

## Tayside Organists' Society

Recital in Westminster Cathedral on Wednesday 20 November 2019

*Review by Kevin Veal*

Two members of Tayside Organists' Society were privileged to be present in Westminster Cathedral for a unique recital on the above date. The Cathedral, in association with the Royal College of Organists and Viscount Classical Organs Limited, hosted what was termed a "Nine-Organ Extravaganza".

The music of the first half was as follows: -

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| (a) Toccata and Fugue in D minor BWV 565   | J S Bach                |
| (b) Concerto in A minor BWV 1065           | A Vivaldi arr. J S Bach |
| (c) Boléro sur un thème de Charles Racquet | Pierre Cochereau        |

The concert was introduced by Gerard Brooks, the President of the Royal College of Organists. The widow of Jean Guillou was present, for what was the first ever performance of her husband's "La Révolte des Orgues" in the United Kingdom.

From the Toccata and Fugue in the first half of the concert, it was not only the Great Organ (Willis 2) and the Choir Organ of the Cathedral that were in use, but also the "Viscount" chamber organs strategically located in the nave of the Cathedral. For those of us who have always heard the majestic Toccata and Fugue played either by one instrument or in Stokowski's magnificent orchestral arrangement, it was a novel experience to have the recital of this famous piece "shared" amongst different organs. A different but very enjoyable musical experience.

The second piece, the Vivaldi Concerto in A minor, is always a great favourite of concert-goers, and this performance was no exception. As the programme notes set out, this arrangement is "Bach's imaginative re-composition of a concerto for four violins from Vivaldi's *L'estro armonico* (Op. 3 No. 10)" from about 1730. It was in 1731 that Bach made this spectacular arrangement of Vivaldi's difficult work. Performed with great skill and aplomb, it was enthusiastically received by the capacity audience and much enjoyed.

However, the highlight of the first half, to the writer of this review, was the Boléro on a theme of Charles Racquet by the renowned organist of the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, Pierre Cochereau, who died in 1984 at the comparatively early age of 59. This arrangement was transcribed by Pierre Cochereau's son, Jean Marc, during the composer's lifetime. The percussion player has the difficult task of playing throughout, and at all times following the dynamics of the organ. After a brilliant and overwhelming musical climax from the organ, the volume is reduced to the extent that, at the end of the piece, only the drums are playing. A truly wonderful performance.

The second half was exclusively taken with

(d) *La Révolte des Orgues*

Jean Guillou (1930-2019)

Jean Guillou (1930-2019) was the organist of St Eustache in Paris for 52 years until his retirement in 2015. (He died in January, 2019.)

The most helpful programme notes told us that this composition, which lasts for thirty minutes, was written for one dominant partner (here, the Cathedral's Great Organ) and eight smaller chamber organs, with the assistance of a single percussion player, who had a considerable array of percussion to assist. The whole piece took the listener through various stages of human emotions, through dreams, doubt, uncertainty and restlessness. Yet, at the end, when the sheer raw energy of the Great Organ comes in and dominates the proceedings, there is a sense of joy and grandeur in the knowledge that all nine instruments and the ever-present percussion are at last in some sort of celestial harmony.

The whole evening was under the musical direction of the renowned German conductor, Johannes Skudlic, who conducted the premiere performance of Jean Guillou's *La Révolte des Orgues* at Landsberg, Germany, in 2007. The percussionist was Helene Colombotti, who also participated in that 2007 premiere performance.

The organists were: -

- (1) Hansjorg Albrecht (*Germany*)
- (2) Tom Bell (*United Kingdom*)
- (3) Roberto Bonetto (*Italy*)
- (4) Winfried Bonig (*Germany*)
- (5) Bernhard Buttman (*Germany*)
- (6) Ourania Gassiou (*Greece*)
- (7) Jurgen Geiger (*Germany*)
- (8) Martin Kovarik (*Switzerland*)
- (9) Peter Stevens (*United Kingdom*)

This was a most enjoyable and unique evening, and one about which we shall probably still be talking for many years to come. *La Révolte des Orgues* has been played publicly no more than about a dozen times, and being present on this occasion, which was also the United Kingdom premiere for this work, made the whole evening very special and memorable. A truly momentous occasion.

Footnote:

Photographs of the event can be viewed on <https://i.rco.org.uk> (free sign-in required).