

The Organ Music of Samuel Wesley (1766-1837)
and William Russell (1777-1813)



Samuel Wesley, painted between 1815 and 1820

The background

It's a commonplace that there isn't much British music worth bothering about between the death of Henry Purcell in 1695 and the first mature works of Edward Elgar two hundred years later. There's Handel, of course, and there are reasonable grounds for counting him as an English composer despite his having been born in Halle, and Mendelssohn has a kind of adoptive status, but no Bach, Mozart, Haydn or Beethoven emerges from our shores during this period. This is not the place to try and explain the reasons for this apparent dearth of musical genius and, in any case, we need to sharpen our focus on music for the organ.

If we take 1695 as our starting point (bearing in mind that Henry Purcell composed little for the organ and even the authorship of that tiny output is disputed) it seems that the 'golden age' of Blitheman, Preston, Redford, Tallis and, a little later on, Byrd, Bull, Gibbons and Tomkins represents a peak from which we descend until we encounter the work of Handel and Stanley in the eighteenth century. The organ concertos of Handel were designed by their composer as interval entertainment during performances of his large-scale choral and operatic works and, because the composer himself was frequently the soloist, require some improvisation. Inveterate borrower from his own music that Handel was, quite a few of the individual movements turn up elsewhere in his output. Be that as it may, the organ concertos are as deservedly popular now as they were when Handel first performed them. Handel's solo organ works are few but there are six 'Fugues or Voluntaries' which can stand comparison with the best of Bach.

John Stanley left us three sets of voluntaries and six concertos which are rightly held in the highest esteem. Handel himself rated Stanley so highly that he often made the effort to listen to Stanley's final voluntary at the Temple Church. For sheer beauty, quality of invention and even emotional impact, Stanley has no equal. We are probably all familiar with the composers introduced to us by the six books of C.H. Trevor's 'Old English Organ Music' and there are many delightful movements by the likes of Alcock, Boyce, Cooke, Crotch, Greene, Travers, Walond and many more, but few come close to Handel or Stanley. Maybe there is just a bit too much predictability and too much reliance on well-worn figurations and sequences.

Samuel Wesley (1766-1837)

John Stanley died in 1786 by which time Samuel Wesley was 20 and already attracting a great deal of respect and admiration not just for his compositions but also for his improvisations. Of his large output for the organ there are two collections which are of particular importance and interest: The Twelve Voluntaries, Opus 6, published separately between 1805 and 1818, and The Thirteen Short Pieces, published in 1812. In his 1973 study of Early English Organ Music Francis Routh makes this fascinating observation on these two collections: *The Twelve Voluntaries and the Thirteen Short Pieces show Wesley's interpretation of the two possible directions in which the eighteenth century Voluntary might develop - first, into a substantial piece, of sonata-like dimensions; second, into short and concentrated preludes.* He goes on to liken the short pieces to Bach's *Orgelbüchlein* inasmuch as each piece exploits a particular organ style, sonority or texture. Now many of us know the 8th and 9th of the Thirteen Short Pieces as 'Wesley's Air and Gavotte' and we play them, perhaps, at weddings. Just because they are so familiar might lead us to think that they are nothing special whereas we need to recall when we first encountered them and how

fresh and inventive they must have seemed. Here are two beautifully polished, highly original musical miniatures which are quite unlike anything else being written at the time.

SAMUEL WESLEY - AIR and GAVOTTE

Samuel Wesley is one of music's most intriguing characters, full of contradictions and leading a pretty bohemian existence by the standards of his day. There are aspects of his personality and behaviour that, even now, might be thought reprehensible and yet, the more one delves into his life, the more he emerges as a rather likeable rascal. His company could never be described as dull! His great friend the composer and publisher Vincent Novello has left us a concise description of the man: *I knew him, unfortunately, too well, pious Catholic; raving atheist; mad; reasonable; drunk; sober; the dread of all wives and regular families. A warm friend, a bitter foe, a satirical talker; a blasphemer at times, and a puling Methodist at others.*

