something old, something new

## Gern meets Gallo in Gozo

The new organ in St John the Baptist Church, Xewkija, Gozo, Malta

Paul Hale

In the December 2017 OR my column celebrated the restoration by Andrew Cooper of the Cavaillé-Coll/Mutin organ in Quarr Abbey, on the Isle of Wight. This month's article also has a Cavaillé-Coll element, though it concerns not the work of his successor, Charles Mutin (1861–1931), but of an earlier foreman of his, August Gern (1837–1907). German-born Gern worked with Cavaillé-Coll from 1859 to 1866, in which year he left the company having installed one of their organs in the Carmelite church in Kensington (an organ destroyed in World War II). Remaining in London, and sensing an opportunity, given the colossal amount of church building and restoration which was taking place all over the UK, Gern set up his own business in Kensington.

His most renowned organ remaining in London is in the French Church near Leicester Square (1868, with pipework and other materials supplied by Cavaillé-Coll; subsequently rebuilt and enlarged by J.W. Walker and B.C. Shepherd & Sons). Outside London, his 1891/1905 II/18 at St Alban's, Frant (Sussex) is highly regarded, and a glance at NPOR shows a perhaps surprising number of instrument on which he worked.

Three of these found their way to the East Midlands: one, dated 1870, now at Ss Peter & Paul, Shelford, arrived via Tockington Manor (Avon) and St Catherine's, Nottingham, as rebuilt by Roger Yates and restored by Henry Groves & Son; another is in J.L. Pearson's beautiful church of St Paul, Daybrook, Nottingham (1896/7, also rebuilt by Yates; currently in excellent condition) and the third was at St Mary's, Lutterworth (1886, rebuilt c.1950 by Taylor of Leicester). Unfortunately, in recent years, the good people of Lutterworth (where during the 1930s/40s Frank Whittle developed the engine for the UK's first jet aircraft, the Gloster E.28/39) fell out of love with their Gern/Taylor organ. It sat, unused and looking for a new home, for about a decade until news of its availability reached the ears of West Country organ-builder Michael Farley, who was looking for just such an instrument as the basis of an exciting new project which had landed in his lap.

That project was a collaboration with Malta-based organ designer Noel Gallo and Renatus of Bideford, to design and build a new organ for the church of St John the Baptist on the island of Gozo, north west of Malta. All the information and some of the text in this article has kindly been provided by Michael Farley and Noel Gallo, who are rightly proud of this considerable achievement.

Michael writes [edited]: 'St John's Xewkija, consecrated in





1978, took 25 years to build, predominantly by local labour. Clearly they had remarkable skills – the building is quite spectacular; the beauty and scale take your breath away as you enter. It is a magnificent edifice of honeycoloured Gozo stone with light from the huge lantern windows filling the building. The worship area can seat 1,000 beneath a massive 27 metre dome. This has created a marvellous acoustic for an organ, with a resonance of some 11.5 seconds.'

A pipe organ for this building had to be custom designed especially to fit with the architecture. Previously it had been considered that there was nowhere for a pipe organ, owing to limited floor space, so St John's

had to make do with electronic instruments. One of the main challenges was to identify a suitable position where a pipe organ would blend both musically and architecturally. Also, it had to be sited where its tone would carry with clarity through the main body of the building. Early designs included two suspended organ lofts on either side of the High Altar which, although magnificent in appearance, would have been costly and would have presented difficulties for access and maintenance.

After many designs, drawings and refinements a design evolved to place the organ in the choir area behind the High Altar, which stands forward of the 'east' wall on which is mounted a striking

painting of Christ. Curves and circles are incorporated into all parts of the case to reflect the architecture of the building. The symbolism of the casework incorporates the cross of St John in two circles depicting the construction of the new Church over the old Church – a Church within a Church; the grilles, pipes and lights all draw the eye upwards to view the painting of Christ. Noel Gallo [edited]: 'The *casework design is complimentary* to the crucifixion figure above and behind it, as the layout is rounded to it with a wave pattern *in the case grille that help to bring* the eyes upward, as the eyes by seeing curve patterns tend to find the centre point by default so the result in this case is to concentrate



on the Christ figure. The longest pipes are in-line with Christ's knees; this limit couldn't be exceeded as the knees represent the moment when Christ fell on his knees with the cross during the Passion – that is why the larger side pipes are at a lower level than the central ones. Also the upright lights help to elevate the view. As the casework of both organ and console needed to reflect the curvatures of the church, there are some similarities such as the side legs of the console, which are detailed like the church's columns; also the funnel-shaped sections beneath the pipe towers are like the same ones present under the church dome.'

