

Noble Nicholson enhances creative Cardiff

The new Nicholson organ at Llandaff Cathedral (part 2) – Paul Hale

If you've not visited Cardiff in recent years you will be in for a shock when you do. The city is blessed with the striking Millennium Centre where Welsh National Opera mounts productions to rival London, Manchester and Glyndebourne; the dock area is imaginatively developed, the city centre has been ripped out and rebuilt sparkingly, sports fans flock to the Millennium Stadium, and fans of *Dr Who* and *Torchwood* flock to see where their favourite programmes were filmed and visit the *Dr Who* exhibition. Cardiff's Church in Wales Cathedral – of SS Peter & Paul, Dyfrig, Teilo & Euddogwy, no less – nearly three miles away from the city centre.

Llandaff, in complete contrast to the city, is a village-like, tranquil place, whose cathedral nestles in a hollow and reveals itself to the visitor coyly, its contrasting western spires delighting the beholder as they come into view. Walk down the great irregular flight of steps to the west door, open it, step inside and a remarkable sight confronts one: a spacious, beautifully proportioned and sensitively restored interior (following appalling destruction during WWII). Taking centre-stage is the great soaring arch in reinforced concrete by architect George Pace, surmounted by an ornamented concrete drum in front of which Jacob Epstein's huge aluminium *Christ in Majesty* offers his blessing. Look closer and you will realise that this famous concrete 'pulpitum' soaring up towards the roof, is now framed and complemented by two equally high-reaching organ cases, looking deceptively light despite their 16ft front pipes taking up less than two thirds of their height. The designer of these majestic cases and the matching '8ft' cases which face down the north and south nave aisles, Simon Platt, now takes his



Llandaff arch and north cases

place as the next great visual artist to grace this building with his work. He is in the good company not only of Pace and Epstein, but also of John Piper, J.F. Seddon and Donald Buttress.

As my article in November 2009 described, the organ within these cases has been imagined, designed, constructed, installed and voiced by Nicholson of Malvern. Now complete and opened in a memorable recital by Thomas Trotter,

the organ subjected itself to a recital I gave on Saturday, 30 October for the South East Wales Organists' Association. Having spent many hours exploring the instrument that weekend, it is a delight now to have the opportunity to describe it. Why a 'delight'? Essentially for six good reasons:

- the tonal scheme is a perfect balance of the needs of cathedral choir, cathedral congregation and

solo repertoire – nothing has been overlooked.

- the dynamic range of the instrument extends from the hushed whisper of gently undulating Swell strings, box closed, to the colossal, cathedral-filling, totally splendid *tutti* (or variety of *tuttis*).
- the tone is beautiful; everything well-voiced, characterful yet blending.
- the wind supply is effortlessly adequate, perfectly steady and completely silent.
- the actions are equally silent (no heavy-pressure clunks here) and both lightening fast and excellent in repetition (due to the use of compound magnets on soundboard wind pressure).
- the console is, as always with Nicholson, completely comfortable, with everything feeling solid and in the 'right place'. A shame it is closed with a roller-blind: it would delight visitors to look up to its gallery in the southeast bay of the chancel and see its keys and stops.

For the listener it is perhaps the third quality, the voicing, which is of paramount importance. Describing tone colours is as difficult as describing



Choir Organ pipework

paint colours, but I shall attempt to give my impressions of the musical effect of each area of the stop-list.

First of all, the Diapason chorus. Most writers now call this a 'Principal' chorus, but the Llandaff ensemble is definitely a 'Diapason' chorus! Strictly speaking there's no difference – a Diapason is what a British player calls that which a continental player calls a

Principal, but as we all know, a true British Open Diapason is in reality a different animal to a continental Principal. Nicholson's Tonal Director, Guy Russell was in no doubt: he wanted this organ to be essentially a Romantic cathedral organ, though with an unashamedly eclectic specification to enable most repertoire to be enjoyably performed. The Diapason choruses are complete on Great, West Great, Swell, Choir and Pedal – even the Choir has an 8ft Open Diapason. They build up with warmth, breadth, clarity and blended brilliance, the comprehensive mixture schemes being a development of those the company employed at Southwell Minster in 1996. The advantage of multiple ranks of mixtures (the Great and Swell each has seven ranks of chorus mixtures) is that no rank is having to work too hard; a rich, complex and seductive ensemble is created by the lower-pitched mixtures breaking back to reinforce the 8.4.2²/3.2 chorus, with the higher-pitched mixtures adding brilliance in the bass and clarity in the treble. These wonderfully full choruses are as ideal for Bach as they are for leading hearty Welsh hymn-singing. Each 8ft Open Diapason has its own distinct tone quality, each fitted to its purpose, from the gently singing almost 18th century charm of the smaller Great Open and the Choir Open, to the stronger but contained Swell



