

The Swinging Sixties

“Is music ahead of the other arts? There is only one answer - No! So far from being ahead, it is mournfully, miserably, cretinously laggard! This is normal. It has always been so; but never has the gap been so scandalous as it is now.” Olivier Messiaen in 1937.

“Most British organ composers are somewhat conservative by comparison with leading continental composers.” Marilou Kratzenstein in 1980. Not much progress there then, by the sound of things.

My first car was a 1961 Vauxhall Victor which was really a scaled-down Yankee saloon complete with fins, lots of chrome, bench seat and column gear-change. In its day this car was quite a style icon. The trouble was that it wasn't really fit for the purpose for which it had been designed. On the rare occasions when it could be persuaded to start it steered like a bulk oil-tanker, had the handling of a sofa and would not stop in a straight line. As with so many of its brothers and sisters it succumbed to the tin-worm and ended its life prematurely at the knacker's yard. Just think on this: when I bought my car it was just eight years old but was already, as we say these days, 'unfit for purpose'. A similar aged car now would, barring accidents, have quite a few years of life-expectancy left and would certainly not be heading for the crusher. Nostalgia's a fine thing but when it comes to cars I'm afraid that very rose-tinted glass are needed.

The basic problem with the nineteen-sixties is one of perception. These days, fifty years on, we have a tendency to gloss over some of the horrors of the time and look back fondly, recalling the Indian summer of steam trains, the Beatles, miniskirts, red London buses, the 'white heat' of Harold Wilson's technological revolution and, later on in the decade, the summer of love, psychedelia and kipper ties. Sixty-five years ago the number one single was 'The Young Ones' by Cliff Richard and the Shadows - a portent of the youth culture to come perhaps? If you're my age the early 'sixties are a time of Airfix model aeroplanes, collecting matchbox cars and wrecking our teeth with the contents of 'Jamboree Bags'. We tend to forget the destruction of town centres by the planners, the hideous tower-blocks, the rapid closure of half of the railway system, the Vietnam War, the violence in the emerging countries of Africa, the student unrest at the end of the decade and the gradual abandonment of traditional values. The buzz-word of the sixties was 'progress' - if it feels good, do it. If it looks good, don't worry that it probably won't work properly.

My Vauxhall Victor looked fine but it was actually very badly made and was fundamentally useless. I wonder how many concrete structures put up in the sixties are still even standing, let alone fulfilling the function for which they were intended. The materials were so often substandard and the designs ill thought-through.

The same 'got-to-be-bang-up-to-date' way of thinking even infiltrated the church. So many of the churches built to serve the burgeoning housing estates of the sixties were shoddily built and whilst they sought to ape the work of the great progressive architects like Le Corbusier or Mies Van de Rohe, they were so often hastily knocked up with inferior materials. One example of what I mean will have to suffice: in 1966 Taylor Woodrow constructed a 22-storey residential block in East London, using cheap prefabricated concrete panels. On May 16th 1968 a small gas explosion caused the building to collapse with the death of four residents and causing serious injury to seventeen others. Ronan Point looked fine on the outside, but it was a death-trap.

It's a bit of a generalisation but I think that it's fair to say that the Nineteen-sixties was not one of the happiest periods for organ-building. Countless fine Victorian and Edwardian instruments were 'improved' by grafting on hopelessly mismatched upperwork to stentorian diapasons or else removing those diapasons altogether in favour of an anaemic mishmash of screaming mutations and perhaps a couple of 'buzz-in-a-bottle' quarter-length reeds. Not all organs and rebuilds of the time were bad. Noel Mander, Walkers, Cuthbert Harrison, Stanley Lambert and Roger Yates of Nicholson's and Maurice

Forsyth-Grant were building superb instruments and it's as well to remember that the decade produced the organs in Coventry Cathedral, St. Albans Abbey, Liverpool Catholic Cathedral, The University of Sussex Meeting House, New College Oxford and St. Michael's Newquay.

Turning to the music of the period and, obviously, we're concentrating on the organ music, I think that it's fair to say that an awful lot of music from the sixties has not worn well and perhaps one of the main reasons is simply that no-one wants to listen to it or spend the time learning it. Maybe, consciously or otherwise, we recognise that, to use current parlance, it 'doesn't deliver' and it's not 'fit for purpose'. Unlike jerry-built tower-blocks or shoddy cars I shouldn't think that anyone has died as a result of badly-constructed music but there is no point in wasting time on it.

