

IMPROVISATIONS 3

DAVID BRIGGS

improvises on the organ of Gloucester Cathedral

- 1 Suite Improvisée, en style français du 17e siècle (12:50)
(Recital, Saturday 22 September 2001)
- 2 Prelude, Adagio and Variations on 'Old Macdonald had a farm' (25:45)
(Recital for the Incorporated Association of Organists, Saturday 20 July 2001)
- 3 Triptyque Symphonique improvisée (21:15)
(Recital, Saturday 22 September 2001)

Recording Engineer: Peter Guppy. Cover photograph: Tony Hickey.

Rear Photograph: DJB at Independence, Kansas with new Cessna 172 Skyhawk, by Victor Sullivan.

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improvisations

3



THREE CONCERT IMPROVISATIONS

by

DAVID BRIGGS

on the organ of Gloucester Cathedral

Suite Improvisée, en style français du 17e siècle (12'50")

(Recital, Saturday 22 September 2001)

1. *Grand Plein Jeu*
2. *Fugue sur les Jeux d'Anches*
3. *Tierce en taille*
4. *Basse de Trompette*
5. *Flutes*
6. *Grand Jeu*

Within the Roman Catholic liturgical tradition in France, it has been customary for several centuries for organists to improvise at certain points during the mass, e.g. the 'Entrée', the 'Offertoire', the 'Elévation', the 'Communion' and the 'Sortie'. In the late 17th and early - mid-18th centuries, the classical French organ building tradition reached a wonderful peak. Many of the instruments were ravishingly colourful in sonority and were tailor-made to the repertoire that was composed (and indeed improvised) for them. There was a real osmosis between composition and organ design. The brilliance of the 'Plein Jeu' (Foundations and Mixtures, often with a Gregorian chant-based Cantus Firmus placed in the pedals), the fiery yet sumptuous sonority of the 'Grand Jeu' (Foundations, Cornets and reed stops), the expressive, melismatic beauty of the 'Tierce en taille', and the quick-speaking 'élan' and sheer power of the trumpet stops (particularly in the bass) were all special characteristics of the 'Classical French Organ' which composers of the period (Couperin, de Grigny, Clérambault...) had very much in mind when creating new music for the instrument. Often though, organists would improvise - naturally in the fashionable sound world of the day. For improvisers in the early 21st century, to

improvise in historic styles is a challenge! I hope you will enjoy the result - rather like stepping into a musical time machine!

Prelude, Adagio and Variations on 'Old Macdonald had a farm' (25'45")

(Recital for the Incorporated Association of Organists, Saturday 20 July 2001)

7. *Theme*
8. *Prelude*
9. *Adagio*
10. *Variation 1 – harmonization (Grand Plein Jeu)*
11. *Variation 2 – Allegro molto deciso (Tutti)*
12. *Variation 3 – Andante, quasi humoroso (Flutes)*
13. *Variation 4 – Moderato, molto espressivo (Fonds 16 8 4)*
14. *Variation 5 – Intermezzo (Flutes et Septièmes)*
15. *Variation 6 – Adagio, homage à Olivier Messiaen, and Variation 7 – Prestissimo*
16. *link passage*
17. *Variation 8 – Sortie, homage à Pierre Pincemaille (Organiste Titulaire de la Basilique St Denis)*

On Saturday 20 July 2001, Gloucester had the privilege of hosting a recital for the National Congress of the Incorporated Association of Organists. A theme was chosen from a hat immediately before the beginning of the improvisation, which formed the second half of the concert. Although, in one sense, this particular theme is a light-hearted one, of course with the recent foot-and-mouth crisis, it seemed right to allow allow an element of melancholy to pervade the form at times, for example during the Adagio and also just before the end of the Sortie.. The repeated notes in the second half of the subject ('Here a quack, there a quack, everywhere a quack-quack!') were both challenging and liberating!

Triptyque Symphonique improvisée (21'15")

(Recital, Saturday 22 September 2001)

18. *Grave – In memoriam Manhattan 11 September 2001*
19. *Scherzo*
20. *Double Fugue*

This was my first public excursion into this form, one often used by the great French virtuoso Marcel Dupré. The first movement was intended as a powerful evocation of the deep feelings enfolding so many millions of people the whole world over after the tragic and needless destruction of the World Trade Centre in New York on 11 September 2001. It is in the form of an impassioned 'crescendo – diminuendo'. The ensuing scherzo uses the same theme, but in a substantially metamorphosed guise! The music is light and effervescent, not without a certain sense of humour, generated in part by the characterful snarling of the Choir Cremona/Pedal Shawm, accompanied by vivacious arabesques on the flutes. The last movement, based loosely on the A flat major Fugue of Dupré (Opus 36, No 2), starts lyrically on the 8 foot 'Fonds'. The second subject is announced on the Swell 'Fonds et Mixtures'(pianissimo). The two subjects are soon combined, and the music escalates into a huge crescendo bringing the improvisation to a climactic conclusion.