Samuel's father, Charles and his mother Sarah Gwynne were both fine musicians and their marriage produced three children: Charles (1757-1834), Samuel (1766-1837) and Sally. The two boys were prodigiously gifted, especially Charles. Sadly, despite such a promising start and much hard work on his part, Charles never achieved the position or status his early promise suggested. Gordon Phillips puts it succinctly, if a little unkindly: *In the case of Charles, genius faded into amiable mediocrity.*



Samuel Wesley aged 11

Samuel, nine years younger than his brother, had already composed an oratorio, 'Ruth' at the age of six and, within two years, had acquired the necessary skill to write it down. It stands as a monument to precocity equalled only by the infant Mozart. If Samuel had done little else with his remaining years he would perhaps be remembered as an astonishing freak, and nothing more, but, despite his failure to hold any important position, the huge number of compositions which flowed from his pen assure him of a place in British musical history. The fact that many of them were also of the highest level of inspiration and craftsmanship place him in the top rank of British composers. Of course we're considering his compositions for the organ but we should remind ourselves that he also wrote five symphonies, three overtures, two string quartets, eleven organ concertos and some of the finest mass settings and motets since the time of Tallis, Byrd and Gibbons.

Long before Mendelssohn's celebrated rediscovery of J S Bach, Samuel Wesley was an avid enthusiast for his music. Introduced to the 'Forty-Eight' by George Pinto, the English composer and keyboard virtuoso who tragically died at the age of 19, Samuel and the sometime Organist of St. George's Chapel, Windsor, C. F. Horn, produced the first English edition of the 'Forty-Eight' and also piano duet arrangements of the organ trio-sonatas of Bach. (It's as well to remember that the organ works of Bach could not yet be played on English organs with their lack of pedal pipes or, in many cases, any pedals at all). The spirit of Bach is never very far away in Wesley's organ music and particularly in his recognition that the organ is essentially a contrapuntal instrument. Wesley is writing more than sixty years after the death of Bach and whilst he takes on board elements of the *galant* style of Bach's most famous son, Carl Phillip Emmanuel, his organ writing is nearly always linear. Let me try and show what I mean.

The Thirteen Pieces of 1812 are set out in four groups, by key. The first three are in G major, the next four in A minor and so on. Each piece within a group is louder, fuller and more intense than its predecessor. The four pieces in A minor clearly reveal this progression: the first, in 9/8 starts with an oboe solo; the second features a cornet solo; the third is indicated to be played by 'a mixture of Diapasons, Principal and Fifteenth' whilst the fourth is for 'Full organ without the trumpet'. Played as a little suite, these four pieces reveal the essence of Samuel Wesley: he has absorbed the craftsmanship and the basic forms of an earlier generation but melded it to his own much more adventurous harmonic spirit. To put this into its historical context, just remember that this music was published in the year of Napoleon's disastrous Russian adventure, to be commemorated many years later in Tchaikovsky's celebrated 1812 Overture.

SAMUEL WESLEY - THIRTEEN PIECES nos. 4 - 7

Moving back five years to 1805 (the year of Nelson's decisive victory against the French and Spanish fleets at Trafalgar) we encounter the first of Samuel Wesley's indisputable organ masterpiece - the twelve Opus 6 Voluntaries. (They were published separately between 1805 and 1818). These are on a much grander scale than the Thirteen Pieces of 1812 and might almost be thought of as organ sonatas. Wesley has travelled an enormous distance from the traditional eighteenth century trumpet or cornet voluntary. The writing is confident and assured. There is drama, pathos and exultation as well as an enviable contrapuntal skill which he is able to sustain throughout substantial movements. The thing that strikes you most, though, is that he's always full of surprises, going out of his way to avoid the

obvious and so holding the interest. You never know quite what he's going to do next!

To be truthful, the Opus 6 set is an embarrassment of riches and it's impossible to pick one voluntary in preference to the others: there's no dead wood here. I've chosen to play the 10th Voluntary, in F, dated January 1814. There are four movements: a gentle Andante for the Diapasons is followed by a jolly dance in 3/8 time for Diapasons, Principal and Fifteenth. A slow and intense section for Diapasons again leads into the final fugue which is quite astonishing: at times it sounds as though it could have been written by Liszt, it's so chromatic. Listen out, too, for the passage two thirds of the way through this movement when, characteristically, he has both hands playing in unison, followed by a left hand part which zips up and down the keyboard before settling on a bottom C - the only note in the entire Voluntary which Wesley specifies should be played by the pedals.