What constitutes worthwhile organ music? Well, one of the best explanations comes from one of the composers we shall be hearing from in a moment. Writing in 1984, Arthur Wills writes this: "As the tendency towards organ-building based on classical principles grows, so composers will be drawn to exploit those features of the organ that are peculiar to it: its range of colours and registers; its unique sustaining power; its old association with both religious and secular occasions and, above all, its essential spirituality." A couple of paragraphs later he tells us that the organ "is the God-instrument, not simply because it is used in churches but because of its intrinsic nature."

Music publishers were extremely busy, particularly during the optimistic first half of the decade. Novello, in particular, had two large-scale series: the adventurous 'International Series of Contemporary Organ Music' and the rather more conservative 'Novello Organ Music Club'. Many of the composers who featured in these series have long since fallen by the wayside, but one or two names went on to establish themselves as mainstream composers: Arthur Wills, John Gardner, Kenneth Leighton and John Joubert. OUP had John McCabe, Peter Hurford and William Mathias. Most of these composers were born between 1925 and 1935 and so would have been between 25 and 35 when the decade began. It's also worth pointing out that most of the pieces I'm going to play date from the first half of the decade: the economy started to go pear-shaped during 1966 and publishers began to reign in their activities a great deal.

ARTHUR WILLS - INTRODUCTION AND ALLEGRO

Arthur Wills was born in 1926 and by the late fifties Novello's were publishing just about everything he wrote. Although he was born in Coventry his name will always be inextricably linked with the music of Ely Cathedral where he was appointed assistant organist in 1949 before succeeding Michael Howard as organist in 1958, a post which he held for 32 years. Arthur Wills has been one of the most prolific composers of music for the organ although it has to be said that he is also one of the most neglected. I suspect that there may be two reasons for this: the fact that he HAS written so much means that not everything has the depth and spontaneity of his best work and his harmonic language can best be described as 'gritty' which is not to everyone's taste. The piece I've chosen is an early one and, to my mind, still one of his most accomplished. The Introduction and Allegro was published in 1961 by Novello as no. 9 in their International Series of Contemporary Organ Music. There is little in common with pieces of the same title by Elgar or Ravel: the flamboyant Introduction sets bravura passages on full organ against short recitatives for flutes and celestes - a favourite Wills device. The Allegro is restless often featuring repeated chords - another Wills trademark - and the harmonic language is decidedly French. At this time the composer was particularly attracted by the music of Vierne, Messiaen and Dupré and he takes their rich harmonic palette and adapts it to his own rather more astringent style.

The piece is very physical - much of the manual writing is in octaves and the pedals are far more than just a bass line. I suppose that now we would be justified in saying that Arthur Wills is really a very conservative composer and this piece is certainly a great deal more traditional than some of the much more experimental things he wrote later on. In his *Symphonia Eliensis* of 1976, for instance, he dispenses with traditional notation altogether. Interestingly, the Introduction and Allegro is dedicated to his wife,

Mary. I wonder if he realised when he had written it that it might turn out to be one of his best organ works?

SUITE: LAUDATE DOMINUM - PETER HURFORD

From one cathedral organist to another. Peter Hurford is now best known for his groundbreaking recordings and broadcasts of the complete organ works of JS Bach in the 1980's and it is hard to see how these could ever be bettered. For twenty years he was organist of St. Albans Abbey where he oversaw the installation of the Ralph Downes designed Harrison and Harrison organ in 1962 which became the centrepiece of the world-renowned international organ festival which he founded. His own compositions reflect his fondness for both Bach and Paul Hindemith (whose three organ sonatas he recorded) and, although labels are not always very accurate, I think that it might be fair to describe his organ works as 'neo-baroque' in that they respect the essentially contrapuntal nature of the instrument and they tend to work with the natural grain of the organ rather than trying to make it perform as a one-man orchestra. His best-known organ work is the Two Dialogues, published by Novello in 1963 and these are delightfully chirpy pieces which are a joy to play but I'm going to play the earlier 'Laudate Dominum' Suite published by OUP in 1961. OUP had already published a couple of his organ works while he was still in his twenties but this lovely set of six short movements gives a fuller impression of his fresh and vibrant style. The little Meditation is easy enough that anyone could play it and the three quick movements, Rondo da Chiesa, Scherzo and French Carol are models of how to say a lot in a very short time. Each movement is headed by a quotation from the Psalms and the first and last make splendid short voluntaries.

