

Energy supplier

As his new organ CD from St Bavo, Haarlem, is released, Joseph Nolan reflects on his first decade in Australia in conversation with **Andrew Green**

Late evening in Perth, Western Australia. I'm on the road and needing company, so I tune to ABC Classic FM, Australia's Radio 3. Immediately I'm blown away by the organ soloist in the Allegro from Widor's Symphony no.6: Joseph Nolan, I soon learn, accompanied (in Widor's orchestration) by the West Australian Symphony Orchestra. The playing, exhilaratingly taut and rhythmic, reveals a true concert performer.

This was a recorded performance from Perth Concert Hall, a stone's throw from Nolan's base at St George's (Anglican) Cathedral, where he has been organist and master of the choristers for a decade. A couple of weeks after that concert, Nolan was back at the hall with his impressive Cathedral Consort vocal ensemble to collaborate with the King's Singers in a performance within the annual concert series he himself founded. So there, embodied in two events, is Nolan's impact on the musical scene of this captivating, rapidly growing city.

A student of Marie-Claire Alain and Dame Gillian Weir, Nolan arrived in Perth in 2008, head-hunted from Her Majesty's Chapel Royal, St James's Palace, by the cathedral's former Dean, John Shepherd. 'I wanted to achieve something extraordinary at St George's, or it wouldn't be worth being here,' is how Nolan expresses his mindset. What attracted him was the challenge of rebuilding the St George's Cathedral vocal resources, generously funded by the Chapter. Added to that was the freedom from daily Evensong commitments: 'This enables me to practise for my concert and recording work in the generous amount of time away that I'm allowed... barring Christmas and Easter, of course.'

For cathedral services, Nolan has the services of male and female professional lay clerks, and boy trebles. His initial analysis of standards suggested a radical make-over was required. 'The ship had become rudderless,' he says. 'A new energy was required. Difficult decisions had to be made. It was better there were holes in the choir for a time until ▶

▶ Joseph Nolan arrived in Perth determined to rebuild the vocal resources at St George's Cathedral, now aided by the new Cadogan Song School (rt), opened in August 2017



RUSSELL BARTON



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▲ St George's Cathedral Choir: tackling challenging repertoire has become their hallmark

▲ The Cathedral Consort, founded by Nolan, has become the ensemble of choice for the Western Australia Symphony Orchestra

◀ the right voices came along, than to plug those gaps at any cost. I wanted to improve sight-reading dramatically and develop a far greater flexibility of sound to embrace the range of colour needed for the breadth of repertoire I wanted to tackle.

'I've sought to instil the understanding that it's the responsibility of the singers to work at music on their own so we can then finesse things in the limited rehearsal time available. I wanted them to feel stretched and to take an interest in the wider choral world. I encourage them to listen to lots of different repertoire on YouTube and Spotify. There's a great atmosphere in the choir – we're all striving for excellence.'

Tackling challenging repertoire has become a

hallmark of the choir, whether the demanding Naji Hakim *Messe solennelle*, pieces such as Judith Weir's *Ascending into Heaven*, or works commissioned from Australian composers such as Carl Vine and Elena Kats-Chernin. An unexpected pleasure for Nolan has been detecting a distinctively direct vocal colour in his singers. 'Perth's such a beautiful habitat in terms of climate and natural surroundings and you wonder if that's why the voices are so fresh. You could write a thesis on it! The boys make a somehow harder, tougher sound than you generally hear in the UK.'

The formation of the Cathedral Consort, going hand-in-hand with the instigation of the concert series (in St George's and Perth Concert Hall) was in part Nolan's way of reaching out to a music-loving constituency not normally keen on church attendance. Adult lay clerks are supplemented by additional professional sopranos. 'The inaugural concert in 2009 was the B minor Mass,' Nolan recalls, 'a real hill to climb for a new choir, but the Consort did a great job. Since then we've performed such repertoire as Handel's *Solomon* – the first-ever fully professional performance in Western Australia – and a Monteverdi *Vespers* with period instruments that was also ground-breaking. Apart from the King's Singers, we've worked alongside the likes of the Hilliard Ensemble and the Academy of Ancient Music; and we're the ensemble of choice for the West Australian Symphony Orchestra. The concert series has really taken off with the public and ABC Classic FM broadcast most of what we do. But nothing would have been possible without incredibly generous financial underwriting from Julian and Alexandra Burt.'