SAMUEL WESLEY - VOLUNTARY in F Op.6 N0.10

Wesley never held any important positions - his reputation made it unlikely that anyone would employ him! His organ music was not intended for church use but rather for informal musical gatherings and so it's probably best to think of it as 'chamber music'. The organs for which it was written were simple by the standards of later instruments by the likes of Hill, Willis and Harrison, being small but colourful, gently voiced and, of course, tuned to mean-tone temperament. The instrument at the Portuguese Embassy Chapel (prior to emancipation in 1829 the only place in London where the Roman Mass could legally be celebrated) was probably built about 1747 by Abraham Jordan as a one-manual of eight stops. A major rebuild in 1808 added extra stops to the Great plus completely new Swell and Choir divisions. Samuel would have played this instrument on many occasions. Two other organs on which he is known to have played regularly are those in The Surrey Chapel and St. Dunstan-in-the-East, London and their specifications are typical of the period:

The Surrey Chapel, Blackfriars Road, London

(Possibly built by Elliot)

<i>Great</i>		<i>Swell</i> (down to tenor F)	
Open Diapason I	8	Open Diapason	8
Open Diapason II	8	Stopped Diapason	8
Stopped Diapason	8	Principal	4
Principal	4	Cornet	III
Flute	4	Trumpet	8
Twelfth	22/3		
Cornet (treble)	III		
Sesquialtera (bass)	II		
Mixture	II		
Trumpet I	8		
Trumpet II (Sw.)	8	Pull-down pedals, 11/2 octaves	

St. Dunstan-in-the-East, London

<i>Great</i> (GG - d''')	<i>Swell</i> (g-d''')	<i>Choir</i> (GG-d''')
Open Diapason	Open Diapason	Stopped Diapason
Stopped Diapason	Principal	Principal
Principal	Cornet III	Cremona
Fifteenth	Trumpet	Vox Humana
Twelfth	Hautboy	
Sesquialtera III		
Cornet III (from c#)		
Trumpet		
Clarion	'Short' octaves. Probably pull-down pedals	

I'm going to conclude this far too brief introduction to the organ music of Samuel Wesley with a later work, dating from 1826, a Prelude and Fugue in C minor. These are the first and third movements of a work published posthumously in 1840 as 'Prelude, Arietta and Fugue' and it is perfectly possible that the movements were not actually intended to sit together. The short Prelude is characterized by a dramatic Beethovenian dotted figurations and echo effects, but the great glory is the magnificent fugue which follows. Here, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries collide in a movement as fine as anything by, for example, Mendelssohn. Towards the end Wesley asks for the fugue subject to be played by the pedals at 16' pitch and then, soaring over the busy counterpoint, we hear the fugue subject high up in the soprano part in long notes. In the final three bars there is another innovation - a double pedal part. If you ever doubted that England produced a great composer between Purcell and Elgar I hope that this astonishing work will convince you otherwise!