KENNETH LEIGHTON - PRELUDE, SCHERZO AND PASSACAGLIA

There is one work which towers over all else in this decade. In fact, without resorting to hyperbole, I think that it's fair to say that Kenneth Leighton's monumental Prelude, Scherzo and Passacaglia of 1964 is one of the most accomplished compositions in the organist's repertoire. It's not easy listening and it's not enough to say that this is a great work because someone says so. It needs justification, so I'll try, if only because I have admired this piece ever since I first heard it forty-five years ago. Kenneth Leighton was born in 1929 and studied with Petrassi in Rome. He was later appointed Professor of Music at Edinburgh. His early works are unashamedly romantic and very beautiful. It's important to note that he was perfectly capable of writing music which was highly accessible: he didn't write dissonances because he didn't know how to write nice tunes and pretty harmony - he chose not to. Just to digress for a minute. One of the finest artists of the sixties (and of today) is David Hockney. If all you know of Hockney's work are the 'Hollywood' paintings and the cartoons, then it's worth going to the Hockney gallery at Saltair just outside Bradford. There you can see some of his pencil portraits and they show that, like Leighton, he was able to produce 'accessible art' as well as anyone. Like Leighton, he chose a different way to cover his canvas.

I mention all that because there is a world of difference between the composer who produces unpleasant music because he can't do anything else and the composer who CHOOSES to use a language which may at first seem a little difficult because it suits his purpose. Leighton is a master craftsman and the score of Prelude, Scherzo and Passacaglia is such that every note is an essential part of the structure. When he uses brittle fourths and fifths in his harmony rather than the more obviously appealing thirds and sixths, it's not because he doesn't know how to write nice pleasant harmony.

Leighton understands that the organ is essentially a contrapuntal instrument and, interestingly, there are virtually no registration indications or suggestions in the score. This is music which fits the organ perfectly and there is no attempt to try and get it to imitate an orchestra or anything else.

Finally, Leighton manages to pull off that almost impossible challenge: he can write serious music which never degenerates into melodrama. This is something which even Liszt and Reger can't quite pull off where the endless fortissimo diminished seventh chords can eventually lose their impact. I had the privilege of meeting Kenneth Leighton on two occasions and I can't imagine a greater disjunction

between the severity of this music and the kind, gentle and warm-hearted composer who brought it into being.

The Prelude is characterized by a two-note ostinato in the pedals. From a mysterious beginning it builds to an enormous climax and an indeterminate close which seems to beckon us on to the next two movements.

The Scherzo is like quicksilver. The opening figure recalls the major/minor conflict of the pedal ostinato in the Prelude. The harmony is spiky, built predominantly on the intervals of a fourth, fifth and seventh. It disappears as quietly as it began.

The Passacaglia is built on a pedal ground bass heard at the opening which uses all twelve pitches. The variations increase in volume and tempo until the theme is given out on the trumpet stop and then broken up over a staccato pedal part. A dramatic silence leads into a cadenza and a huge restatement of the theme in octave pedals and a triumphant close in the major key.

The work lasts twenty minutes. Think of it as an amazing musical journey!

WILLIAM MATHIAS - PARTITA

Both Kenneth Leighton and our next composer sadly died in their prime: Leighton in 1988 at the age of 56 and William Mathias in 1992 at the age of 57. In one sense they have much in common: both were university professors (Leighton at Edinburgh, Mathias at Bangor), both were very accomplished pianists, both left a rich legacy of music for choirs and organists, both were delightful people and both have been generally considered as 'conservative' composers. Born in Whitland, South Wales, in 1934, William Mathias always considered himself every inch a Welsh composer and some of his finest music is for the national instrument, the harp. He described himself as an 'eclectic' composer, drawing his inspiration from a variety of sources, most notably from the Welsh folk tradition (although he rarely if ever quotes actual folk tunes) and the music of the Hungarian composer Béla Bartók.

His melodies (and, by extension, his harmonies) are frequently modal, rather than tonal and he has a particular fondness for modes derived from alternate tones and semitones. Rhythm is vital for him and is frequently dance-like.

