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## VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

The last part in our survey of the British composer's choral works includes the sublime Mass in G minor

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# RIEGER IN VIENNA

The city of Haydn, Mozart and Schubert welcomes a new organ



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## DENMARK IN SONG

How a tradition developed to sing in crisis or joy

## IRISH COMPOSERS' SHOWCASE

Meet the new choral publishers based in Waterford

## RESTORING A HUNTER ORGAN

A WW1 memorial organ returns to its original condition







# Hunter gatherers

A first world war memorial organ in a north London church has been restored to its original condition by F.H. Browne & Sons. **Matthew Power** reports

PHOTO BY CHARLOTTE WILSON

▲ The restored organ in St Mellitus, with the 1960s faux-Corinthian screen remodelled to allow greater tonal projection

The imposing edifice of St Mellitus Roman Catholic Church dominates the north London suburb of Tollington Park. Designed by G.G. Searl as New Court Congregational Church, it opened in 1871 with a capacity of 1,300. In 1920 a new organ was commissioned from Alfred Hunter & Son of Clapham for the sum of £4,500. It was to form a memorial to those men of the parish who had fought, served and died in the first world war. In 1959 the church was sold to the RC Diocese of Westminster, augmenting the parish of St Mellitus to accommodate many Irish people who settled in Islington after the second world war.

Soon after 1960 the console was moved to the gallery and an ornamental wooden screen built at the back of what had become the sanctuary to hide the organ from view. Part of the casework was dismantled to allow for the screen, and the pipework remained intact. No other work had been undertaken since its installation, and when project consultant Ian Bell came to inspect it in early 2014 it was only partially playable. He explains: 'Many

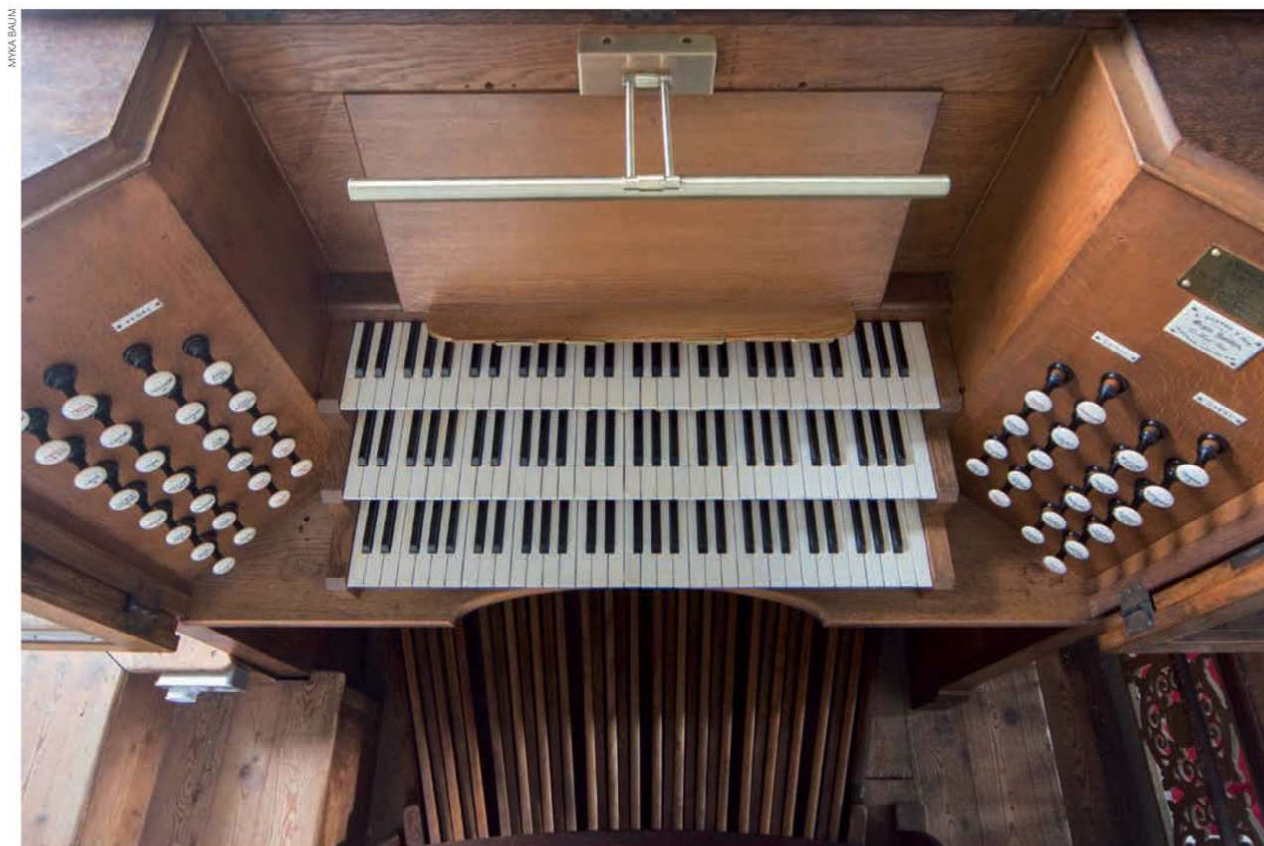
notes and stops did not function, through rotted leatherwork, and the builders looking after it were of the view that electrifying the action was the only sensible approach. Given that tubular-pneumatic action was so central to this later period of the Hunter work, rejecting it did not appeal.' Heritage-based funding would have become less likely with any major mechanical or tonal changes, too. But a fully authentic restoration was not without concerns for Bell: 'The re-siting of the console, still with pneumatic action, at this greater distance could have introduced shortcomings that, with the general deterioration of the organ, were not now evident. I recommended sounding out a shortlist of potential restorers to see what they thought; all except one were enthusiastically confident about strict restoration.' The parish succeeded in a painstaking application to the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) and chose the Kentish firm of F.H. Browne and Sons (now trading as Mander Organ Builders) to restore the instrument.