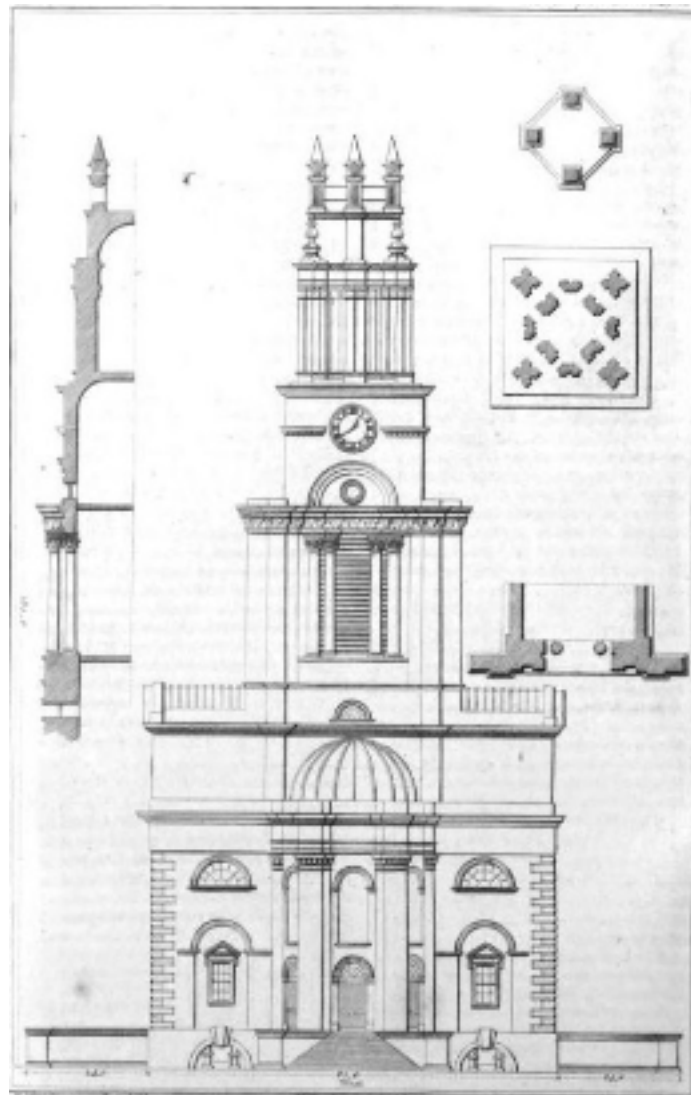
SAMUEL WESLEY - PRELUDE AND FUGUE in C minor

William Russell (1777-1813)

Sadly, it seems that there are no portraits of William Russell and so we can't have any idea as to what he looked like. His father, Hugh, and William's brother Timothy were both organ builders and Hugh was organist of St. Mary Aldermary, Bow Lane where he played an organ which he himself had built in 1781. William deputized here for his father from the age of eleven. In 1793 he was appointed organist of Great Queen Street Chapel, Lincoln's Inn Fields. Five years later, in 1798, William Russell was elected organist of St. Ann's Limehouse and, in 1801, of the Foundling Hospital, retaining both positions until his death at the age of thirty-six in 1813. He was also Director of the Sadler's Wells orchestra and a prolific composer of orchestral, theatrical music and oratorios, including the work which is considered to be his masterpiece, the oratorio *Job*.

For the organ Russell published two sets of Voluntaries, twelve in each set, in 1804 and 1812.. The first set was by subscription and a list of the subscribers reads like a 'who's who' of the most eminent musicians of the time, including Thomas Attwood, Charles Burney, William Crotch, Matthew Camidge, Vincent Novello, Charles Wesley and Samuel Wesley. By the time the second set was published, Russell's fame and reputation were such that no subscription was necessary.

Just as Wesley's organ music was not intended for liturgical use, Russell's Voluntaries fit the organ of his time - often an instrument with vibrant solo stops and generally gently voiced. Russell is very specific in his instructions for registration and it might be useful to take a look at the two instruments with which he would have been familiar and also to note the changes which he made during the period of his incumbency (changes which were made by his father and his brother).



St. Ann's, Limehouse

Here at St. Ann's he had a fine three-manual instrument by Richard Bridge, constructed in 1741 and rebuilt in 1810-11. As was customary at the time, the Great and Choir keyboards ran from low GG (ie, the G below the bottom C of the modern keyboard) up to the D on the second ledger line). The Swell was short compass, running upwards from 'fiddle' G and was therefore effectively limited to use by the right hand. Russell had the compass of the manuals extended at the time of the rebuild, taking the bottom note of the Swell down to tenor C. It's interesting, too, to see the tonal changes which he made at the rebuild, adding new upperwork to the Choir:

