

# **RUBISLAW CHURCH**

## **WILLIS ORGAN CELEBRITY RECITALS**

### **TOM WILKINSON**

**Friday 28<sup>th</sup> April 2023**

#### **PROGRAMME:**

##### **J. S. Bach (1685 – 1750)**

Passacaglia and Fugue in c minor BWV 582

##### **Felix Mendelssohn (1809 – 1847)**

Sonata in A Op. 65 No. 3: Con moto maestoso; Andante tranquillo  
Ostinato in c minor

##### **Johannes Brahms (1833 – 1897)**

Four Chorale Preludes:

‘Schmücke dich, o liebe Seele’ (Deck yourself, my Soul with gladness)

‘Herzliebster Jesu, was hast du verbrochen?’ (Ah Holy Jesu, How hast thou offended?)

‘Herzlich tut mich verlangen’ (I do desire dearly a blessed end)

‘O Welt, ich muß dich lassen’ (O World, I now must leave thee)

##### **J. S. Bach**

Fantasia in G BWV 572: Gravement

##### **Clara Schumann (1819 – 1896)**

Prelude and Fugue in d minor Op. 16 No. 3 (Originally for piano)

##### **Franz Liszt (1811 – 1886)**

##### **Prelude and Fugue on B-A-C-H**

Friday’s Celebrity Organ Recital on the Willis Organ in Rubislaw Church was the fourth in the series of ten this year. It was given by Dr Tom Wilkinson (b. 1985) Associate Lecturer and University Organist at the University of St Andrews and Cathedral Organist of St Mary’s Catholic Cathedral in Edinburgh. Wilkinson’s doctoral thesis was on the nineteenth century Bach revival. That was reflected in his choice of music on Friday.

He opened with one of J. S. Bach’s most popular and well-known works, *Passacaglia and Fugue in c minor BWV 582*. I still have an old fashioned record of Leopold Stokowski’s arrangement of the work for full symphony orchestra but even that, magnificent though it is, comes nowhere near to the incomparably outstanding performance of the work that Tom Wilkinson astounded us with on Rubislaw’s Willis Organ. He made the instrument sound like the best organ in the world!

The work opens with the glorious theme on the pedals for which Wilkinson chose the most regal of sound blends. That amazing theme carries through the entire work. It becomes the theme of the

fugue as well as for the Passacaglia. Wilkinson's pedal work had unparalleled strength and steadiness while his hands created a positive carillon of sound cavorting boisterously over the pedal theme. It started magnificently. I didn't think it could get any better, but I assure you it did. At the end of the piece I thought, 'Might as well just go home now.' nothing else could possibly match either the music itself or the performance, both of which achieved the absolute ultimate in musical prowess. However, I stayed. I was glad I did, because at the end of the concert, there was another piece the performance of which ventured even farther in dazzling organ virtuosity. All the same, Liszt's *Prelude and Fugue on B-A-C-H* judged simply as music does not quite match the unrivalled brilliance of Bach's own work that opened the concert.

*Con moto maestoso*, the first movement of Mendelssohn's *Sonata in A Op. 65 No. 3* did have a richness and regal feel that sat well after the Bach. The movement built to almost operatic power with splendidly complex counterpoint. The following *Andante Tranquillo* was shorter and more gentle with an almost pastoral feel.

Wilkinson then introduced an earlier composition by Mendelssohn whose admiration for Bach led him to compose his *Ostinato in c minor*. I could see the connection with Bach, the pedal tune with the hands chiming above. Wilkinson explained that the young Mendelssohn could not match Bach. The result, he told us, was that the piece sounds almost funny. I'm glad he told us that or I would have written that Mendelssohn was possibly making fun of Bach. He certainly was not. What is it about this piece that makes it funny? I reckon it is the, dare I say, rum te tum sound of the pedal theme that does it. Bach's theme has a regal feel to it that young Mendelssohn's does not. Still, it was a fascinating work, very much worth hearing.

Before the start of the concert, Wilkinson told us that some of the music he was going to play was by composers who were pianists rather than organists and that this would be apparent in their music. One of these of course was Johannes Brahms. However with his *Four Chorale Preludes* he does not do too badly at producing music that works satisfyingly on the organ. The first Prelude, *Schmücke dich, o liebe Seele* had a definite seriousness but was still light and airy. What would have been the pedal bass was provided by the left hand. *Herzliebster Jesu, was hast du verbrochen?* Did have pedals. It was a thoughtful piece which seemed to stroll pensively forward. *Herzlich tut mich verlangen* sounded darker. The chorale theme came through very clearly. The final Prelude, *O Welt, ich muß dich lassen* was the last piece that Brahms composed. Full organ was contrasted with lighter passages almost like full orchestra against solo passages, all in all a regretful or sad piece. There followed a very short middle movement from J. S. Bach's *Fantasia in G BWV 572*. Bach did compose some gentler and perhaps easier music as well. It served as a fine introduction to Clara Schumann's *Prelude and Fugue in d minor Op. 16 No. 3*. This had definite reference to Bach but was unashamedly a piano piece. Wilkinson made it sound really appealing on the organ. Both the Prelude and Fugue were gentle and transparent and in this performance the music came across as very well-constructed.

Gentle and transparent? The final piece in the recital was neither of those, although yes, there were quieter sections that were certainly imaginatively constructed at the centre of what turned out to be a whirling tornado of a piece. This was Liszt's *Prelude and Fugue on B-A-C-H*. Wow! The work by Bach that opened the recital was a showpiece in many ways but this went well beyond that. I think Liszt liked to show off and this music did exactly that. Hands and feet went crazy. I could not help laughing near the end at the pedal trills. Liszt did not just make his performer dance at the organ he almost made him go into paroxysms on the keys and pedals. The proof of Tom Wilkinson's sheer brilliance as a performer was that he was able to do all of that while playing 'all the right notes in the right order'. A gentleman sitting in the audience in front of me said that after experiencing this piece, he was exhausted. Yes! I would agree. And we weren't even playing!

The next recital will be on Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> May when the celebrity organist will be Professor George McPhee. These recitals seem to get better and better. If it continues like that, won't it be absolutely amazing?

ALAN COOPER

