

# A barometer reset

## The Royal Festival Hall Organ: 1954–2014

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*"The Festival has set the standard by which we shall face the future...[it] was marked by imagination and ingenuity... and a pride for what Britain has achieved in all things."*

Dr Geoffrey Fisher spoke these words as Archbishop of Canterbury on 30<sup>th</sup> September 1951 at the close of the Festival of Britain. Though the Festival ended three years before an organ was installed in the Royal Festival Hall (RFH), the imagination, ingenuity and pride in British achievements was embodied in the Harrison & Harrison instrument. A number of battles had to be fought along the way, not least the question as to whether an organ was necessary. Sir Thomas Beecham's note to the London County Council's Royal

Festival Hall working group typified a large number of letters: for a hall of such magnitude, an organ was of the utmost importance.

An organ required a Consultant: Ralph Downes was nominated, most probably at the behest of prominent music critic and promoter Felix Aprahamian. Downes had experience of European and American organs, and of trying to realise what might loosely be termed European Baroque principles on contemporary instruments, as his experiments at Princeton University Chapel demonstrate. The history of the instrument will no doubt be told many times in many places over the coming year, and Downes' version already exists in his autobiography. However, it is worth turning to

Downes briefly, talking of the voicing of the Royal Festival Hall organ:

*"[i]t was, for me, rather dispiriting to hear the lovely, full resonant tones of [the] pipes as they were voiced in a reverberant lobby, transformed into thin astringency when restored to the hall's ambience: that was our permanent handicap!"*

The sound troubles of the RFH never went away, and from 2005 until 2007 the Hall underwent a vast refurbishment programme with the aim of improving the acoustics. The first third of the organ was renovated at the same time, the remainder being removed to Harrison & Harrison's Durham workshop in February 2011 to complete the organ restoration project. The reopening will take place in March 2014.



*Ralph Downes, the Royal Festival Hall organ consultant and curator.*

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In its first life, the organ celebrated the very best performers and repertoires, and a number of influential artists came to make their names with their "Festival Hall debut"; others, such as Simon Preston and Gillian Weir came to be closely affiliated with the instrument. Papers from the Aprahamian archive record Weir's performance of Messiaen's *Méditations sur le Mystère de la Sainte Trinité* as part of the 1982/83 season, and a later note from 1986 shows a committed desire to engage audiences as much as possible and to promote talent: competition winners from Manchester, the Royal College of Organists, St Albans and Chartres were all engaged, and a new late Sunday morning recital series was envisaged:

*"We are also looking at the possibility of an entirely new strand to run after Easter 1988 with an unashamedly popular character...the more 'town hall' repertoire of arrangements, popular organ classics and so forth, designed to appeal to the very different audience who might be lured [to the RFH] on a warm early summer Sunday morning."*

The 1954 organ gave an accurate read-out of its contemporary climate;

in 2014, after a period of significant silence and a not insignificant amount of cultural change, the Royal Festival Hall has reset their iconoclastic cultural barometer for 2014. A vast array of ideas has sprung up – a thousand tongues all speaking in a contemporary language: everyone and everything is included, from primary school children to the oldest living memories of an organ.

As part of the second half of the organ restoration project, children from Telferscot Primary School in Lambeth, and Annfield Plain Primary School, County Durham, have documented the project's progress, creating animation films and writing reviews of organ music – their top ten organ works will soon be displayed in the Southbank Centre! The schools have formed a relationship with one another, and are forging stronger relationships with their communities.

Lambeth and Durham schools received very similar experiences as both visited Harrison & Harrison's Durham workshop and both spent time in the Festival Hall. Lambeth's visit to Durham helped to highlight how all-encompassing the organ is as an educational tool, as they visited Durham Cathedral, aiding their

Religious Education curriculum.

Physics, history, culture: all of these facets have been demonstrated through a variety of organ outreach projects over the years, and the RFH outreach is not different. Annfield Plain students explored at the Festival Hall just what it meant for pipes to be of different lengths, and how different "building blocks" result in different timbres. Perhaps most excitingly, the two schools have collaborated (with the help of computers!) to create a guide to the organ – including what animals they think might dwell inside the Southbank's famous organ's chambers.

Children's illustrator, Jane Porter, was tasked with working with both schools on producing the children's guide, and a board game (based on Snakes and Ladders) which will be part of the Festival in March. Telferscot pupils were also challenged to create an activity that families visiting the RFH could do at home: quickly, miniature organs, constructed out of cereal packets (with all manner of organ paraphernalia, and even audience seats!) flooded in.

But the Southbank Centre's organ-centric outreach doesn't



*Children from both schools visited the Royal Festival Hall to explore the ins and outs of an organ, under the guidance of William McVicker.*