

The President's Therapy: London Organ Improvisation Course 2007

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Many IAO friends will know that in the last months of my time as President I was diagnosed with breast cancer. The treatments are tough, and I was advised to cancel all engagements for a year or so. Halfway through the dreaded chemotherapy, a friend (and whilom student) rang to say he was enrolling on the London Organ Improvisation Course. I looked at the dates, realised they fell well between doses, and so decided to fulfill a long- time ambition to attend.

Normally at this time of year, concerts abound, RCO exam preparations reach apogee, summer courses beckon tutors, and it's school holiday time, so home is busy too. I see in my cancelled engagements that this week should have held three recitals and last week a live broadcast. It's easy to see why Gerard Brooks's four-day course has not been a regular fixture for me, and probably for many other similarly busy organists, since its inception in 2001.

This is a pity, for improvisation still lies off the radar of many organists. Our training in the UK lacks rigour in many directions, none so lamentably as in creating building- blocks to playing. By this I mean a firm understanding of harmony, techniques of composition, and thence the deceptively free skill of improvisation. I confess to having been the most iniquitous offender possible in this department as a student. Why bother, I thought then, with all these circus- tricks, when all that interests me is the literature? Wrong, wrong, wrong! How can renegades like me correct such an omission, given that improvisation cannot be self- taught, but is best learned amongst other like- minded players? Until the LOIC, it would not have been possible in the UK.

Off I went, then, on a Monday morning in a grey and showery London, to meet some 20 organists at All Souls', Langham Place, one of three churches who were kind enough to permit use of their organs. Within half an hour we were using simple ideas to structure our playing. A five- finger exercise played to a regular pulse; arpeggios in common time; fifths creating fanfares- these and more were starting points to focus concentration and submerge the nerves. Whether full-time music student, amateur organist of beginner standard, concert organist, parish church player, jazz pianist, or Oxbridge music don, all of us were soon contributing new ideas within our three sub- groups. Much laughter and discussion was happening too, and inspiration from the three charming tutors, Duncan Middleton, Otto Kraemer and Gerard Brooks. Gradually, every participant was able to move up a gear or two in their improvisation: a bombardment of ideas was liberating the creative juices from all self- consciousness.

By day two I had completely forgotten about being ill. Grappling with Messiaen's mode 2 is the best possible remedy for chemotherapy, I discovered. As the week went on, concerts by Otto Kraemer, David Briggs and Simon Preston were the source of wonder, delight and further inspiration. On day three, our early morning appointment was rewarded with sheer joy by Donald Mackenzie at the Leicester Square Odeon. Not least spectacular of the tonal and visual delights of the Compton was the 1937 hydraulic system, reminiscent of the Thunderbirds' Tracey Island (All systems GO, we cried!) as the console rose from the pit; Donald's exuberant playing for a seemingly effortless twenty minutes crowned the morning's visit.

Day four came all too soon. An afternoon forum included recordings of some historic improvisers. Inter alia, we heard Vierne playing at Notre Dame in the thirties; Cochereau on DVD; and opinions were exchanged as to what made these so great. Finally, we had one last session at the All Souls' organ, during which some students reprised their triumphs of the week - David Maw's Buxtehude Praeludium and Jason Edge's Messiaen Mode 2 Fantasia being particularly memorable. Unforgettable, however, was the tutors' party-piece, involving the national anthems of the UK and Germany (a nod to Otto Kraemer), a conveyor- belt of the three men, and the glorious sight of Gerard Brooks belly- diving the All Souls' console from above the left stop jambs to pick out a cantus firmus on the solo tuba. What larks, Pip!

We left the course amid mirth, gratitude, and huge amounts of food for thought. No wonder participants come back every year. Thoroughly recommended. Congratulations to Gerard Brooks, Duncan Middleton and to the Administrator, John Peacham.