Bell contextualises Hunter's work: 'In the 1850s Alfred Hunter, then aged 30, left his job with Bishop & Son to establish his own business in south London. The company was modest in size but dependable in quality, within 30 years building a hundred or more small organs, mostly of two manuals with tracker action. In 1885 Hunter took his son Robert into partnership and the style, and ambitions, changed. As the turn of the century approached, tubular-pneumatic action became well established, and by 1890 the Hunter output had embraced it and soon took the opportunity to begin producing larger instruments of up to three or even four manuals, often with consoles bristling with pneumatically operated gadgets. The quality remained high, both tonally and mechanically, though the firm never expanded hugely in size and the total of 300 or so instruments they produced was less than half those made by T.C. Lewis, their competitors in south London.'

Tonally, Bell found the organ to be a fine example of the Edwardian period, though ▶



# ST MELLITUS



▲ The console is comfortable, and the finely adjusted pneumatic action is light to the touch

## St Mellitus R.C. Church, Tollington Park, London N4

ALFRED HUNTER & SON (1920); F.H. BROWNE & SONS (2020)

CHOIR		SWELL		Octave	8
Lieblich Gedeckt	8	Bourdon	16	Bass Flute	8
Viol d'Orchestre	8	Violin Diapason	8	Ophicleide	16
Dulciana	8	Rohr Gedact	8		
Harmonic Flute	4	Echo Gamba	8	<b>Couplers</b>	
Harmonic Piccolo	2	Voix Celestes	8	Sw-Ped, Sw-Gt, Sw-Ch, Sw 8ve, Sw sub-8ve,	
Clarinet	8	Gemshorn	4	Ch-Gt, Ch-Ped, Ch 8ve, Gt-Ped	
<i>Tremulant</i>		Flageolet	2		
		Mixture (17.19.22)	III	4 thumb pistons each to Sw, Gt, Ch.	
<b>GREAT</b>		Double Trumpet	16	4 composition pedals to Gt and Ped	
Double Open Diapason	16	Oboe	8	and 4 to Sw.	
Large Open Diapason	8	Horn	8	Reversible pedals to Sw-Gt and Gt-Ped.	
Small Open Diapason	8	Clarion	4	Reversible thumb to pistons Sw-Gt and	
Stop'd Diapason	8	<i>Tremulant</i>		Gt-Ped.	
Principal	4			2 balanced swell pedals (electro-pneumatic	
Claribel Flute	4	<b>PEDAL</b>		action).	
Twelfth	2 <sup>2</sup> / <sub>3</sub>	Open Diapason	16	Key and stop action, tubular-pneumatic.	
Fifteenth	2	Violone	16		
Mixture (17.19.22)	III	Sub Bass	16		
Tromba	8	Echo Bourdon	16		

◀ its enclosure behind a screen had 'blunted its presence'. He pressed for increasing projection into the church by enlarging the apertures, and this was agreed. The pipework itself has not been altered in any way, and the smaller pipes remain cone-tuned.

Stephen Bayley, managing director of F.H. Browne & Sons, explains what the team had to contend with: 'Space inside the organ was tight. Removal of the heavy and awkward derivation machine for workshop restoration, located behind where the console originally sat, was a challenge, getting sufficient people into a small space. When the console had been moved into the gallery, all the pneumatic tubing serving note and stop functions was simply extended and worked surprisingly well. In the intervening decades, though, some of the miles of tight tubing inside the console had become detached or damaged, requiring a back-to-basics approach to restore lost functionality.'

