



The new Kuhn organ for the Royal Academy of Music: its effect is 'hugely impressive'

BENJAMIN HARTE

Fit for a duke

With a strikingly modern case set against the backcloth of elegant, Edwardian-style décor, the new Orgelbau Kuhn instrument in the Royal Academy of Music has caused much excitement. **William McVicker** traces how the project came to fruition

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Founded in 1822, the Royal Academy of Music is London's oldest conservatoire. It was granted a Royal Charter by King George IV in 1830, and during the remainder of the 19th century grew to such an extent that in 1911 it required larger premises and moved to its present building on Marylebone Road.

Students at the Academy have access to a number of organs, including a rare Neapolitan organ of 1763 by Michelangelo and Carlo Sanarica, a four-manual classical organ by Rieger in nearby St Marylebone ▶

GALLERY

◁ Parish Church, and mechanical-action practice organs by Peter Collins (the former studio organ of the late Kenneth Ryder) and by Jan Zielmann. Added to these now is a new instrument, inaugurated on 7 October 2013, in the Duke's Hall, the Academy's main large concert venue.

David Titterington, Head of Organ Studies, explains the background to the new instrument: 'I felt that the addition of a high-quality concert organ would help maintain the Academy's position as a world-class teaching institution. An organ committee was constituted from among

own responses. Other factors included the case design, originality of the tonal concept, value for money and delivery logistics; proven experience and success when building concert hall instruments was highly desirable – especially given the context of where the new organ would be built.'

Three shortlisted builders (from the UK, the Netherlands, and Orgelbau Kuhn from Switzerland) were invited to make site visits and to tender. The organ committee themselves visited instruments by all the shortlisted candidates. Kuhn's submission was 'meticulous', says Titterington, and

in the potential success of the instrument – to ensure the structural stability of the site.' This work was carried out during the Christmas and Easter vacations prior to installation of the organ in July 2013.

The Academy was fortunate to receive support for the project from two of its alumni, Sir Elton John and Ray Cooper, who gave concerts at the Royal Albert Hall and Royal Opera House to help raise the necessary funds for the new instrument. Combined with contributions from other individual donors, the total cost – including the necessary structural engineering work – of around £1.2m was met.

David Titterington describes the instrument as 'fundamentally a symphonic organ. It takes its inspiration from the 19th-century French school and adds a modern twist. The tonal concept is built around the multi-functional Solo Organ which has the role of a Bombarde division, as well as including some stops of a solo character (Cornet décomposé, Cromorne, etc.), while the Great Organ is more classical with an imposing 16ft plenum; it has a mixture designed to work with this 16ft chorus and is capped by a characterful Fagotto 8ft.

'The Swell is undeniably French and has a sub-octave coupler. Both the Swell and Solo are under expression; the optional assisted electrical coupling makes the challenging and virtuosic repertoire more manageable

'The organ takes its inspiration from the 19th-century French school with a modern twist'

the organ department teaching staff and chaired by myself; the Principal, Professor Jonathan Freeman-Attwood, was an *ex officio* member.

'The tender document clearly outlined the Academy's aesthetic priorities: musical integrity, and an instrument able to play a broad range of solo, ensemble and orchestral repertoire (the latter two being of particular importance); it also stated that the instrument should have three manuals, a mechanical action, and a symphonic stylistic outlook with the widest of dynamic ranges. No stop-list was prescribed; the organ builders were left to formulate their

the tonal concept, as drawn up by Dieter Rufenacht, was unanimously approved by the Academy. Kuhn's successful installations in Alice Tully Hall in the Lincoln Center, in Kawasaki and in Essen further reinforced the decision.

The organ is the third to be housed in the Duke's Hall, and occasioned some structural alterations to accommodate it, explains Titterington: 'At 24 tonnes, the new organ is almost twice the size of the previous instrument; the steel-and-concrete slab beneath the stage had to be extended and reinforced. The engineering work was considered to be a key element

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The contemporary case embraces some of the Duke's Hall's decorative detail



The console has a firm, secure key touch

under the fingers. Perhaps the most remarkable thing is the way in which the voicers have been able to pull together some different (but not incongruous) soundworlds, while developing a cohesive and musical tonal unity.