Cherry wood finished with Danish oil has been used for the

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Specification				
GREAT				
B,G,H B&G G&H G B&G	Double Diapason Open Diapason Claribel Viola Principal	16 8 8 8 4	(1–12 Subbass 13-61 from Open Diapason) (1–12 from Subbass)	
G B G B	Wald Flute Nazard Fifteenth Tierce (t.c.)	$     \frac{4}{2^{2}/_{3}} $ $     \frac{2}{1^{3}/_{5}} $	(ext. of Principal)	
G G	Mixture Trompette Octave Swell to Great Positive to Great	III 8	(top 4' octave for Octave Coupler)	
		S۷	VELL	
G	Gedact	8		
G	Voix Celeste (t.c.)	8		
G	Rohr Flute	4	(ext. of Gedact)	
G	Flautino	2		
G B	Quartane Contra Oboe	16	(ext. of Ohoe)	
B	Oboe	8	(ext. of obbe)	
В	Schalmei	4	(ext. of Oboe)	
_	Tremulant (flues, reeds or both)			
	Octave Sub Octave			
_	POSITIVE			
G	Stopped Diapason	8		
G	Flute	4	(ext. of Stopped Diapason)	
G	Principal	2		
B	Larigot	1 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>3</sub>	(ext. of Gt Nazard)	
B	Oboe	8	(from Swell)	
G	Trompette (Gt)	8	(plays additional octaves with octave couplers)	
	Tubular Bells	8	25 tubes, G20–G44; with 5-stage volume control	
	Octave Sub Octave			
	Sub Octave Great to Positive			
	Swell to Positive			
PEDALE				
Н	Acoustic Bass	32	(ext. of Subbass, acoustic bass)	
H	Subbass	16		
B B&C	Open Bass	8	(from Great Open Diapason)	
H&G	Bass Flute	8	(ext. of Subbass)	
G	Quint	$5^{1}/_{3}$	(ext. of Open Bass)	
G	Fifteenth	4	(from Great Open Diapason)	
G B&C	Choral Bass Mixture	4 11	(from Positive Stopped Diapason)	
B.G.H	Harmonics of 32	32	(from various ranks)	
G&B	Trombone	16	(ext. of Great Trompette)	
B	Contra Oboe	16	(from Swell)	
G	Clarion Creat to Padal	8	(from Great Trompette)	
-	Swell to Pedal 4			
	Swell to Pedal			
Usual accessories, plus: General <i>Crescendo</i> Pedal setting controls and on and off Copy and Paste controls Melodic Pedal on Great Transposer: 8 semitones sharper/8 flatter Bells: rotary 5-way control for volume levels 1–5 Rotary 3-way control for Tremulant – to Oboe, Flues or both LED lights in key cheeks and stop-jambs Glazed doors at the back of the organ, to show the internal workings				
There is a separate portable one-manual console, with 12 pre-set pistons, transposer, Melodic Bass and General Cancel. Compass: Manuals CC–c 61 notes, Pedals CCC–g 32 notes				
Wind pressures: Great & Positive 98mm, Swell 95mm, Pedal 85mm, Oboe 115mm, Trompette 155mm				
G = Gern Pipework B = New pipework from F Booth & Sons, Leeds H = Harrison & Harrison (1957) from the late Arthur Starke's organ at Monk's Farm, Isle of Wight				





case, which was made by Renatus, as were the consoles. This was an enormous challenge for them as there is scarcely a straight line in the entire case. The consoles are both in cherry with white maple interiors. Bespoke custommade parts are used for the console accessories including the displays, draw-stops of stainless steel and cherry caps for the pistons. The small one-manual console has 12 presets of selected stops from the main organ. It is portable and can be used in any part of the church if needed.

Colin Peacock (of Renatus), adds: 'The two consoles and the casework took over 3,500 hours to build. The designs had many curved elements and it was important that these were manufactured in a manner that ensured there would be no movement in the variable climate of Gozo. It was necessary to adopt techniques and materials that we use in modern high-end commercial joinery rather than in traditional organbuilding. For example, forming complex curved surfaces from CNC machined plywood ribs, covered in bendy ply and finished with sheets of flexible veneer.'

As the floor space behind the High Altar was limited, the organbuilders were (surprisingly) permitted to cut a huge hole in the marble floor to gain access to the rooms beneath. This lower space was [Michael]: 'used for bellows, blowers and ancillary equipment etc., leaving a floor area at Church level of semi-circular shape with maximum available depth at the centre of 2.5m (reducing as you move left and right) and height of 3m, with a maximum width of 6.5m. In this limited area we fitted 19 ranks including Tubular Bells, taking care to ensure all areas were accessible for maintenance. This was helped by having access to the chests from the room directly below. Bottom boards are of toughened glass which slide for access to the magnets; most

chests can be accessed from quick release bottom boards beneath.'

