

Book Review

LETHAL PIPES OF ST PAUL'S

A History of the Organ in St Paul's Cathedral

by Austin Niland and Nicholas Plumley

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Assistant Jonathan Rennert writes The insights into the working of the music department at St Paul's given by Liveryman John Scott on the two preceding pages coincide splendidly with publication of this fascinating new book, researched by Austin Niland and completed (after Niland's death) by Nicholas Plumley.

At 224 pages, this is no mere pamphlet; nor is it a dry academic study, though it shows the results of years of painstaking investigation.

It may come as a surprise to liverymen who expect, at the Company's annual evensong in St Paul's, the mighty sounds of the five-manual monster-organ, to discover that it began life as quite a modest instrument.

Built by "Father" Smith, it sat on Wren's intricately carved screen, which divided the choir area of the building (where the congregation then sat) from the dome and the nave (which were rarely used for services).

The advantage musically was that the pipes spoke without obstruction; visually, attention was focused on the dome rather than on a west-to-east vista.

Much information is presented in easily readable form. We have original architect's drawings of possible organ-case designs; numerous entries from the cathedral's accounts books; insights into the introduction of German pedals – the pedal board of 1720 seems to have been the first in England, though a full-length version was not introduced until 1849; and new facts about alterations to the instrument's pitch during the 19th century.

The rivalries between organ builders (Smith and Harris in the late 17th century; Hill and Willis in the 19th) make lively reading – and there is the occasional unexpected titbit.

I was not aware that Handel, after practising on the organ in St Paul's, used to spend "long evenings with Gentlemen of the choir of St Paul's at the Queen Anne Tavern nearby". Nor had I realised that congregations for certain services during the 1800s numbered as many as 10,000 (and 13,000 for the Duke of Wellington's funeral in 1852).

Hardly surprising, then, that the choir screen came to be removed, since it was creating a barrier that reduced the usefulness of the choir area at big services, and that the organ was dramatically enlarged.

John Scott contributes a chapter on how to use the instrument to best effect, being particularly conscious that the sound heard by congregations is very different from that experienced at the organ console. He warns of the "lethal" 32ft Contra Bombarde (up in the dome), and gives advice to visiting players on the balance between departments and varying delays between the moment that the organist's finger is depressed and the time he hears the resulting sound.

Scott describes the tone of some of the registers, and helpfully mentions that the present Queen considers the Royal Trumpet ranks to be "rather noisy". He also discusses possible changes and additions – a dome console; an organ screen such as the one that distinguished Liveryman Noel Mander (responsible for the 1977 rebuild) would like to see reinstated; and Nicholas Plumley's idea of several smaller organs around the building.

However, he does not resurrect Renatus Harris's 17th-century idea (suggested again in 1839) of a huge six-manual organ over the great West Door.

Mr Pianoman's Advice Centre

After a lifetime of buying and selling pianos, Liveryman Julian Markson found that he was getting too far from the keyboard and decided to set up a consultancy in the subject he knows best. Vivien Schweitzer reports

Buying a piano is like buying a car: what you really need to hear through the sales pitch is solid, unbiased advice. Yet while there are many piano dealers, tuners, restorers and auctioneers, until recently, there has been no advice service – a niche that Julian Markson believes he can fill. With an extensive background in the piano business, he was well equipped to launch his Piano Advisory Service earlier this year.

Markson had worked at Markson Pianos (founded by his grandfather in 1910) all his life, and remains a director of the company.

"I realised that I had lost track of what I was doing," he says, "in that I wasn't dealing with pianos any more. I was running a successful business but I was dealing with lawyers, accountants and insurance companies, and not actually doing that much with pianos. I missed that, so I decided to take early retirement and go back to my roots."

Markson explains that the idea of giving piano advice is an old concept, one that used to be run in the 1960s under the auspices of The Piano Publicity Association.

"There were times when my father would go around the country and do phone-ins, where people got general advice. So advice-giving runs in the family, and I thought that it was time to resurrect the idea of a piano service. And I enjoy it. I get to meet people and talk to them about pianos, which I love."

The realisation that the public is often "conned diabolically" was a major factor in his decision.

Markson remembers an occasion when he went to give a repair estimate to a woman whose ceiling had fallen inside and on top of her piano. She had been given a previous quote of £7,000 – for a piano that Markson thought was probably worth only about £3,000 to begin with.

Markson plans to market the service primarily through word of mouth – aiming at "anybody who has a piano and doesn't know where to sell it, or somebody who has seen a piano, wants to buy it but doesn't know where to get an unbiased opinion. As a pianist, you may think that a piano plays beautifully, but it perhaps needs tuning every two weeks. I can make sure that the piano is structurally sound and will hold its tune."

He is also targeting piano teachers and insurance companies, as well as considering the hotel and restaurant trades.

"There are people who call me in and say: 'I've never heard anything better', and you go and find an 1875 piano fit for the scrap heap. At this point, I become more like a doctor. You have to be very gentle with people, and say: 'Look, sorry, a piano does have a finite life. It's not like a Stradivarius.'"

He points out that pianos that are brought from abroad are invariably damaged by the shippers. "I deal with that as well, and try to reassure people that their pianos are all right. People think

'I become like a doctor, gentle with people. Say, look, sorry – a piano does have a finite life. It's not a Stradivarius'