‘The effect in the hall is hugely impressive; it is rich and warm with a strong lower frequency range – a characteristic which appears to be generated from deep within the organ. As a consequence, the instrument favours the romantic repertoires, as these are the closest to the heart of the organ’s tonality. Having said that, the ingenuity of the design, integrated mixture composition and voicing gives a definition and authority to contrapuntal writing.’

Given the traditional ambience of the Duke’s Hall, how did the new organ come to be housed in such a modern case? Titterton explains: ‘The “faux-Edwardian” decoration of the Duke’s Hall dates only from [its] 1992 renovation, so we were free of planning restrictions in the sense of having to retain anything of historic significance. Two casework options were therefore available to us: to build in a style reflecting the “period” of the hall, or to explore the possibility of a contemporary and visually striking case that embraces some of the decorative detail but captivates the eye in a bold and thrilling way. From the very first sketches by Kuhn’s case designer, Claude Lardon, it became clear which way both they and we wanted to go. His clever use of contrasting colours and textures, the luminosity of the maple-wood casework, and the overall vibrancy of the whole convinced us this was the right direction. As one of our Governing body remarked, “It also has to look like a Concert Hall organ!” ▶

The Duke’s Hall, Royal Academy of Music, London

ORGELBAU KUHN (2013)

I. GREAT		Principal	4
C – c4		Flauto amabile	4
Bourdon	16	Nasard	2 ² / ₃
Principal	8	Octave	2
Flûte harmonique	8	Terz	1 ³ / ₅
Bourdon	8	Scharf IV	1 ¹ / ₅
Viola da Gamba	8	Trompette	8
Octave	4	Cromorne	8
Hohlflöte	4	Clairon	4
Quinte	2 ² / ₃	<i>Tremulant</i>	
Superoctave	2		
Mixtur IV-V	2	PEDAL	
Fagott	8	C – g1	
		Principal	16
		Subbass	16
III. SWELL		Echobass (from Gt)	16
C – c4		Octave	8
Quintaton	16	Flöte	8
Diapason	8	Violoncello (from Gt)	8
Cor de nuit	8	Bourdon (from Gt)	8
Viola	8	Octave	4
Voix céleste	8	Posaune	16
Fugura	4	Trompette	8
Flûte octaviante	4		
Flageolet	2	Couplers	
Fourniture III-IV	2 ² / ₃	<i>II-I, III-I, III-I sub, III-II, III-II sub, I-P,</i>	
Basson	16	<i>II-P, III-P, III-P super</i>	
Trompette	8		
Hautbois	8	<i>Mechanical couplers with optional Kuhn</i>	
Voix humaine	8	<i>Coupler Assistance</i>	
<i>Tremulant</i>		<i>Capture system including 15 x 1,000</i>	
		<i>combinations</i>	
II. SOLO (IN SWELL BOX)		<i>USB interface</i>	
C – c4			
Rohrflöte	8		
Salicional	8		



Ray Cooper and Sir Elton John, who helped raise funds for the organ, join Peter Holder (at the console) and Academy principal Professor Jonathan Freeman-Attwood (r)

◀ The concert space enables the new organ to be used in combination with orchestras and large ensembles, and concert programmes following its inauguration include concertos by Lou Harrison, Handel and Poulenc, which would be more complicated to mount using the Rieger in St Marylebone Church, as the building has fixed pews.