The other big task when Nolan arrived was to overhaul the cathedral's two organs, both modern instruments by Knud Smenge. 'A radical re-think was needed,' Nolan relates. 'Work on the west end organ is basically complete, although I'd love to re-do the action. It was well-constructed but out of sympathy with the building, which quite simply has no acoustics. A major part of the work done by Patrick Elms was to lengthen the reeds and tone down all the mixture work. It sounds more like a Harrison now and is able to manage everything from baroque repertoire through to Elgar, Finzi and Howells.'

'The priority now is the two-manual chancel organ. It provides real clarity of attack, so it leads the choir well. But there are no strings, no clarinet – not enough colour. So we need to find \$2.5m...'

Nolan the organist has now performed widely in Australia. Top venue? St John's Cathedral in Brisbane. 'Best organ by a mile,' he says. 'It offers the

perfect marriage of a concert and accompanying organ, supported by wonderful acoustics. It's a rich sound with plenty of bite and attack, capable of a massive roar. A joy to play. It's just undergone refurbishment, so I'm looking forward to my visit in September to give the first recitals on it, featuring all six Vierne symphonies. Will it be even better?

Nolan also singles out organs at St Paul's Cathedral, Melbourne and Sydney Opera House, where he played last year with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. 'It's a Ronald Sharp – a beautiful instrument, but hard to balance and find your way around. I played Liszt's *Fantasy & Fugue on 'Ad nos'* and took the roof off! If you find the right sounds, it's a lot of fun.'

The great organs of Europe will nonetheless continue to exert a gravitational pull as Nolan's career develops. He keeps in touch with contacts via Skype and email to sort concert, recital and recording schedules. A guiding principle in his Signum recordings is to play the right repertoire for the right place. His complete Widor organ symphonies were recorded on the fabulous Cavaillé-Coll instrument at La Madeleine in Paris: 'It's so hard to play this repertoire anywhere else once you've played it there.'

The latest release – another five-star offering – majors on Duruflé, featuring the organ he played at Saint-Étienne du Mont in Lyon. Repertoire includes Duruflé's ear-bending transcription of one of the celebrated Tournemire improvisations and a world premiere recording: David Briggs's demanding *Tombeau de Duruflé*.

Just released is a Reubke/Messner-Bach/Buxtehude/Mendelssohn (6th Sonata) album recorded on the 1738 Müller organ at the St Bavo Grote Kerk in Haarlem. 'You feel you're touching greatness in the loft,' says Nolan. 'Mozart, Handel, Brahms and maybe Mendelssohn played there. And that organ case – your jaw just drops. The organ is one of those you don't play: *it plays you*. It's a very heavy instrument when everything's coupled together – wrist-breaking. And it isn't always easy to balance between the manuals. Some of the pipework isn't all that special, but overall the sound is *really* special, as are the St Bavo acoustics. The organ was potentially a dangerous choice for the Reubke C minor Sonata, which I don't think has ever been recorded at St Bavo. But it works.'

Next up for Signum is the complete organ works of Alkan, recorded in his home city of Paris – by the sound of things, Nolan's second home. In 2016 the French government made him a Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres for services to French music.

Perth is the focus, though. Nolan now has dual

British-Australian citizenship. He's clearly proud to have been awarded the degree of Doctor of Letters (by examination) by the elite University of Western Australia. The future? Perth and its vibrant musical life clearly captivate him. 'It isn't a cultural backwater in any way these days. You think there's almost *too* much music going on, but audiences are terrific. I'm so fortunate to have such incredible support for the music at St George's. The main point is that things shouldn't plateau. I'm only interested in moving forward.' ■

A one-time cathedral lay clerk, Andrew Green has been a music journalist/broadcaster for over 30 years. Nothing feels more 'home' than choirs and church music.

▼ 'It feels as though you're touching greatness in the loft': Joseph Nolan at the console of the 1738 Christian Müller organ in St Bavo, Haarlem



all, yet another version of the 'American Classic' in which the eight(!) celestes and the gorgeous French Horn co-exist with Koppelflute, Scharff and even Siff flute (sic).

