have been built with this very music in mind.

Robert Schumann is not a composer that you normally associate with the organ, but I was delighted with a rare opportunity of hearing his 'Four Sketches'. They sounded like nothing else in the organ repertoire, that I at least am familiar with. Actually, watching Henry Fairs's fingers dancing joyfully over the keys I thought, 'This is very pianistic music!' The first sketch had bouncy figures making fingers dance over the keys and later, a running pattern for the left hand driving the music forward irresistibly.

The second sketch had the merest echo of that but stronger and more regal. There were repeated notes with a melody moving underneath. The third sketch was performed with admirable fluency. I particularly enjoyed the final sketch. Did Schumann intend to project a sense of humour in this music?

Henry Fairs promised us a particularly lovely clarinet stop on the Willis organ in the 'Petite rapsodie improvisée' by Charles Tournemire, transcribed by Duruflé. I thought that this piece had something of a familial connection with the first piece in the concert because of the light fingered decorative passages set against the clarinet melody. Of course this is entirely by coincidence. The clarinet stop certainly lived up beautifully to what we had been promised.

Henry Fairs divulged his special fondness for the music of Percy Whitlock. We were to hear the last two pieces from Whitlock's 'Four Extemporisations' - 'Fidelis' and 'Fanfare'. These were indeed marvellous, though in quite different ways. 'Fidelis' was the very essence of English pastoral romanticism, absolutely delightful. The 'Fanfare' on the other hand was explosively exciting. Henry Fairs took control of the Willis organ in this piece and drove it to the peak of its power. It was the perfect vehement, full colour conclusion to a first rate, sometimes unusual, and wildly entertaining recital.

Do keep your eyes open for the next concert. It will be on Monday 10th April when Graham Scott will be at the Willis Organ. Same time, same place.

ALAN COOPER