



Freestyle BY GRAEME KAY

Hale, the conquering hero comes... with a piece of string

As a fan of cinema, I've always been aware that film productions all have interesting back-stories, especially as it can take years for ideas to progress from germ to full bloom. Every music CD has a back-story too, and some are worth recounting. So it is with Regent's recording of the Vierne and Langlais *Messes solennelles*, with the Choir of Southwell Minster, conducted by Paul Hale [REGCD 425]. The disc was made in Sées Cathedral in Normandy, and there's a reason which goes beyond the fact that Southwell is twinned with Sées. Paul takes up the story:

'When I went on reconnaissance before taking the choir there on tour in 2012, I was asked that we sing an Evensong in what had been the monks' Quire, as well as our concert in the nave. I was enthusiastic and said, "It would be lovely to use the Cavallé-Coll *orgue de chœur*." That's when they said it was "dead" and a French organ builder had told them it would cost €20,000 to fix it! I tried the key and stop action – both worked – then asked whether there was an electric blower. There was, and they found a switch; it roared into life but clearly no wind was getting to the reservoir.

I realised that only one thing would stand in the way – some sort of guillotine or roller valve between blower and bellows, regulated by a wire from the top of the bellows. I asked to take the back off the organ – they thought I was a mad eccentric Englishman (and worse, a non-Catholic!) but consented to my whim. Taking the back off revealed a blower, squeezed in next to the Cavallé-Coll's original reservoir. The piece of cord which operated the valve was probably 100 years old and had simply worn away where it ran over a pulley. I took both ends off, measured the overall length and asked whether they had any string in the sacristy. By

now convinced of my insanity, they nonetheless brought forth some string, from which I cut exactly the same length as I had found. Attaching it to the reservoir top, running it over the pulley, attaching it to the valve and then raising the valve to the open position before tying the knot, I then asked them to switch on again. Lo! The reservoir rose and settled, we went round the other side to the [reversed] one-manual console, I drew some stops including the Trompette and placed my hands on the keys (standing up – a previous curé had pinched the organ bench for his house!). A wonderful full-blown Cavallé-Coll sound poured out, everyone jumped, and the organist, who had known the organ – silent – from having been a chorister there 40 years before, burst into tears!

'We then performed there using the organ, singing at the end of an all-British programme the Kyrie from the Vierne *Messe solennelle* as an encore, at which point the entire cathedral audience rose to their feet and applauded to the roof. On the coach afterwards, I determined to return with Gary Cole (of Regent Records) and record the Vierne and Langlais Masses with this stupendous pair of C-C organs: a first for a British cathedral choir. And it came to pass.' ■



▲ Rehearsing for Evensong at Sées, with the *orgue de chœur* back in action

Graeme Kay is a multiplatform producer for BBC Radio 3 and 4.