The Art of Improvisation – a perspective

Good improvisers, like good composers, have usually always been so, often showing an inclination at a very early age. Often they have experimented at their instrument (or piece of manuscript) long before their first lesson. Without anyone to say "no, that isn't quite right – do it this way" there is an uninhibited freedom in enjoying sound, just for its own sake. There are no "complexes", just a direct forging of a link between the fingers and the aural imagination. Some call it "to play by ear". Many young improvisers string chords together without the faintest knowledge of formal harmony. It is characterised more by an alert ear, rather like that developed by professional mimics! This is before any element of formal "codification" is brought into play. The child rarely knows what he has produced, in technical terms, but has nevertheless started along the long road towards the development of his or her inner musical personality. This unique "space" remains within the musician until the end of his life, and can also inform the performance of repertoire, giving it a unique personal characterisation and authority. The encouragement of improvisation at an early age, a type of aural research, in parallel with the learning of pieces, cannot but be a positive means of stimulating musicality.

This co-existence of instinct and culture has been present throughout musical history. The father of Frederic Chopin wrote: "Luckily, when you were young, you always spent most of your time improvising." He could allegedly improvise to perfection in the style of both Bach and Mozart! So, from an early age, Chopin was not simply tied to the written text, but was encouraged to explore and develop his musical freedom of imagination.

These days with the increasing technical perfection and standardisation of performance, partly through CDs, music can so often sound stereotyped. There can be only one authentic way to play. But Mozart said, "To interpret a piece well, you should play as if you are improvising." Indeed many of the great classical composers (Beethoven, Mozart, Liszt, Chopin, Stravinsky, Rachmaninoff...) had equal reputations in their lifetimes as improvisers. For some reason the twentieth century on the whole saw a diminution in the composer/improviser aesthetic. Nowadays, in the western musical culture, the art is reserved more or less exclusively to jazz musicians and organists.

Pierre Cochereau, Organist of Notre-Dame de Paris from 1955 until his death in 1984 and arguably the greatest organist-improviser of the twentieth century, once described organ improvisation as heading towards extinction. It is ironic, therefore, that he injected such an enormous vitality into the art form and was partly responsible for a worldwide resurgence of interest (through his numerous recordings) in the art of improvisation – perhaps even saving it from extinction! For Cochereau, improvisation was very similar to composition (in terms of musical techniques and structures) but speeded up at least 100,000 times. He believed in the present moment, the creation of ephemeral music inspired by the theme, the instrument, the nature of the audience, the mood of the performer. He believed that improvisation should be "construite, mais non préparée" (structured, but not prepared). For Cochereau, always in-between aeroplanes, composition was too long-winded and a virtual impossibility (as far as schedule/inclination was concerned). But, listening to his improvisations, they sound like inspired, well thought-out compositions. He called this the 'illusionist's art' – like some sophisticated musical conjuring trick – but, in his case, the illusion was often totally complete, creating, at best, music of

spontaneous excitement rarely experienced in the performance of written music.

Although I never had the pleasure of meeting Pierre Cochereau, I am in no way ashamed to say that no other musician has had more impact on my own musical development, since I was very young. Having spent thousands of hours (between 1984 and 1994) transcribing many of Cochereau's improvisations from LP/CD, I suppose I could say that I feel very close to him, at least in musical spirit!

Of course my improvisations are not quite the same as Cochereau's! But nevertheless, I, and a good number of improvisers of the present generation, owe him an incalculable debt of gratitude for opening a door to the future...

DAVID BRIGGS

Organist, Gloucester Cathedral, UK

Tutor in Organ Improvisation, Royal Northern College of Music and Royal Academy of Music

Recently hailed by the American Guild of Organists as one of the top 100 organists of the twentieth century, David Briggs enjoys a worldwide reputation as an organ concert artist and is renowned especially for his skill as an improviser. After having won the Silver Medal of the Worshipful Company of Musicians and all the prizes at FRCO at the age of seventeen, he was appointed Organ Scholar of King's College, Cambridge and was awarded the John Stewart of Rannoch Scholarship in Sacred Music. In 1982 and 1983, David had the privilege of playing for the Christmas Eve Carol Services from King's, to a live audience of around 350 million.

Subsequently he continued his studies in Paris with Jean Langlais, and in 1995 became the first British winner of the celebrated Tournemire Prize at the St Albans International Improvisation Competition.

