

Hamburg comes to Marlborough

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As I sat in Marlborough College Chapel in February this year, waiting for the inauguration of the new Beckerath organ to begin, my mind slipped back to a similar occasion 36 years ago when as a sixth-former I sat in Clare College Chapel to hear Lionel Rogg inaugurate the first, and until now, sole Beckerath organ in this country.

The two instruments could not be more different. Few companies have changed their house-style so radically, the new yet being so fully informed by the old. How therefore, did it come about that a leading English public school should install a brand-new 62 stop 4-manual organ by the leading Hamburg firm whose only previous essay in this country was a small and uncompromisingly North German neo-Baroque instrument for Clare College Chapel?

Marlborough College Chapel, dedicated to St Michael and All Angels, was erected in 1884/6 on the site of the first, smaller chapel built by Blore in 1848. It was constructed by Stephens & Barstow at a cost of £31,000 under the direction of the distinguished architects, George Bodley and Thomas Garner and was consecrated on 29 September 1886 by the Bishop of Salisbury. Measuring 154 feet long, 54 feet wide and 60 feet high, the chapel is fashioned in the Late Decorated Gothic style. Amongst its noteworthy architectural features are the apsidal form



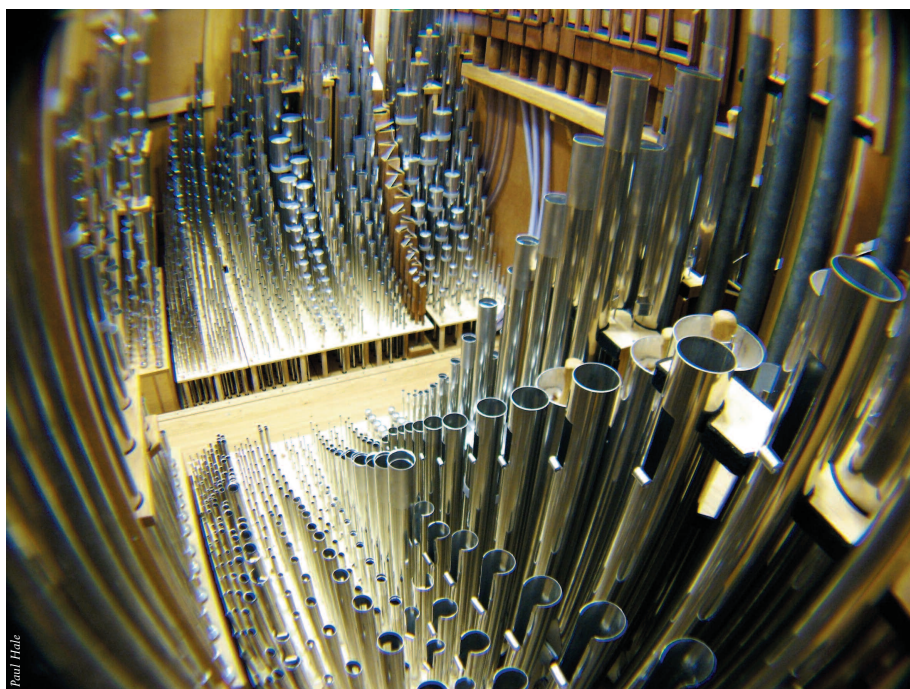
View to altar at Marlborough College Chapel

of the East end and the strikingly large reredos in the Anglo-Catholic style, which was gilded in 1951 by Sir Ninian Comper at the same time as he painted the inside of the apse. Bodley & Garner's colour scheme of greens and browns, much loved by John Betjeman, dominates the Chapel interior, together with a series of twelve large murals by the late Pre-Raphaelite Spencer Stanhope. Other artistic features of note are the Scholars' Window on the south side (designed by Burne-Jones and made under the

direction of William Morris) and Eric Gill's sculpture *The Virgin and Child* above the outside of the West Door. The elaborate organ case, tall enough to contain a 16ft speaking front, is also the work of Bodley & Garner.

Taken as a whole, this building forms an inspiring setting for liturgy and music, despite having the narrow, tall and long proportions typical of such school chapels, seating some 600. The College's first organ was constructed for the west gallery of the former chapel in 1876 by Forster & Andrews, being moved to a lofty chamber at the north-east end of the new chapel and then in 1911 enlarged and modernised by Forster & Andrews (F&A), on tubular pneumatic action. In 1955 Hill, Norman & Beard (HNB) electrified and completely rebuilt the organ with a new 4-manual console, detached and placed amidst the choir-stalls in front of the organ. Lack of tonal impact in the chapel

led to further additions (such as a 32ft reed) and regular rescaling and revoicing of both F&A and HNB pipework. With the actions failing and the crowded organ chamber and much altered pipework suggesting a fresh start, the College in 2001 assembled an organ committee around their organists Ian Crabbe and Tim Ridley (later including new Director of Music, Ian Sutcliffe) and began the process of assessing whether to rebuild or replace.