Alex Binns, one of the students who took part in the opening recital, commented, 'It produces a thrilling *tutti*, which made it an electrifying experience to play the last section of the Dupré *Poème héroïque* with its brass dialogue. The Swell strings combined with a solo on the Great Harmonic Flute produced a beautiful and atmospheric sound for the middle section. I was unsure at first what would work in order to balance with the brass players and field drum, and I found myself revising my registration several times. I had at first anticipated that the organ would most likely overpower the brass players, having heard its brilliance in the body of the hall while listening to fellow students rehearsing. However, when it came to the rehearsal with the instrumentalists, I found the opposite, and had quickly to make a few revisions, and increase my

Upcoming concerts featuring the new Kuhn organ in the Duke's Hall, Royal Academy of Music, Marylebone Road, London NW1

MONDAY 6 JANUARY AT 6PM

Organ Showcase, with George Inscoc, Graham Thorpe, Joseph Beech and Jeremy Lloyd

J.S. Bach: *Das alte Jahr*, BWV614; *In dir ist Freude*, BWV615; *Passacaglia* in C minor, BWV582

Buxtehude: *Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern*

Durufflé: *Prélude sur l'Introit de l'Épiphanie*
Max Reger: *Chorale Fantasia 'Wie schön leucht' uns der Morgenstern'*

Free, no tickets required

SUNDAY 19 JANUARY AT 12 NOON

Royal Academy of Music/Kohn Foundation Bach Cantata Series

Anna Harvey (m-s), Richard Dowling (t), Bozidar Smiljanic (b-bar), Academy Baroque Orchestra (Margaret Faultless,

leader), Peter Holder (org) / Iain Ledingham (dir)

J.S. Bach: *Sie werden aus Saba alle kommen* (All they from Sheba shall come), BWV65; *Gott soll allein mein Herze haben* (God alone shall have my heart), BWV169; *Prelude & Fugue* in D, BWV532
Tickets £13 (concessions £10, season discounts available) from the Academy Box Office

THURSDAY 23 JANUARY AT 7.30PM

Percussion and Organ, with Peter Holder (org), Péter Fodor (vibraphone), Stella Quartet / Neil Percy (dir)

Lou Harrison: *Concerto* for Organ with Percussion Orchestra

Joseph Pereira: *Strophe*

Tickets £7.50 (concessions £5.50) from the Academy Box Office

MONDAY 3 FEBRUARY AT 6PM

Organ Showcase, with Michael Papadopoulos, Peter Holder, Jemima Stephenson and Alexander Binns (org), Oliver Pooley (perc)
Franck: *Choral no.2* in B minor
Messiaen: *L'ascension*
Tournemire: *Deuxième fresque symphonique sacrée*, op.76
Thierry Escaich: *Ground II* for organ and percussion

Free, no tickets required

Royal Academy of Music Box Office:
www.ram.ac.uk/events; or telephone
020 7873 7300 from Friday 3 January

registrations. This was also helped by the organ's two enclosed divisions, which have an excellent dynamic range.'

Final-year student Peter Holder reported that 'baroque repertoire can be performed most effectively owing to the more classically influenced first manual. The organ itself has been much talked about for its unorthodox scheme, particularly regarding the dual function of the second manual. Sometimes one has to search for the "right" sounds and work to ensure the most effective balances – but surely that is the purpose of an instrument in such an institution? I performed the Duruflé *Suite* and found it possible to adhere to every registration marking by the composer in the *Sicilienne*.' And Jeremy Lloyd observed: 'There were some aspects of playing an organ in a concert hall (as opposed to a church) that I didn't know how to approach, but some time experimenting and asking listeners' opinions helped me enormously. The console is very comfortable, with a firm but secure key touch. I was apprehensive as to the look of the organ from the initial artist's impressions before it was built, but [it] definitely looks subtle but still modern and innovative when seen "in the flesh".'