'The pipework was in surprisingly good condition, albeit very dirty. While the cleaning restored some brightness, opening up the front of the organ, with a new case set into the existing screen, allowed significantly greater egress of sound and development of the chorus, which had not been heard properly for some 60 years.'

The church's monumental proportions are striking. Its shoebox-shaped interior results in agreeable acoustics, and despite an ocean of carpet and close-knit rows of pews, there is reverberation of around 1.5 seconds when the building is empty. The previously theatrical 1960s screen which created a faux-Corinthian backdrop to the altar is now repainted off-white, and has become an elegant reredos illuminated with new arrays of (non-speaking) tin pipes standing in apertures that allow generous tonal egress. Upstairs, the console is comfortable, with angled stop jambs within easy reach. The finely adjusted pneumatic action is light to the touch and remains unchanged when manuals are coupled. Slightly offset to the right of a row of eight wooden toe levers are balanced expression pedals to Swell and Choir; opening and closing them smoothly takes a little practice.

A tonal tour reveals a marvellous character; here are the highlights. The Choir's warm flutes contrast with a keen Viol d'Orchestre, all blending into a gentle



COURTESY ST MELLITUS CHURCH



CHARLOTTE WILSON

▲ The organ as first installed in 1920, and one of the memorial plaques thought lost, restored to the church in 2014

chorus crowned by adding the choir octave. A full-compass Clarinet is particularly attractive in its lower octaves. On the Swell, clear Voix Celestes with the Echo Gamba have real presence, especially when extended with couplers; the bright chorus will easily support hymn accompaniment if desired. Double Trumpet, Horn and Clarion

form a smooth ensemble while retaining distinct characters of their own. The luxury of small, large and double Diapasons on the Great produced a breadth of tone that stopped me in my tracks. The hefty Tromba also has enough 'clang' to soar above full Swell without sounding impertinent. The very quiet Pedal Echo Bourdon is audible ▶



## ST MELLITUS

CHARLOTTE WILSON



CHARLOTTE WILSON



CHARLOTTE WILSON



▲ Pipework has not been altered in any way; trainee Joe Calder works on site

◀ from the console, but is felt more than heard. The Violone has edge, flues speak nice and quickly, and the Ophicleide is pleasingly even. Less is definitely more here, and care in drawing combinations will be rewarded with balance and colour.

James Orford (organist in residence at Westminster Cathedral) gave the virtual inaugural recital in December (streamed online, and at the time of writing with nearly 900 views). What does he most enjoy about this instrument? 'The quality, depth and richness of colour, its exquisite pipework ... I was amazed at its breadth of tone – you could be forgiven for thinking that it is a lot bigger.' Orford tailored his programme to the instrument's strengths. 'There were its chorus possibilities in the Bach, solo colours in the Whitlock, string sounds in the Ireland,

accompanimental ability in the Stanford, and full throttle in the Vierne!' It is rare to play a pneumatic-action instrument restored to prime condition; what did Orford notice? 'The responsiveness of the action allows you to feel close to the organ and the way it speaks and breathes. There are drawbacks: few registration aids, and the position of the console means a delay between playing the notes and hearing them. In the faster music, that took some time to get used to. Nevertheless, it was a real joy to spend hours experimenting with its variety of colours.'

The NI.HF funding of the restoration required a parallel activity plan to enrich and engage the community and offer educational and other opportunities for local people. Emma Beck and Kirsten Walton were brought on board to oversee an outreach

programme. This has included a six-month placement with F.H. Browne & Sons for trainee organ builder Joe Calder, who has now been taken on full-time by the company; and a series of 24 piano lessons for 12 local schoolchildren, made available through the local Arts and Media School, Islington. Beck admits that due to Covid-19 it has been difficult to get those lessons going, with some learning having to start online.

An unexpected result of the coronavirus has been the generating of a wider audience. Beck reports that an integral part of the community aspect has been a group of volunteer researchers who have traced stories of some of the soldiers memorialised in 1920 and made contact with their living relatives: 'One family in Australia so engaged with the project that they got up during the night to watch the live recital!'

The outreach project will end this summer; the aim is to have groups organised to establish ongoing opportunities for organ recitals, concerts and further use of the instrument. Beck pays tribute to the volunteers from the church and local community: 'How their work has fed into the centenary concert and the legacy film has been really significant, especially during this challenging time. F.H. Browne's commitment to this project has been extraordinary too, in the way they have gone above and beyond what was expected.' ■

*stmellitusingan.co.uk; for a film of the project and Christmas concert, visit [bit.ly/3awcycQ](http://bit.ly/3awcycQ). With thanks to Fr Paul McDermott, Ian Bell, Stephen Bayley, James Orford, and Emma Beck.*

*Matthew Power read Music at the University of London. He was editor of Choir & Organ for nine years and works as a writer, editor and musician.*