The Great reeds



Solo Tuba

Open, the fuller and louder larger Great Open, and ultimately to the Lewis-like big, bright West Great 8ft Principal. Actually, my favourite is the Great 16ft Double Diapason, played up an octave (which is precisely where a 61-note compass comes into its own): it could have come from the hands of Father Smith. Gorgeous. All this is underpinned on the Pedal not just by a full-toned open metal chorus up to Mixture (rather low-pitched at 15[4ft].19.22 and to my ear in need of a 26.29 to match the manual choruses), but also by a wonderful Open Wood 32/16/8 of tremendous sonority and drive. When all choruses are coupled, a positive wall of sound is propelled down the nave – an intensely invigorating experience

The wall of sound is matched and indeed transformed by the chorus reeds, all on 6 ins wind pressure – a high enough pressure to give the voicer great latitude

and ensure stable, sonorous tone. Both Swell and Great have a family of full-length 16/8/4 trumpets, the Great voiced somewhat darker. The Swell reeds with the box open are just as loud as the Great (as is the Swell fluework) which allows some thrilling antiphonal effects and a *tutti* perfectly balanced from north (Great) to south (Swell). The mighty Pedal Trombones 32/16 effortlessly underpin all this; in due course a 16/8 Bombarde and 8ft Trumpet will be added; the treble of the Trombone could then be usefully tamed. The Tuba is on 15ins pressure and is carefully modelled on Father Willis's scales. Willis Tubas have always seemed to me to possess the most musical of British Tuba tone – a 'trumpet' tuba rather than the more closed Edwardian Tubas of the Arthur Harrison school. This one is a gem, peeling down the south side of the nave and carrying all before it. Until the enclosed Solo

Organ has been added (chequebooks out, please) the only soft reeds are the full-toned and very useful Oboe on the Swell and the characterful but blending Cremona (capped) on the Choir. The Solo box, when installed, will contain three soft reeds and a blazing heavy-pressure Orchestral Trumpet.

Quite the most beautiful sounds on the organ are the flutes and strings. The softest flute is the charming wooden Stopped Diapason on the Great – soft enough to accompany the Oboe, which is vital as the Choir 8ft Bourdon is quite a big fellow – large-scale capped metal pipes under-girding a generously-scaled Choir *cornet décomposée* 8.4.2²/₃.2.1³/₅. [1¹/₃]. The Choir Tremulant renders utterly delicious any combination of these ranks – to which can be added the real luxury of the Choir 16ft Bourdon, a stop available also on the Pedal as the softest 16ft. The Great Harmonic Flute 8ft is a masterpiece: as fine a stop as one would find in a Cavaillé-Coll, and streets ahead of the never very sophisticated average British Harmonic Flute. It demands a Tremulant – alas, there is none to the Great. The gentle open wooden 4ft Wald Flute partners either 8ft flute perfectly. The Swell flutes are a slight surprise. The 8ft Stopped Flute is a gently-arched mouth metal Gedackt of quite narrow 'Lieblich' scale: it doesn't quite sound as it looks, and in a couple of octaves has a slight chuff, rather at odds with the smooth Romantic role of the Swell as an accompanimental department. I'd have given the Choir 8ft Bourdon a little more articulation rather than the Swell 8ft Stopped Flute. The 4ft Nason looks as if it's going to be perky and rich in harmonics (as their highly successful stop at Southwell is), but turns out to be somewhat bland, despite the clever transition from narrow-scale stopped wood to tapered open wood – very rare and difficult to construct. Still, as a pair of flutes they work well, each giving the other an element of its own tone, so when drawn together or with the strings, Diapason or Oboe, all is fine. The Pedal Bourdon, Quint and Bass Flute are excellent stopped wooden flutes – generous scale and voiced to be full but interesting in tone, with no quinty cough on attack. The prepared-for Solo Organ includes a family of 'orchestral' flutes 8.4.2.