St. Ann's, Limehouse

Built by Richard Bridge 1741, rebuilt 1810-11

<i>Great</i> (GG-d''')		<i>Swell</i> (e-d''')		<i>Choir</i> (GG-d''')	
Open Diapason I	8	Open Diapason	8	Open Diapason (C-f)	8
[Open Diapason II	8]	Stopt. Diapason	8	Stopt. Diapason	8
Stopt. Diapason	8	Principal	4	[Dulciana g-f''']	8]
Principal	4	German Flute	4	Principal	4
Twelfth	22/3	Cornet	III	Flute	4
Fifteenth	2	Hautboy	8	[Fifteenth	2]
Tierce	13/5	Trumpet	8	[Mixture	II]
(Sesquialtera	V)	Clarion	4	Cremona (g-d''')	8
[Sesquialtera	III]				
[Furniture	II/III]				
Cornet from c'	V				
Trumpet	8	Pull-down pedals GG - C			

Nb: () = stops removed at rebuild. [] = stops added at rebuild.

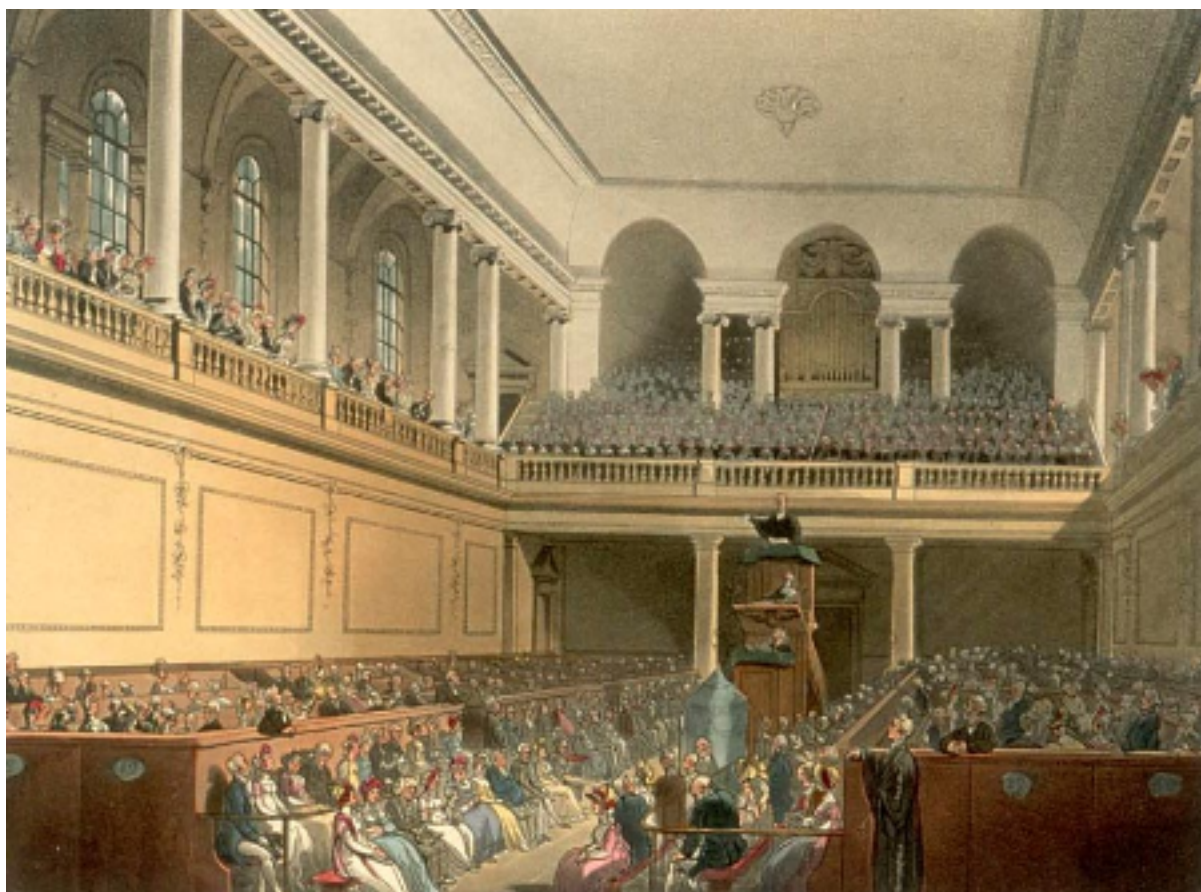
The organ in the Chapel of the Foundling Chapel is remarkably similar, as are the changes instituted by Russell in 1805:

