

# ARTISTS & *their* INSTRUMENTS

## *Joseph Nolan* on the organ of St Bavo, Haarlem

“It’s an astonishing organ. When it was completed it was the largest organ in the world, with 60 stops and 32-foot pedal towers. Mozart played it when he was 10 in 1766. Handel played it, Mendelssohn played it – it is extraordinary.

It’s a Christian Muller organ, built between 1735 and 1738. Obviously there have been quite a few changes over the years when additions have been made or the organ has been made more practical to play, but there is no getting away from the fact that you are playing something incredibly special. They are so proud of it, they really look after the instrument.

The space is just astonishing – you have to be there to believe it. You walk into the cathedral, and there’s this incredible ornate organ. The acoustic is obviously immense. So is the atmosphere that surrounds the organ, its history – there are not many organs where you can feel someone great has actually sat there. You feel that very strongly at St Bavo.

I recorded the Reubke Sonata on the 94th Psalm on this instrument because, so far as we know, nobody has actually recorded this piece on it – and I can tell you, when all the manuals are coupled it’s like depressing bricks – it’s incredibly heavy, and the physical element of playing a piece like this is huge. But I think one of the biggest reasons



and detail, and for me that’s what’s really special about this recording.

This is an organ that physically shows you how to play. You play too fast, you’re made at the right tempo – that’s a wonderful thing about mechanical action: you can actually control the speed of air that comes through the pipes. And I think in the Reubke sonata this forces you to play at the right tempo because otherwise the organ will effectively just say ‘no’ to you.

I wanted to record the work there because of the unique clarity of the sound. It’s very similar in some ways to the organ that Reubke would have performed this work on in Merseburg Cathedral.

The acoustic is so boomy, but our sound engineer Mike Hatch, whom I believe to be an absolute genius, captures both the sense of space and the instrument’s essential clarity

You sit at the organ and you suddenly realise that all the stops are such a long way away from you. Especially in the Reubke sonata I had to have someone either side of me pulling them because it’s physically impossible to reach them!”

*Joseph Nolan’s recording on the organ of St Bavo, Haarlem, for Signum will be reviewed next issue*