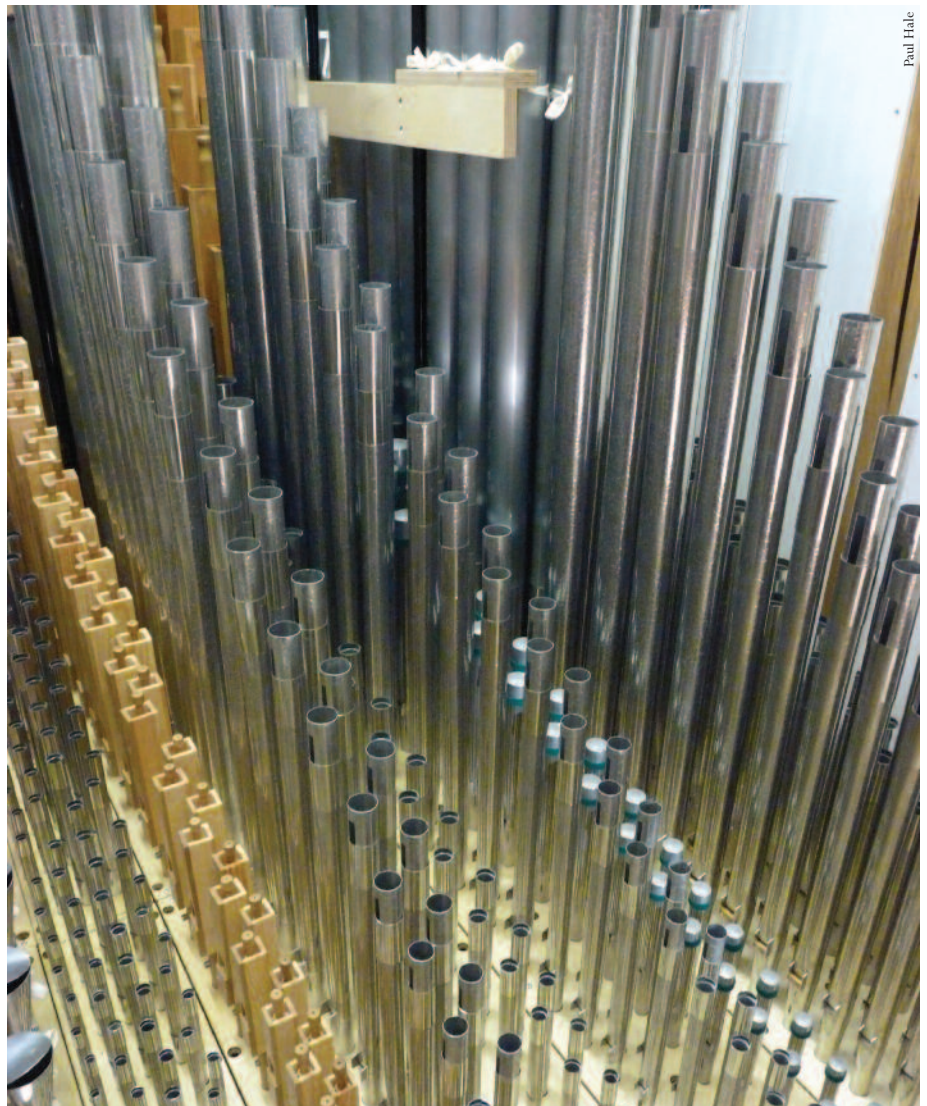
Finally to the strings. How rare it is to find an organbuilder making a new Swell 16ft Contra Salicional these days! I wonder where the last one was? Especially a full-length specimen in a swell box tall enough to take all 8ft basses un-mitred with headroom to spare. It purrs with silky delicacy, perfectly matched to the medium-scale slotted Salicional and Voix Celeste, tuned with a slow, restful beat. On the Great is found an 8ft Gamba, scaled and voiced as a moderately slotted small Open Diapason with silvery string overtones, very gentle and a marvellous blender or subtle solo stop on its own or, cello-like, with the Harmonic Flute, or in a more piquant manner with the 4ft Wald Flute. It just needs a Tremulant to bring it fully alive! The Solo Organ, when installed, will include a 16.8.8.4 family of more 'orchestral' strings, of which the Contra Gamba will draw also on the Pedal. The Pedal will in addition gain a less stringy Violone (south case pipes) once extra funds are found; currently these glorious tin pipes sit there, mute, awaiting an action and a wind-supply.

As I have intimated, the wind supply and actions never draw attention to themselves and the console is a dream. What I have yet to mention is the astounding volume range of the Swell box, which despite being huge and having two complete sets of shutters – one facing north across the chancel, the other (brought into operation with a stop-knob) facing west down the nave – manages to bottle up this powerful department as if it were in the next building, whilst when the shutters are open it is impossible to conceive that the pipes are in a box at all. Truly astounding – and it contradicts the view that the most effective swell-boxes are small.

Heralded as the largest completely new British cathedral organ since Coventry I can say with conviction that the Llandaff Nicholson is also the best new cathedral organ since Coventry, which it matches for versatility, colour, glory in choruses, beauty in flutes, refinement in reeds and strings, and the highest build quality. It simply must gain its Solo and its completed Pedal

organ to take its rightful place at the pinnacle of British cathedral organ-building. Please help Llandaff find the funds; they and this masterpiece deserve it.

Next time: can Harrisons at St Edmundsbury Cathedral match Nicholsons at Llandaff? Read my exclusive article about the new St Edmundsbury H&H in our next issue.



Swell flutes and strings

Paul Hale

Colin K Jilks & Associates

TUNING AND MAINTENANCE THROUGHOUT SOUTHERN ENGLAND

Organ Builders

Tuning and maintenance, Restorations, Tonal finishings
Mechanical, Pneumatic, Solid state actions

Tuning requests and enquiries:

9 Rosemary Close, Steyning, West Sussex. BN44 3YT
Tel: 01903 810395 Fax: 01903 812169 E-mail: colinkjilks@aol.com

Colin K Jilks & Associates Limited
Registered Office: 9 Rosemary Close, Steyning, West Sussex. BN44 3YT
Registered in England No. 4527607

DR. CHRISTOPHER KENT, F.S.A.

Accredited Member of the A.I.O.A.

ORGAN ADVISER AND CONSULTANT

Especially experienced in assistance and guidance on historical and musicological matters relating to conservation and restoration. Archival and literary research undertaken.

The Laurels, Tytherton Lucas, Wiltshire, SN15 3RJ.
Tel: 01249 740294; email: christopherkent9680@btinternet.com