There are 1,204 pipes in the instrument, of which around half (the main choruses) are the restored Gern pipes from Lutterworth; this is shown in the accompanying specification. Noel Gallo chose to scale the organ in the romantic French style, so the availability of the Gern ranks was timely, as they matched perfectly with his needs. The 101 display pipes (by Booths of Leeds) are of polished and lacquered zinc. To make the instrument resourceful as possible as some ranks are extended and duplicated on different divisions, so direct electric chests were used throughout.

Noel Gallo writes: 'The acoustic strategy adopted was one that located the organ at ground level and made it face the audience directly so as to have direct projection of sound in the shortest distance possible. The rounded wall behind and above





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the organ (the shell) helps to project sound more directly. The reed pipes are designed to project sound upwards so the perception at the centre of the church is that of sound coming not only from the organ lower level but also from the upper part and over from it. This helped to get the organ to be heard in a dynamic manner. The major acoustic factor creating the church's long reverberations is the sound reaching the dome high up above the church with a cascade of reverberations happening and causing this phenomenon. The strategy was therefore to try to stop as much sound from the organ as possible before it reaches the dome. Since the organ's present location is in front of the audience and pews, the latter are made to serve as sound absorbers. Finally after all these assumptions the organ now sounds definite and every note is clearly captured from every position within the church in a crystal clear result, even in performances with "fast"

notes. The organ sound spectrum is focused to have bright high sounds and deep sounds and trying not to concentrate on the mid ranges. This helped to have the organ become clearly heard and that is why the pipe scales were based on a large scale. The 8ft Open Diapason [mainly new case pipes] scales from 164mm (6.5 ins) at bottom C. The church's large internal volume has also helped to make the sounds deeper so that the large scaled Bourdon 16' sounds like an Open 16' from the middle of the church in a balanced way.'

The layout can be seen in the drawings on page 49. The internal planning was rather tricky: the challenge was to find space for every part, to have good access and to create good positioning for the pipework to speak well without obstacles. The Great and Positive pipes are low down in the case and speak through the casework grille, which is covered by a coloured steel gauze. The





Swell pipework is placed a little higher than the Great/Positive pipes so as to speak over them. The designers were aware that they needed to keep in mind that the church is very large and the mere 1,204 pipes need to speak out unfettered. The Swell box side wall and roof are slightly tapered to direct sound well. The Swell box back is formed around the church's complex masonry 'east' wall mouldings, providing a close, sound-insulating fit. The acoustic result of the whole organ has turned out to be remarkably effective, with both good projection and also a really hushed sound from the Swell when closed.

Once the organ was complete in the Farley workshops, in September 2016, Andrew Millington, formerly Director of Music at Exeter Cathedral, gave a recital to 70 invited guests. Installation on Gozo took place during November; on Advent Sunday, 27 November it was played publicly for the first time, and blessed by His Excellency the Bishop of Gozo, Monsignor Mario Grech, in the presence of her Excellency the President of Malta, Mrs Marie Louise Coleiro Preca, the Minister for Gozo and other dignitaries. The Bishop and President also attended the Inaugural Recital given by David Davies, formerly Organist of Exeter Cathedral, on 6 May 2017.

The specification was designed to be French influenced (hence the use of the Gern pipework) but is capable of playing the largest possible repertoire, despite the inevitable limitations of 19 ranks.

There are special function control panels within drawers, their display a black surface with an arrangement of LED lights behind to indicate information. This complex display was visually and technically designed by Noel Gallo, with Colin Peacock (Renatus). The issue was [Noel]: 'to have a clean black screen when all is off (without seeing the LED bulbs when off) as you would view a TV screen, but

with the difference that you have only simple LED lights that can be easily changed if they fail. The displayed text is engraved on a special black double vinyl surface that lights up when a row of LED lights glow behind it, with a frosted glass in between to have an even spread of light for a full filled text view.' Almost certainly a first for a pipe organ!

Though a world away from that known by August Gern, one can be quite certain that however bewildering he might have found the technicalities of this extraordinary new organ, and how unusual the beautiful serpentine case, he would have rejoiced that his pipework was once again in use, singing sweetly into one of the world's most resonant churches. The completion of this project is something of a triumph for Noel Gallo, Michael Farley and his team, and Colin Peacock and his team at Renatus. Worth a visit on your next trip to Malta, without a doubt.



## Paul Hale is a professional organ consultant, recitalist and choral conductor.

Whilst Organ Scholar of New College, Oxford (1971–4), Paul Hale began to write about the organ - his first published piece was in Organists' Review, of which he was later to become Reviews Editor and then Editor (1990-2005). A noted recitalist, lecturer and choir trainer, Paul is well-known in the UK, in Europe and in the USA. As well as being an Organ Adviser for the Dioceses of Southwell and Lincoln, Paul is an accredited member of the AIOA and has designed many new and restored organs throughout the UK. He is a diploma examiner for the

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