Foundling Hospital Chapel

Built by Thomas Parker 1769, rebuilt 1805

<i>Great</i> (GG-e''')		<i>Swell</i> (g-e''')		<i>Choir</i> (GG-e''')	
Double Stopt. Diap.	16	Open Diapason	8	Stopt Diapason	8
Open Diapason I	8	Stopt Diapason	8	Dulciana (C-e''')	8
Open Diapason II	8	[Principal	4]	Principal	4
Stopt Diapason	8	[Cornet	III]	[Flute	4]
Principal I	4	[Hautboy	8]	Fifteenth	2
(Principal II	4)	Trumpet	8	[Cremona (g-e''')	8]
Twelfth	22/3	[Clarion	4]	(Vox Humana	8)
Fifteenth	2	(Cremona (to Ch.)	8)		
(Blockflute	2)				
[Seventeenth	13/5}				
Sesquialtera	III				
[Furniture	II]				
[Cornet (from c')	IV]				
Trumpet	8	Pull-down pedals GG - C			

Nb: () = stops removed at rebuild. [] = stops added at rebuild.



A service in the Foundling Hospital Chapel, 1808

Russell and Wesley were friends and there have even been suggestions that Russell was a pupil of the older man for a time. Whether or not this is so, there is clearly a degree of cross-fertilization, although Wesley's Thirteen Pieces and Opus 6 Voluntaries are more or less contemporaneous with Russell's two sets of Voluntaries so, in a sense, they complement each other. Rather than give a lengthy description, I'll play the Eight Voluntary in Bb from Russell's first set. It's in four movements: a dignified introduction for the Diapasons followed by a beautiful extended Andante which features solo stops and is highly theatrical: this is music which would not be out of place in the theatre or the opera-house. A short Andantino leads into the final fugue. The second and fourth movements require pedals and, indeed, much of the second movement is written on three staves. This is a very early instance of an independent pedal part in English organ music. Incidentally, it was this Voluntary that first attracted me to Russell many years ago and I have to confess that it still has that 'wow' factor for me!

WILLIAM RUSSELL - VOLUNTARY VIII, 1st Set IN Bb

No composer exists in a vacuum and very few, if any, can be entirely original. If anyone's shadow lurks in the background of Russell's music it must be that of Joseph Haydn. After all, Haydn had spent the years 1791-2 and 1794-5 in London where he had been warmly received and where, in his own words, he passed the happiest days of his life. There's a the same beauty, elegance and immediacy in Russell as we find in Haydn. What makes Russell's Voluntaries stand out, though, is not only their attractiveness but the dullness of so much organ music of the period. The established Church was going through a time of self-satisfied awfulness:

organists rarely played music of much worth, preferring to improvise and, by most contemporary accounts, improvising very badly. Cathedral music was in a dire state and was destined to remain so until Samuel Wesley's son, Sebastian, took it by the scruff of the neck and, with others, began a systematic process of improvement. All this was a long way in the future and, anyway, it has to be admitted that nothing of Samuel Sebastian Wesley's for the organ was to be a patch on that of either his father or of Russell. Not until Elgar's G major Sonata of 1895 do we encounter English organ music of such quality again (yes, I know that might sound a bit hard on Henry Smart but, fine though his best is, it's really very sub-Mendelssohnian!) With Russell, we have a composer who is not afraid to import the music of the theatre to the organ bench and, perhaps because of that, we maybe feel a little uncomfortable about playing movements from his voluntaries before or after church services. Here's another absolutely delightful movement. It's the Siciliano from the 4th Voluntary of the 1st set. I think this is stunningly lovely but it has more in common with an operatic aria than a pre-service voluntary and it shows Russell to be not only a master of melody but also harmonically highly imaginative. It's the equal of at least one very well-known soprano aria in Haydn's 'Creation' (think of 'With verdure clad' and you'll see what I'm getting at!)

