

# AN AUDIENCE GUIDE TO THE ROYAL ALBERT HALL ORGAN

by Paul Hale

The organ in the Royal Albert Hall has received more than a new lease of life at the hands of Mander Organs: it has become a fully-functioning instrument probably for the first time in its entire life. As left by Willis and Harrison it always struggled for breath owing to the restricted size of the main wind-trunk from the blowers; in addition the heat in the Hall split many of its 19th century soundboards and wind-trunks. Thus its pitch sagged and its ensembles suffered. Now rebuilt with a new wind system and new soundboards it is fully charged with wind as never before and rings out in an almost startlingly imperial manner, proclaiming with a sure voice its stature as the largest organ in the UK.

This essay attempts concisely to give an account of its almost myriad tonal features.

Of the Diapason choruses, the Great is divisible into two: the secondary chorus, which is transferable to the Choir manual, and the primary chorus, which is the dominant ensemble. The softest Diapason chorus is the Swell, then the Choir, now speaking through a grille above the console. The Great primary chorus can be balanced by the Pedal (metal) Diapasons, the 16ft Fagotto perfecting the ensemble. Neither the Swell nor Choir choruses add anything to the Great primary, and even the Great secondary chorus adds little more to the primary than extra complexity because of the sheer output of the huge I 6.8.4.2.V.VII primary ensemble — a remarkably musical sound despite its incredible output. A crucial element is the fabulous Cymbale



19.22.26.29.31.33.36, its tierce rank adding a hint of English mustard to the brilliant cascade of a chorus.

Now to the chorus reeds and big solo reeds. The Swell chorus reeds are perhaps the most Willis-like, fine stops. But for the Full Swell (underpinned perfectly by the wooden 32ft Contra Trombone in the Swell-box) to balance in the Hall, the two Willis Tubas need to be included. Turning to the Great we find bold and fiery Harmonic Trumpets at 8ft and 4ft which act as ideal chorus reeds for the full flues, the contrasting Posaune being an alternative for slightly smaller combinations. The Trombas, as voiced by Mander, have become scintillatingly loud Willis-type Tubas, the 16ft equalling in loudness the Solo/Bombard 16ft Contra Tuba and the Pedal Ophicleide (itself as memorably brazen as before, but now blending better). In terms of volume, the next stop down is the rounder-toned Pedal Bombard, then the superb and remarkably prompt Fagotto. The Trombone is of different tone; slightly softer because of its enclosure in the distant Swell box. The Quint reeds (here and on the Solo/Bombard) are softer and rounder than the unison ranks, blending and enriching the

texture, in a similar way to that accomplished by the wonderfully gritty Harmonics on Great and Pedal. In some ways my favourite chorus reeds are the two perky Trumpets on the unenclosed Choir — delightful, fresh-toned classic English stops.

The fine Solo/Bombard enclosed Tubas offer a level between that of the Swell reeds and the full Great reeds; well short of the unenclosed Tubas, particularly the Tuba Mirabilis (on 30-inch wind), which has an imperially pealing, effortless dominance. The Orchestral Trumpets (25-inch wind) are simply staggering: a white-hot blaze of the most brilliant reed tone, yet with plenty of body. They are the most exciting big reeds on the organ, even if not quite the loudest. The widest range of tutti imaginable is possible on this organ by choosing which style of reeds to add to the full Great & Pedal flues. A blazing 'French' tutti is as possible as a stentorian 'Edwardian' or slightly more restrained and elegant 'Victorian'. There is the largest possible range of delightful *piano* to *mezzo-forte* orchestral reeds on three manuals out of four, and on the pedals. Such piquant registers include the Swell Vox Humanas

(16ft & 8ft), the four woodwind ranks and French Horns (of differing tone) in the enclosed Solo and the four woodwind stops in the enclosed Orchestral section.

The Choir Organ has been transformed by its slightly revised position. Clear-toned and chirpy, every stop sings out, bell-like, under the orchestral canopy. The 1974 H&H Nazard and Tierce were wisely retained, revoiced to blend with the remaining Willis flues. They provide a welcome strand of pure 'real' organ colour, a refreshing alternative to the more sophisticated soft solo reeds, and an opportunity for areas of repertoire to be played more satisfactorily than by the 'town hall' elements of the organ. As delicate as the Choir Organ are, the Carillons and Tubular Bells, being rather far back in the organ to be perhaps of much use. The Bass drum makes its presence felt rather more.

The flutes around the organ show the maximum variety one might reasonably expect, given that Willis himself rarely employed more than three flute types: Claribel, Lieblich and Harmonic. Harrison's scarcely broadened this range but by rescaling and revoicing managed to avoid the sameness for which the Willis organ was criticised. Strings are more varied still, and are all excellent specimens. As one would expect, the gentle Swell Salicional and Vox Angelica are the least keen and the softest: the Solo two rank Unda Maris, fluty Dulciana-like, is almost as soft. Then the Swell Viola da Gamba and Viola (louder) come into the

picture, joining the little Dulciana on the Choir, the Viola d'Amour and quite delicate 16ft Contra Bass on the Solo.

Next the Great, which retains its Willis family of Violas, (32ft!), 16ft, 8ft and 4ft, now set back further within the organ, augmented by a typical H&H Geigen. The Pedal has stops to balance all these, of course, including a beautifully purring 16ft Salicional, and the Violones at a somewhat louder level. None of these refined and distinctly late 19th-century string sounds prepares the listener for the Mantovani-like cascade of string tone in the enclosed Orchestral division. Building up from the keen but tiny Viole Sourdine to the full chorus of Violas 16.8.8.8.8.4.12.15.17.19.22, this is the most developed string chorus ever made by a British builder: powerful enough (box open) even to add an edge to the Great Diapason chorus, yet still musical in tone.

All this vast tonal palette is controlled from the beautifully reconstructed Harrison & Harrison console, now fitted with comprehensive modern playing aids by Mander Organs, whose wonderful work has restored this monumental instrument back to its place once more as the nation's premier concert organ.

Long live the Iron Voicel

Paul Hale

*This essay is based on a longer article which appeared during 2004 in Organists' Review*

