

To Bach and back again

11 September 2007

As ever, the annual Livery Club Bach Cantata Concert took place at St Mary at Hill. Wren's light, airy church of 1677, restored after a fire in 1988, is perfectly suited to music-making of this scale. As members of the Livery processed, we were greeted with Buxtehude's grand *Tocatta in F*, BuxWV 157, played on the historic organ built by William Hill in 1848.

Now well established in its 11th year, the church was filled for this increasingly popular annual event, including members of the London Appreciation Society. This year, there were three cantatas: two by Bach and one by the greatest organist of his day, Diderik Buxtehude, the 300th anniversary of whose death was commemorated in 2007. In his words of welcome, Pastmaster Jonathan Rennett reminded us of the high regard that Bach held for Buxtehude, travelling a great distance on foot to hear the master.

Jonathan directed the highly accomplished St Mary at Hill Baroque Players, leader Stephen Rouse, from the

chamber organ. All young professional musicians, they used copies of 18th century instruments and playing techniques to recreate the sound world of the period. Of the four fine young vocal soloists, each already building up an impressive range of experience, bass-baritone, George Humphreys was of particular note as a major prize winner of the Musicians' Company.

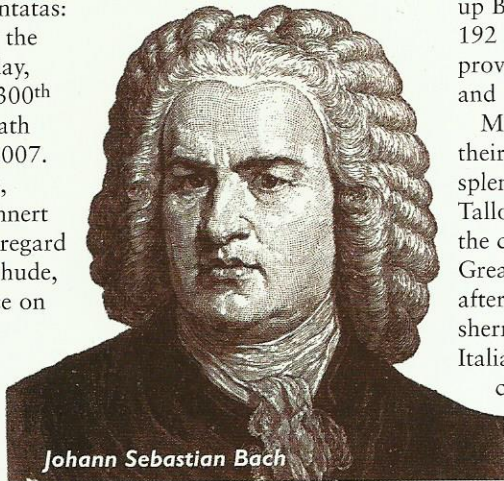
Bach's Cantata 22 *Jesus nahm zu sich die Zwoelfe*, written for the Sunday before Lent, has five sections with a particularly independent

orchestral part in which Joel Raymond's oboe obbligato was especially expressive. The one-to-a-part Chorale was notable for its balance and clarity of texture.

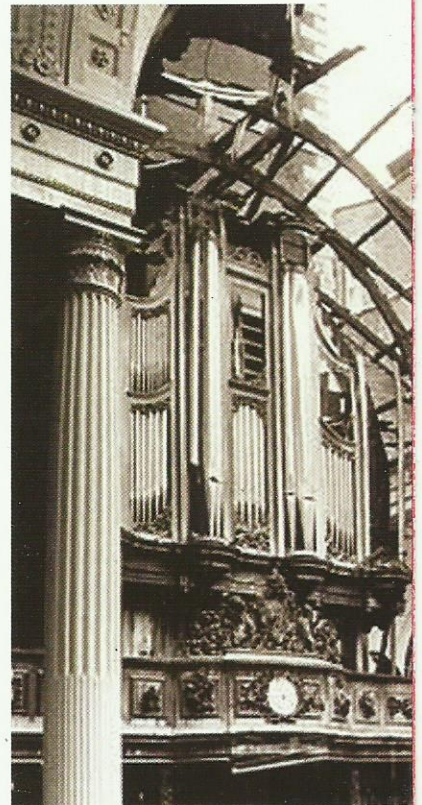
We were in a slightly different sound world for Buxtehude's Italianate Cantata *Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied*. Set for soprano, with violin and continuo, the clear, centred voice of Ruth Gomme did, indeed, 'Sing unto the Lord a new song', the many short contracting sections of tempi and mood being especially well judged.

The three sections making-up Bach's incomplete Cantata 192 *Nun danket alle Gott* provided a suitably affirming and joyful close to the concert.

Members of the Livery and their guests then retired to the splendid surroundings of the Tallow Chandlers' Hall - like the church, built just after the Great Fire (although restored after war damage). After a sherry reception in the sunny Italianate courtyard and a convivial lunch, the young French pianist, Amandine Savary, studying at the RAM



Johann Sebastian Bach



Fire damage before restoration in 2000 by Mander Organs

and 2006 winner of the Company's Harriet Cohen Bach Prize, filled the room with a vivid account of Bach's *Italian Concerto*.

The Company Carol Service

11 December 2007 at St Michael's, Cornhill

In the last year or so I have grasped every opportunity to attend Musicians' Company events with Liveryman Jeff Kelly in an attempt to educate myself in the glories of great music. Little did I know when accepting Jeff's invitation to the Carol Service that I, a mere music novice, would be asked to write a piece about the evening for a readership of musical experts.

While listening to an organ performance of *Variations sur un Noël* played by Liveryman Clive Driskill-Smith and gazing at the striking blue vaulted ceiling I wondered why St Michael's wasn't a Wren church. It certainly didn't look like one but I discovered subsequently that it is. Wren's rebuilding of the tower and upper

half of the church, which were destroyed in the Great Fire, commenced in 1715. But St Michael's was restored in the nineteenth century by that doyen of the Gothic Revival, George Gilbert Scott, hence my confusion.

After the Master and Liverymen of the Musicians' Company and Master and Wardens of the Turners' Company had filed in to their seats, soaring voices from the back of the church signalled the start of the service and the choir began to process up the two side aisles singing Britten's *A Hymn to the Virgin*.

It is the tradition for one specially composed new carol to be included in the service each year. This year we heard the world première of Anna Meredith's work

Et nobis puer natus est. Commissioned by Leslie East for the Musicians' Company as a gift on his Installation as Master, Anna found inspiration in the work of a 15th century Scottish poet, William Dunbar. It was written for a ten-part unaccompanied choir where the voices were treated as a small orchestra and it worked beautifully alongside music from earlier centuries. Anna is a young musician who was the Company's Lambert Fellow in 2003/4. The Lambert Award receives royalties from the rock musical *Tommy*, which it uses to support selected students with fellowship awards every year. Anna is a former composer in residence for the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra and is going on to great things, having been commissioned to write a work for the Aldeburgh Festival. Following Anna's new carol we enjoyed another modern piece, this time a carol written by the Master himself as a