WILLIAM RUSSELL - SICILIANO from VOLUNTARY IV, 1st Set in D

Russell is always very specific about the stops to be used. He's not especially innovative in this respect, using solos and combinations which would have been quite commonplace to any eighteenth century composer: Hautboy, Cremona, Diapasons (by which he means both Open and Stopped Diapasons together), Cornet, Trumpet and so on. What IS new is the way in which he uses the organ. I'm going to conclude with what, in many ways, is the most striking of Russell's Voluntaries, the last one of the 1st set, in C minor. In many ways, this is almost Beethovenian in scale and in majesty. There are no fewer than five movements. The opening Adagio for the Diapasons shows Russell's highly imaginative, often bold, use of harmony. This is music in which harmony is both functional but also deeply expressive. Listen to the anguished chords above the sustained dominant pedal G half-way through.

There follows one of the earliest (if not actually the first) Trumpet tunes to be written in a minor key. The effect is quite disturbing as we tend to associate the use of the Trumpet stop in the Eighteenth century Voluntary with a rather jolly mood: here, it's use is anything but.

The third movement is a March characterized by open octave passages. Gillian Ward Russell, the composer's distant relative by marriage, considers that these represent some kind of Masonic cryptography: knocking on a door, followed by chains of thirds and sixths with tied notes and slurred pairs of syncopated notes. Russell may well have been acquainted with Mozart's Masonic Funeral Music.

The fourth movement, moves us from the minor into the major and is Handelian in its strong dotted rhythmic patterns. Ending on a half-close, it leads straight into the final Fugue.

Nothing prepares the listener for the first five notes of the striking fugue subject - a rising semibreve scale in whole-tones: C - D - E - F# - G#. Russell exploits the ambiguity of this note-series with masterly assurance and produces an enormous movement, complete with obbligato pedals and, towards the end, an increase in

intensity as the voices overlap in a daring stretto. The relief from so much tension as the pedals make their final entry in octaves is palpable. This would be an astonishing achievement for a middle-aged German or Austrian composer: for an Englishman still in his 'twenties it's almost unbelievable.

WILLIAM RUSSELL - VOLUNTARY XII, 1st Set in C minor

ENVOI

I hope that, if nothing else, you might feel moved to explore the music of Samuel Wesley and William Russell. Of course, there are other composers of the Georgian period and their music is rewarding to play and enjoyable to hear (it's also mostly a good deal easier to play) and some of these are:

John Alcock senior (1715-1806) and his son:

John Alcock junior (1740-91)

Jonathan Battishill (1738-1801)

William Boyce (1710-79)

Charles Burney (1726-1814)

Benjamin Cooke (1734-93)

William Crotch (1775-1847)

George Guest (1771-1831)

James Hook (1746-1827)

John Keeble (1711-86)

William Walond (1725-1770)

Of these, Keeble is by far the most interesting and adventurous. He's a bit of a wildcard, like Wesley.

Much of the music we have heard and mentioned today is freely and legally available to download at: <http://imslp.org/>

John Kitchen has recorded all of William Russell's organ Voluntaries on the beautiful 1829 organ of St. James's Church, Bermondsey, restored in 2002 by Götze and Gwynn. It's on the Delphian label DCD34062

The outstanding recordings are by Jennifer Bate: originally issued on 6 LP's, they were reissued on CD as 'Stanley to Wesley' (on six CD's, available separately) and feature superb performances on period instruments. Although no longer available to buy new, they can still be obtained secondhand on ebay and from Amazon.

In addition, many pieces by both Wesley and Russell are available on youtube.

To fully appreciate this lovely music it is best heard on instruments of the period in which it was composed, using the meantone temperament common at the time. Jennifer Bate uses the organs at Adlington Hall, St. Michael's Mount, Kenwood House, Killerton House, Everingham Chapel and a 1764 Snetzler bureau organ. It's a revelation!