

# Tayside Organists' Society

## *Visit to The Laidlaw Music Centre, St Andrews*

22 April 2023

*Review by Ron Oliver*

The final meeting of the current session comprised a visit to the Laidlaw Music Centre, St Andrews, where the programme consisted of a tour of the premises, a demonstration of the organ, and an insight into the 'Sowne of Organe' project. All of this was hosted and presented by the current Head of Programming at the University, Chris Bragg.

Nine members of the Society attended along with the same number of members of the public. Chris Bragg was an excellent communicator, and his enthusiastic and upbeat delivery related well to this state of the art, high tech music centre, and the first part of the proceedings was a tour of this brilliantly conceived building.

Music degrees at St Andrews were terminated in 1988, and associated music facilities ceased to function. This course of action backfired on the authorities, as it was learned that many potential students were being deterred from applying to study at the university. These were often highly talented musicians, who, although not wishing to study music, did wish to further their musical development, and it became obvious a musical facility was urgently required. Of course, major fundraising was necessary, but the main supporter of the project was the Peer, Lord Laidlaw, after whom the centre is named.

Opportunity was taken to consult architectural and technical expertise, and this has resulted in this magnificent building which was opened in 2022. Sound insulation was paramount in the design, and it is virtually impossible to be disturbed by sound transmission from adjacent practice rooms, all located at first floor level. Another feature was the amplification and audio control room, which caters for rock bands and contemporary 'sounds', but also facilitates live streaming on YouTube, where access to performances is available to internet users. However, the pièce de résistance is the Recital Room, which can accommodate anything from large orchestras to choirs and solo performances, not to mention audience attendance at the many public concerts. The entire floor area is a stage consisting of rectangular panels, which can be vertically adjusted to produce a raised area of any size, with different floor heights to suit each performance, but also allowing the inclusion of audience accommodation. This flexibility is mechanised and operated from a control panel. Different performances require different sound accommodation and this is achieved through timber walls with projecting fins to prevent sound reverberation, along with a 9 metre high ceiling, also constructed of timber, but which likewise has an inbuilt capacity for adjustment.

The major visual feature of the Recital Room is the organ gallery with its beautifully proportioned instrument. The organ specification for the centre was decided at early design stage and an 'early English' concept was targeted. Enquiries were made, amongst others, with Willis organ builders, who just happened to have such an instrument in stock, being used for training and demonstration purposes.

The Lewis organ dates from 1868, modified and updated in 1925 with a Cornopean stop being added at that time, and the rich sound produced is absolutely superb. It is not a large organ, having only fifteen stops, but a wide range of sounds can be obtained, and this was ably demonstrated by Chris who played four pieces starting with a Bach transcription and ending with a lively Vierge sortie.

The organ is well used and there are currently six organ scholars at the University. The entire complex is used extensively not only by the University but the community of St Andrews and beyond.



After a coffee break, a short talk/PowerPoint presentation was given by Chris about the ‘Sowne of Organe’ project, the title being taken from the words of a 16<sup>th</sup> century Scottish ballad and indicates that the sound of an organ was very much part of life at that time. The aim is to produce a record of the many musical gems of organs there are throughout the country, and consequently enthuse churches about the role they can play in continuing the legacy they have inherited, leading to a desire to keep their instruments not only functioning but in good repair. Often churches are custodians of organs of whose value, both historically and musically, they are unaware. Much more information is available on the website, [www.sowneoforgane.com](http://www.sowneoforgane.com).

In conclusion, Vice President George Bell delivered a vote of thanks to Chris for his hospitality and welcome to this magnificent facility.

Regular concerts are advertised on the website <https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/music/> and those who were unable to attend the meeting are encouraged to pay a visit – they will not be disappointed.