The piece I've chosen to play is the early three-movement Partita of 1962. Like most of his compositions, it was a commission and was first performed by the late Allan Wicks, to whom it is dedicated. It's an astonishingly assured piece for someone still in their twenties and contains all the Mathias hallmarks: the trumpet fanfares, the jolly dance-rhythms, the mysterious Celtic mists and bitonality of the middle movement and the percussive repeated chords in the last. A deeply devout man, his music is never sour and rarely dark for long although one can't help but wonder what he might have been able to write had he not been so tied to commissions throughout his life. Almost everything he wrote was to commission and, by its very nature, either celebratory or commemorative.

The first movement opens with a fanfare which dissolves three times into a brief preview of the dance which follows. It ends softly.

The second movement is built on an insistent pedal ostinato, a bit like a drum beat, and builds to a huge bitonal climax before subsiding into a gentle reprise of the opening.

The last movement is another dance, this time quite breathless, before a reprise of the fanfares from the first movement.

This is wonderful, joyous music and few composers have enriched the repertoire as much as Mathias. In a review of a disc of his organ music in the Penguin Record Guide the reviewer sums up his contribution

perfectly: “It is difficult to think of other mid-twentieth-century organ music that offers such diversity of style, natural feeling for the instrument plus genuine musical inspiration.”

CHRISTOPHER STEEL - SIX PIECES

You might wonder why some names are missing from our programme today. What about John Joubert, John Gardner, Alan Ridout, John McCabe, Alun Hoddinott. Peter Maxwell Davies and many others? Well, what I have tried to do is pick a representative selection of what I think are some of the best pieces of the decade. Obviously this is bound to be very subjective but I have to admit that I rejected pieces not just because I don't like them but also because there may be practical reasons for not including them: an awful lot of nineteen-sixties organ music is gratuitously sour or unpleasant and there's a limit to how much practice time you can devote to something which sounds horrid even when you get it right! Another practical consideration is that composers of this period often demand a 61-note keyboard and here at Cartmel we only have 56 notes. Sometimes it's feasible to play bits down an octave or on a higher-pitched stop, but often it just doesn't work. Some of these composers just don't appeal to me - I struggle with Alan Ridout who can be aggressively dissonant at times; I can't make much of John McCabe's organ music although he clearly is an exceptionally gifted composer in other spheres. Much the same is true for me of Alun Hoddinott, a truly visionary composer for orchestra but pretty disastrous in his understanding of what will work on the organ. For sheer downright horridness I don't think anything comes within a million miles of Peter Maxwell Davies's Three Organ Voluntaries although they discount themselves by virtue of having been written in the seventies anyway. I would like to have been able to play you John Joubert's superb Passacaglia and Fugue of 1961 but it's too hard for me and I've lost the music.

I'm going to finish with another composer who died tragically young in 1991 at the age of 52. Christopher Steel has written some of the most colourful and imaginative music for the organ of the last fifty years. Like Leighton, Steel studied abroad, in his case in Munich at the Hochschule für Musik under Harald Genzmer, a pupil of Paul Hindemith, although he spent most of his life in the south of England. He composed seven symphonies and numerous concertos and chamber music. His first published organ work is the Fantasy on a theme of Purcell, composed for Rodney Baldwin to play at the 1965 Pershore Festival. Although not published until 1974, his Six Pieces for organ were written in 1968, along with his organ concerto and so qualify for inclusion this afternoon. I bought the score as soon as it was published and I can still remember the thrill of coming across organ music which was so cheeky, particularly in the three quick movements.

Christopher Steel is fond of bitonality and of putting new wine into well-used bottles. The forms he uses are familiar but the language is very much his own and is invariably witty and memorable. It's so refreshing to find a 'serious' composer in this decade who is not afraid to have fun.

If you like these Six Pieces you will certainly enjoy the delightful Suite 'Changing Moods' of 1980. His masterpiece is the tremendous set of 'Variations on a theme of de Machaut' of 1982 although some organists rate his 'Variations and Fugue on Two Croatian Carols' even higher.

I hope that you like these short pieces. They are: Intrada, Flourish, Nocturne, Dance, Meditation and Postlude.

There were many bad things about the organ music of the nineteen-sixties and some of it is very bad indeed and has rightly been consigned to the dustbin of history. On the other hand, it was a decade in which a number of gifted composers left us a rich legacy of fine music which is well worth taking on board. Bracing winds were blowing through the organ loft, sweeping away much that was dull, tired and irrelevant. I hope that you will have found at least one piece this afternoon which you hadn't heard before and which you might care to explore a bit more.