

The Beast at Hexham Abbey

This is the term that the Hexham people use for their magnificent organ, and, from what I heard on Tuesday 24th February, it is quite appropriate!

That evening, I was present, with a group of fellow-Mercers¹, at the installation of the new Rector of Hexham Abbey. It was a wonderful, happy occasion: the new Rector, Rev'd Canon Dr Dagmar Winter had already been part of the ministry team (although her previous parish had been elsewhere); she was clearly respected and loved by those who had worked with her in past years, and she was evidently delighted to be back at the Abbey.

The service was made particularly moving by the inclusion of the ceremony of so many groups from the general Hexham community, from two children representing schools, to the civic dignitaries, and they were all there to celebrate a their place in strong integration of the Abbey and its buildings into the life of the town.

The relatively short service had music at its centre, with a choir of adults and children – boys and girls on this occasion – under the direction of Marcus Wibberley. The choir started the main proceedings with a very atmospheric *a capella* rendering of Weelkes' 'Alleluia, I heard a voice'. Later, they sang John Rutter's tuneful 'Look at the world' before the Installation itself; and after The Welcome and the Peace came Stanford's familiar 'Magnificat in C', which always takes me back to my days as a boy-alto.

And then, of course, there was the Beast. Our party entered the church in the middle of the Largamente of Bach's Pièce d'Orgue (BWV 572), and what a noble sound that was! We were soon treated to that inexorable 2-octave rising scale on strong pedals, reeds and all, and on to the joyful concluding bars over dominant pedal. The interrupted cadence at the end always surprises (even if keenly anticipated). The final section was a complete contrast, with whispering flutes over the long pedal fall that gently unwound the climactic pedal rise in the Largamente, and, at the end, the piece just disappeared into the ether. This gave a good introduction to the main organ prelude to the service: Buxtehude's Prelude in A Minor: complex and virtuosic, part answering part, with no less than two fugal sections and ending almost with a fanfare – a suitable note before the service started with the Choir's introtit.

The service concluded with the Bach's Fugue in G minor (BWV 578) – its theme heightened for me at each entry by the boyhood words: 'Mister Bach wrote sev'ral tunes that sound like this ...'. A real treat afterwards, although not mentioned on the service sheet, was Bach's huge Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor (BWV 582).

¹ The Worshipful Company of Mercers of the City of London share the patronage of Hexham Abbey with Viscount Allendale They are patrons or joint-patrons of a number of livings in London and elsewhere.

The organ is set, very strikingly, over the entrance to the chancel, and it is a handsome and impressive sight. The organ loft is at the centre, facing the nave, but the organist is curtained from view, so that all communications with the choir director and clergy are dependent on video screens. To my regret, I did not have the opportunity to see the organ's console close to on this occasion, but I do hope to have an opportunity next time I am in Hexham.

The organ was built in 1974 by Lawrence Phelps and Associates of Erie, Pennsylvania, U.S.A., with two manuals and pedal organ, and 34 stops. According to the Lawrence Phelps website:

The Phelps Organ at Hexham Abbey was the first modern mechanical-action instrument built in the United States exported to Europe, reversing centuries-old cultural flow. It was part of the 1300th anniversary of the Abbey, an event in which Queen Elizabeth participated in during the September 1974 celebration.

Extensive details and a very interesting article about the organ are to be found on the Phelps web page:

<http://www.lawrencephelps.com/Documents/Instruments/hexham.shtml>

and a quick study of the stop-list gives a sense of the power, variety of registration and the sensitivity of the instrument – and underlines what can be done with a modern two-manual organ.

Not to be forgotten is that the late Lawrence Phelps was the husband of our Patron, Dame Gillian Weir DBE, and she has given a number of recitals on this organ, including its inaugural recital in the presence of Her Majesty the Queen, and a recital celebrating the organ's 30th birthday.

Anthony Hodson
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