The Marlborough Swell



The console

Once the latter course had been chosen the committee moved into the next phase, that of visiting organs in the UK and Europe built by the world's leading companies. Tenders were invited from numerous firms, the majority British. A short-list was selected but it was not until the Hamburg firm founded in 1949 by Rudolph von Beckerath (1907–1976) flew the committee out to the USA to visit its recent installations in Wichita, Kansas and New York that the decision became clear. As Tim Ridley writes in the elegant brochure produced for the inaugural event 'We were absolutely bowled over by the quality of workmanship, the sensitivity of their mechanical action and the beauty and musicianship of their sound'. What they had discovered was that the Beckerath firm can now build modern eclectic organs, historically informed, broad in scale and rich in tone, with highly impressive flue choruses influenced by their north German origins, yet with French influences fully embraced and blended to form a remarkably cohesive and impressive whole. This was just what the chapel needed, in the view of the committee, and as the price was also very favourable, the contract was placed (after this writer was taken on board to ease planning consent and advise on the final stop-list, mixture compositions, console

layout and combination system).

The old organ was sold, piecemeal (a few ranks – mainly wooden pipes – were re-used at Beckerath's request), the fine Bodley case, of course, was retained. Beckerath built the new instrument during late 2005 and all of 2006, beginning installation in the summer, regulation of the c.5,000 pipes being complete by Christmas.

And so the day of the inauguration dawned – 4 February, a freezing cold day. As we sat on the narrow, hard oak pews, a superb Evensong was sung with consummate skill by the large Chapel Choir (including exciting commissioned canticles by Tim Ridley) and accompanied quite brilliantly by Ian Crabbe (sometime organ scholar of Magdalen College, Oxford). The Bishop of Salisbury dedicated the organ in grand Sarum style, sprinkling it liberally with holy water; he remained for the opening recital given by Simon Preston, who was in top form. The organ was displayed in an imaginative and extremely well-prepared manner in a programme of good length including major works by Bach (the D minor and *Sei gegrüßet*), Bolcom, Gershwin, Karg-Elert and Jongen (*Sonata Eroica*) plus an encore.

A study of the stop-list (see right) (62 speaking stops with one rank doing double-duty) may not reveal any British

influence, but nomenclature can be deceptive. Just as Klais at Bath Abbey was influenced by Hill, so at Marlborough College Rolf Michl, Technical Director of Beckerath, is keen to point out that the organ aims to 'incorporate the German traditions of Baroque and English and French Romantic organ building'.

Although the stop-list is mainly self-explanatory, some descriptions may help the reader to conjure up an aural picture. First of all, put away any expectations that the main principal chorus is of slender, harmonic-rich but foundation-weak Germanic principals. It is indeed quite the opposite, with generous scales and a healthy wind pressure ensuring a sonorous broad richness of tone – very British indeed and just what a school chapel organ needs, especially when it is speaking across a chapel down which it has to reach. Crowning this rich chorus, with its dignified 16ft Großprincipal (shared with the Pedal) are eight ranks of sublime mixture work, where the North German experience of the Beckerath firm really shows. This grand chorus is the very heart of the organ, the Great reeds being subservient to it, in typical Germanic manner – despite their names. What I rejoice in, is that unlike the Birmingham Klais or Manchester Marcussen, no flutes have to be added to bulk-up the chorus – the sound is pure

principal, not that amorphous muddle which results when endeavouring to get sufficient tone out of so many modern German or Scandinavian organs in large buildings. The Pedal matches the Great excellently, the rolling F&A open wood, now called Offenflöte, giving a wonderfully rich underpinning. The Pedal reeds are also a match for the Great reeds, which is a polite way of saying that they too are rather restrained. Very musical and wonderfully useful in counterpoint, they are somewhat disappointing for grand effects, French symphonic music or Edwardian British repertoire.

