

St. Albans International Organ Festival



Meet the Recitalist: James Lancelot



Please tell us a little about your concert programme

I have chosen music entirely within the German tradition, including areas of that tradition which have perhaps not had the exposure in recent times that they really deserve. I have derived huge pleasure from both French and English organ repertoire over the years, but I find the German romantics in particular increasingly attractive.

What first attracted you to the organ as an instrument and how old were you when you started playing?

Hearing the organ played in church as a young boy, and then, in particular, my experience as a Chorister at St Paul's Cathedral. Once I had learnt the treble repertoire I spent most of my time following the organ part and listening to what was going on upstairs. It may not have improved my singing at the time, but it proved useful experience! I think I was probably seven when I first played a hymn on the organ in church (O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness; not the ideal baptism, and not every verse started on the correct chord, as I remember....)

Who (or what) has had the greatest influence on you as a player?

In terms of the organ, John Dykes Bower's playing at St Paul's, and both Ralph Downes and Dame Gillian Weir's teaching. Nicholas Danby was hugely illuminating on Mendelssohn and Hindemith. In terms of recordings, Gustav Leonhardt, especially in terms of Bach, Sweelinck and the English virginalists. I haven't even started talking about the piano, which was my first love and which I still (all too occasionally) derive huge pleasure from playing.

What is a typical day in the life of James Lancelot like?

In some respects, similar to (for instance) that of William Byrd and Thomas Tomkins; an early start and a Chorister rehearsal to prepare that day's music; organ practice; then the centrepiece of the day being the sung worship itself. But I don't have weekday Matins to cope with; and instead of composing beautiful music the rest of the time, I answer e-mails and attend meetings.....

What have been the highlights of your recent schedule?

The Festival recital at St David's Cathedral; the IAO Congress in Durham, which I hosted; and appearances with the Cathedral Consort of Singers at Alwinton, and with the Cathedral Choir at Richmond (Yorkshire) and the Brinkburn Festival. The Cathedral choir gave first performances of seven new works during 2013.

Which piece of music most recently made a big impression on you?

I resurrected the Reubke Organ Sonata recently; it is a deeply-felt work, its composition almost a miracle, coming from a composer so young and with such a short opus-list. I have also learnt Hindemith's first sonata this year; a hugely rewarding experience. If art is concerned with trying to interpret to us what it is to be human, then I feel he succeeds wonderfully well.

Which book would you recommend all musicians and music lovers to read and why?

I tend to treat reading as an escape into a different world, and musically I am lamentably unread. But both Peter Williams and Stephen Bicknell are always worth reading on the subject of the organ; and I am going to start on John Eliot Gardiner on J S Bach as soon as my wife has finished our copy!

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