



ABERDEEN AND DISTRICT ORGANISTS' ASSOCIATION

RONALD LEITH

IMPROVISATION

**St Mary's Episcopal Church, Carden Place, Aberdeen
Saturday 25th February 2024**

REPORT:

This is a report and not a review of what was an engrossing talk, with elements of tutoring and demonstration on the subject of improvisation for the organ. Ronald Leith began by detailing his personal history with the organ currently in St Mary's Carden Place. It was originally built by Forster and Andrews of Hull in 1876 for Blackfriars Church, the remnants of which can be seen as part of the wall surrounding Robert Gordon's College, Aberdeen. The wall of the gymnasium as Allan Bicket informed us. Churches are still closing today at an alarming rate and the organ we heard today has been in Skene Street Church which closed in 1975, John Knox, Church at Mounthooly which closed in 1996 with the congregation moving to Greyfriars Church in the City's Broad Street. Ronnie Leith remembers playing the organ when it was in Skene Street and had a regal flight of steps up to the organ itself. The flight of steps is no more and there are changes to the organ itself but Ronnie still has an affection for the instrument.

Following on that fascinating background to the many changes of place for the organ, Ronnie went on to discuss the art of improvisation itself. There are, he said, two separate kinds of improvisation. There is Concert Improvisation which was not really going to be dealt with in detail since the idea of the event was to get members themselves to take part and Liturgical Improvisation which was more important for the members being the kind of thing that they would be likely to be required to confront in their work as church organists.

Ronnie did touch on the various sorts of Concert Improvisation mentioning famous exponents of the skill, different in several countries, Germany, France and England. The French organists, Jeanne Demessieux (1921 – 1968), Olivier Latry (b. 1962) and Maurice Duruflé (1902 -1986) all received a mention. They would often give an improvisation as the crowning event of a concert performance. Some of their improvisations would be of symphonic length and style. I myself would like scientists to invent a time machine so that I could go back to the past and hear one of Anton Bruckner's

famed improvisations, but to sort of quote the words of *The Lost Chord*, 'It may be only in Heaven that I will hear that music again'.

Dealing with the English improvisers, Ronnie told a marvellous story about Dr Samuel Wesley. A couple had come to his church while he was playing. They asked the verger if they could see the organ. They were introduced to Wesley who said that if they went back down into the Church to listen, he would play a special improvisation just for them. After the piece was finished they said to the verger, 'Oh! That was absolutely marvellous', the verger replied, 'Yes, he plays exactly that piece to everybody who visits'. I wonder if that is true, anyway it's a great story.

Ronald who has for many years been organist at St Mary's Roman Catholic Cathedral in Huntly Street explained how he uses improvisation during the Mass. A lot of moving about of clergy is involved and they do not appreciate silence which is what would be involved if the organ did not play. In such cases, improvisation is employed basically to fill time. However the improvisations need to stop when it is required for the next part of the Mass to follow on. Ronald told us that he would often play with just the right hand, because he would have to watch carefully what was going on at the back of the Cathedral. If he used both hands, he would end up with a crick in his neck as he looked round to follow proceedings.

It was time to invite members to come up and have a go. Ronald had brought music with him to act as the basis of the improvisations. There were passages of plainsong and the hymn *Forty Days and Forty Nights*.

*Forty days and forty nights
You were fasting in the wild.
Forty days and forty nights
Tempted, and yet undefiled.*

A serious subject obviously, so one member was surprised when Ronald used the tune as a kind of jolly dance. Should an improvisation follow the impact of the words of a hymn or not? That was an interesting question.

The first member to come forth joined the Association just yesterday. This was Harry Thomson who is currently studying with Kamil Mika. He did well under the tutelage and encouragement of Ronald. The second member was none other than our current President, Dr Shelagh Noden. It is she of course who takes the Choir in St Mary's Cathedral. Her improvisation was richer and more complex. Kyle McCallum was the third member to take part. He is a composer as well as for many years a full time organist. He added quite complex pedal work to his improvisation on the hymn tune., Ronald worked enthusiastically with him.

The final member to take part was another young organist and recent member. Filip Meszka is currently an organ scholar at Aberdeen University. Ronald gave him much detailed workout and encouragement and the result was most impressive.

I do not really play the organ but I learned a great amount from today's event. I remember Ronald telling me afterwards about one famous teacher who said to his pupil after he had finished his improvisation, 'Right, and now what?' Members who play in the Church of Scotland still have to fill time with music during Communion and possibly at the beginning and end of Services. I'm sure today's event will have been of considerable help. I found it both informative and hugely entertaining.

The next event on Saturday 23rd March will be the Members Recital in St Andrew's Cathedral in the series Cathedral at Noon.

ALAN COOPER