The huge Swell is as complete as one could wish, and here the reeds take centre-stage in the full swell. Beckerath's attention to detail resulted in the treble of the Harmonia Aethera being sent back to Germany for re-making: it didn't seem quite right in the building – it does now. The Positiv is narrower in scale than the Swell and this extends to the Cromorne which is rather thinner than its name suggests – more of a Clicquot scale would have been beneficial here. In impact the sparkling and well-projected chorus is a fine foil to the grandeur of the Great chorus. The Solo, though small, has a selection of useful colours either for solo use or for coupling to other manuals such as the Swell to



The spectacular Bodley & Garner case

augment their resources. The old Tuba is retained but from its position in the case is distinctly restrained despite its 300mm (12ins) pressure. One begins to realise that for Rolf Miehl, who was responsible for the main design aspects and carried out the tonal finishing, blend and balance is all – no one stop standing out vividly against the others. Miehl (now co-owner of the company), in the creation of this organ, headed a team of eighteen of the company's thirty craftsmen and women.

To understand the history of the

Beckerath company and its development since the death in 1976 of its founder Rudolph von Beckerath, their website, (www.beckerath.com/en/company/history.html) is well worth browsing.

I well remember the look of contentment on Herr Beckerath's face, back in 1971 that evening in Clare College Chapel, as Lionel Rogg displayed the new organ's piercing mixtures and their slender underpinning. That organ (even now, with its upperwork tamed) is light years away from the sonority of the company's work at Marlborough. This is the first continental import of this size that, in my view, has sufficient 'guts' to do its job well (with the notable exception of the Edinburgh Rieger). Whether or not a British firm would have done the job as well or better is quite another matter; it's certainly another opportunity lost for our finest firms to show what they can do, but for the College that was a secondary consideration: they liked best what they heard of the Beckerath firm's current work and went for it. History will judge the result.

Next time we continue with our look at new organs in school and university chapels, with a trip to Scotland Glenalmond College Chapel. It may show that not only big is beautiful...

Marlborough College Chapel specification

GREAT ORGAN		SWELL ORGAN		POSITIV ORGAN		SOLO ORGAN (enclosed)		PEDAL ORGAN	
Großprincipal	16	Flûte allemande	16	Prestant	8	Harmonic Flute	8	Untersatz	32
Principal	8	Bourdon	8	Holzgedeckt	8	Flute Céleste	8	Principalbaß	
Principal Céleste	8	Flûte ouvert (old, triangular)	8	Prestant	4	Concert Flute (old)	4	(from Great Großprincipal)	16
Viola da Gamba	8	Viole d'Orchestre (old)	8	Spielflöte	4	Trumpet	8	Offenflöte (old)	16
Rohrgedeckt	8	Voix Céleste	8	Nazat	2 2/3	Clarinet	8	Bourdon (old)	16
Octave	4	Acoline	8	Gemshorn	2	Vox Humana	8	Octavbaß	8
Waldflöte	4	Fugara	4	Terz	1 3/5	Tremulant		Flutebaß (old)	8
Quinte	2 2/3	Flûte octaviante	4	Larigot	1 1/3	Tuba (old)	8	Choralbaß (old)	4
Superoctave	2	Nazard	2 2/3	Scharf	22.26.29.33.36			Mixtur	12.15.19.22.26
Cornet	1.8.12.15.17	V Octavin	2	Cromorne	8			Contra Bombarde	32
Mixture	19.22.26.29.33	Tierce	1 3/5	Tremulant				Bombarde	16
Cymbel	26.29.33	Sifflet	1	Solo to Positiv				Fagott	16
Bombard	16	Harmonia Aethera	12.15.19					Posaune	8
Trompete	8	Plein Jeu	15.19.22.26.29					Great to Pedal	
Clarine	4	Basson	16					Swell to Pedal	
Tremulant		Trompette harmonique	8					Swell to Pedal 4	
Swell to Great 16		Hautbois	8					Positiv to Pedal	
Swell to Great 8		Clairon	4					Solo to Pedal	
Swell to Great 4		Tremulant							
Positiv to Great		Swell to Swell 16							
Solo to Great		Swell to Swell 4							
		Solo to Swell 16							
		Solo to Swell 8							
		Solo to Swell 4							

compass:

manuals [black naturals, bone-capped sharps] 61 notes/pedals [radiating & concave, German pattern] 32 notes

mechanical key-action

electric stop action

electric couplers with opto-electronic sensors and new, fast-decay magnets

wind pressures:

Swell 87–100mm, Great 80mm, Positiv 75mm, Solo 98–300mm, Pedal 90–110mm

A fully comprehensive combination system & stepper is incorporated.