David Titterington sums up with enthusiasm about the new opportunities students now have: 'For many of [them], the opportunity to perform in a concert hall will be a new experience – as will learning to engage with new and wider audiences. Organists are often cocooned away in an organ loft, out of sight. This instrument allows students to develop their skills on the concert platform: deportment, musical projection and engagement are often missed out when performers are not visible. The secular environment of a concert hall will help students develop new skills. For the very first time in many years the organists are enjoying the full conservatoire experience of engaging with the wider musical community by being centre-stage.' ■
www.orgelbau.ch, www.ram.ac.uk

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Freestyle BY GRAEME KAY

Memories are made of this; and Britten reconsidered

In early November I returned to Dunfermline, the ancient capital of Scotland, where I was one of 320 pupils who left the local grammar school, Dunfermline High, in 1973. The 1968 intake had never had a reunion, so an enterprising group of supersleuths spent six months using social media, electoral rolls, Christmas card lists, adverts in the programmes of Dunfermline Athletic FC, and just plain hitting the phones, to track us all down; of the 200 they found, over 80 were reeled in – plus some teachers and our former headmaster (now in his 90s) – for what turned out to be an emotionally positive but undeniably weird event, not least because I was tasked to compile a soundtrack of 400 pop songs from 1968 to 1973, and conduct an instant scratch choir in a couple of madrigals. One of the sideshows was a visit to morning service at Dunfermline Abbey, where we had performed *Noyes Fludde* and recorded the Vivaldi Gloria under our DoM, the late Richard Galloway, with George McPhee at the Abbey's very fine organ – a III/53 instrument by Forster & Andrews (1882), Scovell & Co. (1911), J.W. Walker & Sons (1966) and David Loosley (1987). The present organist is Dr Norman Mitchell (right), formerly of Kirkwall Cathedral and co-founder, with Peter Maxwell Davies, of the St Magnus Festival. Norman rounded off the service with Guilman's *Grand Chœur*, and I was delighted to confirm to him that in the 40-year interval since I last deputised for a service at the Abbey, the standard of music had risen to very considerable heights, with a strong, robed Abbey Choir now singing an Introit, Anthem and Prose Psalm every Sunday, drawing on an eclectic repertoire ranging from Tallis to Tavener.



GRAEME KAY

'At last,' wrote BBC Radio 3's Petroc Trelawny in the *Daily Telegraph*, '... we have fallen for our great Britten...' November's worldwide 'Britten Centenary Weekend' compelled music lovers to re-evaluate their often uneasy relationships with Britten. His dedicated but never strident pacifism did not play well with certain sections of British society; his discreet but unconcealed lifelong relationship with the tenor Peter Pears was illegal – the scandal of public exposure could so easily have derailed his career completely. And his enthusiasm for working with children, and the musical inspiration those relationships gave, has attracted the attention – unavailingly – of today's paedophilia vigilantes.

As the centenary weekend was to prove, the key to unlocking an appreciation of the music probably lies in early exposure. For me, it was performing in the school production of *Noyes Fludde* that offered a way in. Indeed, the all-Britten weekend on Radio 3 – presented from a makeshift studio in Snape Maltings Concert Hall's restaurant overlooking the Alde estuary reed-beds – began with live performances from the song cycle *Friday Afternoons*: hundreds of children's choirs all over the world had pledged to perform it on Britten's birthday. Also on the menu were live performances of *Noyes Fludde*, the *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*, the *Three Church Parables*, *Albert Herring*, the *String Quartets*, *Cantata Academica*, the *Spring Symphony*, and a host of other works. In between concerts, Radio 3 brought in biographers, musicologists, and a procession of people who had worked with Britten, from his domestic staff to the man who supplied his trousers, to fill in every area of his life, from the food he ate to the fast cars he loved, and the dogs who shared his life. Plucky presenter Tom Service even replicated Britten's penchant for a daily plunge in the bone-chilling North Sea at Aldeburgh. As the last BBC outside broadcast truck left Snape, there was a sense that Britten was at last becoming properly understood; at the outset, one listener had tweeted, 'I hate Britten – get this horrible noise off my radio.' He returned later, somewhat chastened: 'I think I'm changing my mind – I'll have to listen to this stuff again.' From Radio 3's point of view, 'job done'.

Graeme Kay is a multiplatform producer for BBC Radio 3.