CHRIS BRAGG

JOHANNES BRAHMS: VARIATIONS

Christoph Schoener, St Michaelis, Hamburg
MDG 949 2051-6 [69:34]

★★★★



The Michaeliskirche in Hamburg had its organs comprehensively renovated in 2009: Freiburger Orgelbau 'optimised' the large 1962 Steinmeyer and the 1912 Walcker Fernwerk, and Klais restored and reconstructed the 1914 Marcussen 'concert' organ (a large two-manual instrument primarily intended for accompanying). Thanks to that German speciality for such situations, the 'Generalspieltisch' and reverberant acoustics, the opportunities for symphonic transcriptions with stereophonic effects are manifold, and Christoph Schoener goes to town in three Brahms transcriptions, one each from the fields of orchestral, chamber and piano music. Lionel Rogg's transcription of the 'St Anthony' Variations is well known, while Manuel Gera's free transcription of the second movement from the op.18 sextet and Rachel Laurin's arrangement of the Handel variations for piano are much less so. Schoener's playing is virtuosic: he clearly knows his instruments well and we hear a huge variety of colour – the setzer positively fizzes, while the ghostly Fernwerk adds a little off-stage drama. Reviews like this only mention tuning when infelicities are evident, so allow me to break the mould and say that the tuning here, despite the vast resources and the various locations of the pipes, is fastidious. Bravo.

CHRIS BRAGG

THE COMPLETE ORGAN SONATAS OF JOSEF RHEINBERGER

Roger Sayer, Harrison & Harrison organ, Temple Church, London
Priority PRCD 1165 (6CDs) [7:14:51]

★★★★



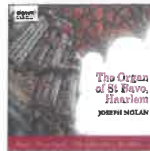
Josef Rheinberger (1839-1901) was a versatile composer. Works included operas, symphonies, a piano concerto, sacred music and piano works, but his best compositions were his 20 organ sonatas. Like his contemporary

Alexandre Guilmant, Rheinberger's music has suffered in recent decades, due (I suspect) to the conservative harmonic language which derives from Bach, Mozart, Mendelssohn and Schumann, and not from progressive Germans like Liszt and Wagner. This must have been deliberate, because as *répétiteur* for Wagner's *Flying Dutchman*, Rheinberger astonished colleagues by playing and transposing the score at sight. A gifted improviser, he counted among his pupils Humperdinck, Wolf-Ferrari and Wilhelm Furtwängler, as well as several Americans. His teaching involved traditional skills of harmony, counterpoint and form, which his organ sonatas exemplify. Originally envisaged as a set

ORGAN OF ST BAVO, HAARLEM

Joseph Nolan, Müller organ, St Bavo, Haarlem
Signum Classics SIGCD 546 [70:08]

★★★★



Reubke's *Sonata on the 94th Psalm* rings out here with robust brilliance in its first recording on the magnificent III/64 Müller organ in Haarlem's St Bavokerk. Joseph Nolan has the measure of its imposing architecture, formidable pedal demands and Lisztian fire, sweeping through its final moments with dramatic aplomb. Mendelssohn's D minor Sonata is lent adroit Lutheran solemnity, and Buxtehude's F major Toccata & Fugue shines on the Müller, Nolan relishing its flamboyant fantasy. Three pieces by Bach – the chorale preludes BWV 659 and 688 and Henri Messerli's arrangement of the BWV 1004 Chaconne – are richly realised. Ateş Orga's notes unpick all with intricate attention to detail.

MICHAEL QUINN

JEHAN ALAIN: ORGAN WORKS - A 1942 PERSPECTIVE

James Higdon, Bales Organ Recital Hall, University of Kansas;
Alain Organ, Romainmôtier, Switzerland
Not on label (self-released; available online from CD Universe, Amazon, CD Baby et al) [79:34+79:56]

★★★★



These are undoubtedly the most valuable CDs of Alain's organ works since the recordings made in the 1990s by Helga Schauerte. Here, James Higdon focuses solely on the 1942 edition and markings that Jehan's father, Albert, made on his personal copies. For further interest, six pieces appear twice, with a bonus rendition on the restored Alain house organ. I can see why they are ▶

of 24 (in all keys), only 20 were completed. A gifted melodist, his command of formal structures in the 19th-century German manner was exemplary – a true successor to Mendelssohn.

As current organist of the Temple Church, Roger Sayer is an excellent person to extract the most from the Harrison & Harrison organ, first built for Glen Tanar in 1927. Thanks to George Thalben-Ball, the organ was installed in the Temple Church in 1953, with subsequent changes in 2013. As a vehicle for Rheinberger it is convincing, and Sayer is masterly in managing the myriad colours and dynamics demanded by the music. The Passacaglia (Sonata no.8) is a particular highlight, and the fugal finales (including a fugue on a complete chromatic scale) are always ingeniously wrought, often concluding with a partial recapitulation of the first movements, tightening the sonatas' structures. Intermezzi, marches, andantes, variations, idylls, pastorals, ricercars, regional folk pieces, as well as preludes and fantasias, all contribute to the variety of forms included. Altogether, this recording should help to redress Rheinberger's neglect.

DAVID PONSFORD