

Organist Joseph Nolan can match any orchestra

VICTORIA LAURIE

If you walk inside St George's Cathedral off Perth's busy streets, you may hear a peal of organ music played by a distinguished musician.

In the main organ loft or seated in front of one of two other cathedral organs will be Joseph Nolan. If you're lucky, you may hear him play the spectacular Toccata from Charles-Marie Widor's Symphony for Organ No 5, a stirring and popular piece for occasions such as Britain's royal weddings.

You're likelier to hear him rehearsing for ecclesiastical services and choral recitals that have attracted a following among St George's regular parishioners and beyond. They include retired BHP Billiton iron ore head Sam Walsh, a firm admirer of Nolan's artistry and patron of his cathedral music program.

Yet few other church visitors know that Nolan is an internationally celebrated organ recitalist, who in April was made a chevalier in the Order of French Arts and Letters for his services to French music, in particular his recordings of Widor's symphonies.

British-born Nolan began his career as organist to the Chapel Royal at St James's Palace. He has performed often at Buckingham Palace, playing the first concert on the Palace Ballroom's restored organ.

"It was a scary experience because it was in front of an invited audience only, including Charles Mackerras," Nolan recalls. "He was a very generous man."

Nolan has performed around the world, but mostly in France where, after graduating from the Royal College of Music in London, he studied under legendary teacher and organ soloist Marie-Claire Alain.

He went on to record Widor's symphonies for Signum Records on famous organs — La Madeleine in Paris, St Francois De Sales in Lyons and St Sernin in Toulouse — played by Widor himself and by organ music composers such as Gabriel Faure and Camille Saint-Saens.

"I recorded all 10 symphonies in five nights and looking back, I think 'How did I do it?'" says Nolan. "I remember someone saying: 'These are not enough nights, you will not be able to do it.' I did, although it almost killed me."

"I did six months of nothing else, at least four or five hours' rehearsal a day, to make sure that I had mastery of it."

Nolan's recordings have been lavishly praised by critics. One reviewer noted that Nolan "transcends Widor's scores, truly reveling in the gothic beauty of



Master recitalist Joseph Nolan at his base, St George's Cathedral in Perth

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this music and the grandiose instruments of the belle époque".

Next year, Nolan will perform all 10 Widor organ symphonies during a week's residence at Melbourne Town Hall.

Even more prominent will be his debut with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra in February, when he will play the Widor fifth symphony and Liszt's choral fantasy and fugue *Ad Nos* on the Sydney Opera House organ.

A precociously talented child from a non-musical family in Hull, Nolan started playing a piano keyboard at the age of four.

"Then when I was 15," he says, "I went to visit somebody at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester. I heard someone play the organ and I was hooked."

As a Royal College scholarship student, he studied organ and piano. "To have a good piano technique is very important as an organist," he says.

In 2008, Nolan arrived in Perth to take up the role of cathedral organist and master of the choristers. He was lured by former cathedral dean John Shepherd, a doctorate music expert who Nolan jokingly says "has a silver

tongue and could sell snow to Eskimos".

"He doubled the budget for music and gave me a very nice deal. I don't have to play evensong during the week so I can do a lot of practice."

The move to Australia has suited Nolan personally, too; he has

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become an Australian citizen and his nine-year-old son attends school in Perth.

He also has been appointed as an honorary research fellow of the University of Western Australia's school of music.

The cathedral's incumbent dean, Richard Pengeley, describes Nolan as "clearly one of the best organists in the world and greatest living exponents of French organ music".

He says Nolan is also "a great choir master and identifier of tal-

ent" for the cathedral choir of paid singers, which includes the boy choristers. Pengeley says when the choir performed with the West Australian Symphony Orchestra in Bach's *St John's Passion* earlier this year, principal conductor Asher Fisch "raved about them".

"He sets the bar high and is totally unflinching in his expectations," *The Australian's* Perth music critic Mark Coughlan says.

"Joseph pushes people to deliver beyond a standard they thought they were capable of. His sense of rhythm and colour and theatrical drama, which is essential with Widor's music, is compelling, overholding notes to create a super smooth legato line."

Clive Paget, editor of *Limelight* magazine, describes Nolan as "a bit of a treasure" whose musicianship deserves greater acclaim in his adopted country.

"You think an orchestra makes a big noise, but wait until the organist has put his foot on the pedal," he says.

Nolan concedes that his organ playing has rarely attracted the sustained interest enjoyed by other instrumentalists. Until now, it seems.

"Music is hard work and often you can feel as if you are up against a brick wall," he says. "The chevalier award is also lovely — I put a lot into French music and it's nice to be recognised for it."

"It seems to have led to other engagements, like my solo debut with the SSO."

Completing the Widor series on France's best organs was satisfying, "but then I thought: 'What do I do next?'"

He returns to Perth next month after recording performances at Selby Abbey and giving concerts at Swansea International Festival and in other parts of Britain. Next year he will also visit The Netherlands to make a recording for Signum on the ornate baroque organ of St Bavokerk in Haarlem that was played by Mozart, Handel and Brahms.

Back home, choral conducting has become a second passion.

"This choir sings beautifully from vowel to vowel," Nolan says. "It's actually hard for them to get out a consonant when I want it. A reason I'm still here is that it's pretty tricky to find a choir that sounds as good as them."

"People say I almost build the

choir sound the way I approach the organ," he adds. "I'm always drawing on certain stops, on certain singers' sounds at different moments. It's all building blocks to music."

He would love to get funding to tour the cathedral choir, "because at our best we are every bit as good as visiting British choirs".

Playing Widor's symphonies will always be a big part of Nolan's life. His affection is clear for the prolific French composer.

"Widor's own playing was extremely legato and he was very, very still at the console," Nolan says. "Everything was about technique. I think his music is played far too fast; in St Sulpice the organ physically pulls you back. You try and play too fast and it grips your body and slows you down. The instrument's personality is that powerful."

Widor continued playing the organ at St Sulpice in Paris into his 90s.

"There's a recording of him playing his Toccata very slowly," Nolan says. "He was probably riddled with arthritis by then, but it's still wonderful to hear him play, bless him."