

Tayside Organists' Society
Presentation on Improvisation
Dundee Congregational Church

Wednesday 24th November 2021

Review by Kevin Veal

The Society met in Dundee Congregational Church, Constitution Road, Dundee, on the evening of Wednesday 24 November 2021. An audience of about 30 persons was present, comprising both Society members and members of the Church. Due to the speaker, Professor Norman Beedie, having a vehicle puncture on his journey from his home in Fife to Dundee, the start was delayed, but happily – and because Professor Norman had been able to make contact – the delay was of only some 20 minutes, during which time the ladies of the church served (at a time earlier than expected) tea and refreshments to those present.

The meeting was introduced by Society President, Sheriff Kevin Veal, who remarked how pleasing it was to again meet in person. The baton for the evening was then passed to Professor Beedie, the Organist and Director of Music at the church, who spoke on “Improvisation”.

The Professor stressed that improvisation was very personal to the player. It was not an opportunity to copy or imitate another performer’s style of music. He recommended that, prior to playing an improvisation, the organist should sit at the console, take a few seconds to be calm and still and gather his or her thoughts, prior to selecting perhaps 4 notes, which could feature throughout the improvisation, and perhaps – in an introductory piece prior to the commencement of public worship – build up the volume, whilst retaining control and ownership of what was in the player’s mind. In a nutshell, it was “the organist’s piece”, and his personality must come through every note that was being played. There is no “fixed” method or rules which apply to individual improvisations. The style, introduction, colour, tempo, pianissimos, fortes, solo lines, use of pedal stops and length of piece were all matters within the gift of the performer.

Professor Beedie then demonstrated on the church’s 3-manual organ, built originally by Frederick Holt of Edinburgh, rebuilt successively by D&T Hamilton, John R Miller of Dundee, Rushworth & Dreaper of Liverpool and most recently by Harrison & Harrison of Durham, an improvisation which brought into sharp focus the factors he had been stressing. (He described this church as the “Cathedral of Congregationalism”, and stated that the organ was indeed worthy of the building.) Thereafter, our member, Andrew Macintosh, played a short improvisation which was much praised by the Professor. In conclusion, Professor Beedie highlighted that an

improvisation – carefully crafted and played – can easily set the scene for an Act of Public Worship.

A Vote of thanks on behalf of the Society and all present was given by Vice President, Ron Oliver, who thanked the Professor for an illuminating talk this evening as well as his obvious preparation. Thanks were also given to the ladies and church staff.