

Review of Geoff Willis and Rob Goldfinch concert - 11 July 2024

Each year during the Summer, St Lawrence Church, Alton runs a series of Lunchtime Organ Concerts and this year, Geoff Willis and Rob Goldfinch's were invited to give the second concert in the current series - associated with the inaugural Alton Arts Festival. Usually, it is a single performer but we used Geoff to persuade Rob to return to Alton as he is such a shy, reluctant, retiring and introverted musician and entertainer. The cunning plan worked and each played solos and joined forces to play organ/piano duet.

Geoff opened the concert with a robust performance of D Wagner's (pronounced as in footballer's "WAGS") Festive Trumpet Tune and rechristened the title - in the spirit of the Alton Arts Festival - "Mid Summer Festival". Rob reminded us of Pavarotti's rendition of Puccini's "Nessun Dorma" (during the Three Tenors performance at the 1990 Football World Cup) the aria's beauty and Pavarotti's exquisite voice. Rob transcribed it to the organ and invited the audience to join in - they didn't and instead enjoyed Rob's playing. Eric Coates was the master of orchestral arrangements and a prolific composer of light entertainment music including the famous "Dambusters March". It was "Knightsbridge March" that Rob chose and performed with great gusto taking advantage of the three manual organ's stop arrangements and volume especially during the final crescendo. Rob is well known for his compositions and improvisation and his "Sunrise" was a sheer delight. Geoff suggested adding some bird sounds and, perhaps a change of key so Rob had to readjust his crib sheet to add a couple of extra chords! He did check afterwards to see if everyone had emerged from their sleep!

We next experienced piano and organ duet with that famous tune "Nola" by New York based Felix Arndt. He wrote "Nola" as an engagement piece in 1915, ten months before his wedding to Nola Locke. Sadly, he died during the flu epidemic in 1918. The combination worked well with Geoff playing "Oom-pah" chords on piano and Rob played melody on organ. It was a triumphal joy much appreciated by the audience.

We were reminded of the success of producer Gerry Anderson (aka John Eccles) to create in the 1960s Captain Scarlet and Mysterons and puppets such as Lady Penelope. The accompanying music composed by B Gray was unforgettable and Geoff played the theme from Thunderbirds on the organ. Following a serious attack of nostalgia among the older members of the audience, Geoff then moved on to "Saints on a Spree" composed by the legendary organist, Nigel Ogden. Nigel had a long career with the BBC in his programme "The Organist Entertains". Nigel started his career as an organ sales demonstrator and became an established BBC celebrity and composer. The "Saint on a Spree" is based upon the hymn and spiritual "When the Saints go Marching in" set to a wide variety of dances. It certainly got the feet tapping and Geoff expects to hear from the BBC in due course!

Finally, Rob closed the concert playing the well known Toccata from Charles-Marie Widor's 5th Symphony. Last time Rob played this in Alton a couple of years ago, he remarked that, when younger, he played it from memory but decided this time to use the music - spread out in "Cinemascope" on the console. Two thirds of the way, the music decided to part company leaving Rob to continue - successfully - from memory. This year, he used the music and I was very impressed with his accuracy, tempo and clarity of the notes in his performance. It was a very professional delivery and brought to a close a most entertaining concert. The audience loved it and translated their appreciation into donating generously.