After having held the post of Assistant Organist of Hereford Cathedral for four years, David was appointed Organist and Master of the Choristers at Truro Cathedral in 1989, becoming the youngest Cathedral Organist in the country. In June 1994 he took up the position of Director of Music at Gloucester Cathedral, becoming only the fourth holder of the post during the twentieth century. As well as being deeply involved with the 'Opus Dei' of the cathedral for eight years, he also oversaw the complete restoration of the Cathedral Organ by Nicholson in 1999 and had the privilege of directing three Gloucester Three Choirs Festivals, in 1995, 1998 and 2001, working with the Festival Chorus and the Philharmonia, Bournemouth Symphony and Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestras. In April 2002 David will relinquish this position in order to concentrate on his rapidly expanding freelance career as a concert organist and composer.

Recent engagements have included concerts in the UK, France, Germany, Italy, Australia, New Zealand, Iceland, Canada and the USA, where he is represented by Phillip Truckenbrod Concert Artists. All of his concerts include a major improvisation. Future tours include USA (February, April, September and November 2002, March, May, July and November 2003), Australia and New Zealand (May 2002), Finland (August 2002), Germany and France (September 2002) and South Africa (May 2003).

Increasingly in demand as a composer, he is fascinated by the relationship between composition and improvisation, i.e. how to establish in the former the spark of

spontaneity of the latter! He composed a Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis for the Hereford Three Choirs Festival in August 2000 and was commissioned to write a major millennium commission, 'Creation', for soloists, chorus and orchestra which was premiered in December 2000 by the Gloucester Choral Society, to ecstatic reviews in the national press. The work was also performed in the 2001 Gloucester Three Choirs Festival, with the Festival Chorus, Ruth Holton (Soprano) and the Philharmonia Orchestra, conducted by the composer. Future composition projects include a Symphony in Four Movements, (commissioned by the celebrated American organ duo Elisabeth and Raymond Chenault), a Sonata for unaccompanied violin, a new work for the choir of St Mary's Cathedral, Edinburgh, an Organ Concerto for Blackburn Cathedral (to be premiered during one of the concerts celebrating the soon-to-be restored cathedral organ), a Song Cycle (for American mezzo-soprano, Martha Hill), a Requiem (commissioned by All Saints, Atlanta, USA) and a Concerto for Organ Duet and Orchestra (commissioned by St Paul's Episcopal Church, Greenville, North Carolina) in celebration of their new four-manual Fisk organ.

He has made seventeen commercial recordings, including the highly acclaimed CD of his own transcription of Mahler's Symphony No.5.

He is fanatical about aviation.

GLoucester Cathedral Organ Specification

Thomas Harris 1666, Bishop and Son 1831, Henry Willis 1847/1889
Harrison and Harrison 1920, Hill, Norman and Beard 1971, Nicholson and Co. 1999

PEDAL

Flute 16
Principal 16
Sub Bass 16
Quint 10 2/3
Octave 8
Stopped Flute 8
Tierce 6 2/5
Septième 4 4/7
Choral Bass 4
Open Flute 2
Mixture 19, 22, 26, 29
Bombarde 32
Bombarde 16
Trumpet 8
Shawm 4

CHOIR

Stopped Diapason 8
Principal 4
Chimney Flute 4
Fifteenth 2
Nazard 1 1/3
Sesquialtera 19,24/12,17
Mixture 29, 33, 36
Cremona 8
Tremulant

TRANSFERS

Great reeds on Man IV
West Great flues on Man IV

GREAT

Gedecktpommer 16
Open Diapason (West) 8
Open Diapason (East) 8
Spitzflute (West) 8
Bourdon (East) 8
Prestant (West) 4
Octave (East) 4
Stopped Flute (East) 4
Flageolet (East) 2
Quartane (West) 12, 15
Mixture (East) 19, 22, 26, 29
Cornet (East, mounted) 8,12,15,17
Posaune 16
Trumpet 8
Clarion 4
West Great Flues Sub Octave

WEST POSITIVE

Gedecktpommer 8
Spitzflute 4
Nazard 2 2/3
Doublette 2
Tierce 1 3/5
Septième 1 1/7
Cimbel 29, 36, 40
Tremulant

COMBINATION COUPLERS

Great and Pedal Combinations coupled
Generals on Swell toe pistons

SWELL

Chimney Flute 8
Salicional 8
Céleste 8
Principal 4
Open Flute 4
Nazard 2 2/3
Gemshorn 2
Tierce 1 3/5
Mixture 22, 26, 29, 33
Cimbel 38, 40, 43
Fagotto 16
Trumpet 8
Hautboy 8
Vox Humana 8
Tremulant
Swell Sub Octave

COUPLERS (*reversible)

*Swell to Great
*Swell to Choir
*Swell to Pedal
*Choir to Great
*Choir to Pedal
*West Positive to Great
*West Positive to Choir
*West Positive to Pedal
*Great to Pedal
Pedal Divide

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