

**ALTON ORGAN SOCIETY – NEXT ORGAN CONCERT TUE 6 NOVEMBER 2018 AND REVIEW OF
MARTIN BAKER'S ORGAN CONCERT - TUESDAY 2 OCTOBER 2018**

There are usually only two circumstances when musicians can, legitimately, improvise: in jazz and on the pipe organ during services and/or concerts. French organists are masters of this skill often improvising between hymn verses or, if they are really clever, as their end of service voluntary. One of UK's leading organ improvisers is Martin Baker (Organist & Master of the Choristers, Westminster Cathedral) and those attending Alton Organ Society's opening concert of the 2018/2019 Season on 2 October 2018 witnessed Martin's skills at first hand. Moreover, his organ playing artistry exceeded all expectations leaving the audience spell bound with his skill, interpretation and ability. As is the custom, Martin was given the surprise theme just before starting his improvisation and the chosen piece was Karg-Elert's famous "Nun Danket" - a favourite piece on special occasions such as weddings, feast days etc. He played through the whole piece as originally composed and then launched into the most impressive (some might say outrageous) improvisation. He moved through different keys, different styles, very different registrations and, after about 5 minutes, returned to the original theme. There was a collective jaw drop at this most fascinating and impressive demonstration of invention and musicianship.

Prior to this, Martin's programme was one of variety, contrast and, again, masterful organ playing. He opened his concert with a piece probably new to most audience members namely "La cité céleste" by Lionel Rogg (*b.1936*). Structurally, it bore a striking resemblance to Olivier Messiaen's "Apparition de l'église éternelle" but easier on the ear with wonderful chords, colour and varying style. No concert is complete without Bach and Martin's perfect delivery of JS Bach's Sonata 2 in C minor (BWV 526) was pure delight. Bach sonatas are most demanding on the player requiring quite different movements between left hand, right hand and pedals. Apparently, Bach composed them as a complex teaching aid for his organist children.

The next piece was a complete contrast with Herbert Howells' Psalm Prelude Set 1 (Op.32 No 2) played with much feeling. It was based on psalm 34 words "But the meek spirited shall possess the earth". This is a favourite piece played usually before the start of a church service with a quiet start followed by gentle crescendo in the middle eventually fading away towards a quiet end. Was it coincidence that this was played on the 30th Anniversary of Howells' death.

Martin's major part of the programme was Alexandre Guilmant Symphonie 1 (Op 42) in three movements; "Introduction et Allegro"; "Pastorale" and the magnificent climax during the "Final". Martin's delivery of this very fine piece was a "tour de force" universally loved and enjoyed by this informed audience. He could have ended there with thunderous applause but...we reached a new heights of excellence with his Improvisation on Nun Danket described above.

We look forward to a return visit of Claudia Grinnell (Winchester Cathedral) on Tuesday 6 November 2018. Claudia will be playing music by Pachelbel, Naji Hakim, Pieterszoon, Dvořák, Jules Grison ending her concert with Elgar's "Pomp and Circumstance March" (No4). The concert will be held at St Lawrence Church, Alton GU34 2BW starting at 8.00 pm (refreshments available from 7.30 pm). Further details can be found at altonorgansociety.co.uk or by contacting Tony Willman at tony.willman@mac.com or 07928 516052.