

Tayside Organists' Society

“Improvisation – the bones, the flesh and the personality”

Talk and demonstration by Prof. Norman Beedie

in Dundee Congregational Church

Thursday 17th October 2019

Review by Kevin Veal

The Society met in the evening of Thursday 17 October 2019, in Dundee Congregational Church, Constitution Road, Dundee.

The members, together with members of the Congregation and other visitors including John Riley, (from Edinburgh Society of Organists), were given a talk by Professor Norman Beedie, the organist of the church, his topic being “Improvisation, the bones, the flesh and the personality.” There were over 30 persons at this meeting.

Professor Beedie gave a very interesting and stimulating talk, and outlined his early boyhood experiences, when he was assistant organist at St. Fillan's Church, Newport, before playing at the then Panmure Street Congregational Church, (which subsequently became Panmure Trinity Church), and later amalgamated with Dundee Congregational Church, being the church in which this evening's talk was being given. After recently relocating to north east Fife, he was appointed Organist of Dundee Congregational Church within the last 2 years.

After leaving Dundee High School, he went to Glasgow and graduated from the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama before, with the aid of a Sir James Caird Travelling Scholarship, studying initially in Rome, and thereafter in Paris with Nadia Boulanger. He presently leads the course in Classical Improvisation, as well as teaching conducting at the now renamed Royal Conservatoire of Scotland.

He advised us that improvisation and extemporisation come from the heart and soul of the performer, who can attempt to interpret the emotions of the listeners in the individual circumstances in which they find themselves. Organists have a special tool

at their disposal, namely, the ability to create discordant sounds, (available because of the facility of holding the notes with both sounding simultaneously). In addition, organists can ensure that voluntaries, such as those played at the collection of the offerings or during the distribution of Holy Communion, are appropriately continued and ended to ensure that the public act of worship is not unnecessarily elongated.

In summary, all organists should not be afraid to use their improvisation skills – in such manner as they deem most fitting – as part of their duties as organist in the support of public worship. There is no right or wrong way for this to be achieved but through it all, the soul and personality of the organist will shine through.

After demonstrating his skills on the Miller 3 manual organ in the church, Professor Beedie extemporised – at an audience member's request – on the melody "Judas Maccabaeus" by G F Handel.

Professor Beedie's talk was very warmly received and enjoyed by all who were present. The Society's Vice President, Mr Ron Oliver, expressed thanks to the Professor for his work in preparing this evening's presentation, and for and giving us the benefit of his long years as a musician of high standard and quality. Thanks were also expressed to the Rev Alan Livingstone, the Minister of the Church, and his team who ensured that the church was adequately and well heated.

Thereafter, all present retired to the adjacent church hall where a very welcome "purvey" had been prepared. The Society President thanked the ladies of the church who had made the necessary preparations.