

On recording the Christian Müller organ at Sint Bavokerk, Haarlem – some personal observations

Joseph Nolan

I am very pleased to have been invited to write about my experiences recording my tenth organ disc for Signum Records at St Bavo, Haarlem.

The history of the 1735-8 Christian Müller organ is very well documented in print and online, so I will focus on the choice of repertoire for the disk and my personal observations regarding the physicality of playing this historic instrument.

The recording nights were booked in for the 26th and 27th September 2017 with two earlier opportunities for rehearsal on the 24th and 25th September. Whilst waiting at the church entrance for the first rehearsal with my travelling companions, David and Fo Mason, we observed what a pretty city Haarlem is, with a bustling alfresco restaurant scene surrounding the Church.

The organ's custodian, Anton Pauw, welcomed us and proved throughout the whole experience to be a delightful host. We walked around from the kitchen street entrance into the nave of the church presenting the us with the first view of the organ. The sheer magnificence of the case was breathtaking. Despite the organ case being cited as the most photographed in the world, and a case I had seen in pictures many times, nothing quite prepares you for its sheer scale when stood before it.

We were then not surprised to climb a great many stairs to reach the organ loft. Red was the prevailing colour in the loft, with the large black organ stops on square shanks, the whole effect was striking. The keyboards and pedal board look, as you would expect, very 'used' and historical. I anticipated correctly, that it would be heavy to play once all the keyboards were coupled together.

The first night of rehearsal was spent

exploring the sounds of the organ and Anton Pauw was very helpful at explaining which stops were original and then with regard to the rebuild by Marcussen between 1959 and 1961 which I understand was to take the organ back to more of its original state. Additional voicing was undertaken between 1987 and 2000 by Flentrop.

It is not my place as guest and newcomer to the organ at St Bavo to enter into debate re its history or aesthetics. However, from the console at least, the organ sounds very different to how it speaks into the nave, so the console headphones which were linked up to nave microphones were very helpful and revealing.

With regard to the speech of the organ, it was very immediate and the clarity of the pipework was outstanding, even in a perilously lively acoustic. Balancing the manuals against each other and then the pedals was clearly going to be an issue as proved in the Bach 'Nun Komm der Heiden Heiland' BWV 659 and the trio 'Jesus Christus Unser Heiland' BWV 688.

This leads me onto my choice of repertoire, perhaps an element that is almost as important as the playing itself. I think many organ music lovers would concede that the CD marketplace is a very crowded one, with a great deal of the repertoire having been recorded many times. Inevitably, this state of affairs also leads to the feeling of having to 'find an angle' that ensures the disk will attract the attention of magazines, reviewers and the public, without losing a sense of artistic integrity

I felt that my last disc for Signum



'Midnight at St Etienne' achieved this synergy, but the link to Duruflé afforded me a great deal of scope. The theme at St Bavo was not quite so obvious with Bach, Buxtehude and Mendelssohn already being well represented in the organ discography. An organ favourites disc was a nonstarter and the contemplated disc of contemporary Dutch organ music was considered to be too hard a sell for a commercially viable recording.

I began to ponder if the Reubke Sonata, a veritable warhorse for the organ, had been recorded at St Bavo. Given the scale of the work, which I felt matched the gargantuan proportions of the building and organ, I felt it was an exciting possibility. Signum and I have researched the annals of released recordings of the Reubke Sonata from St Bavo on a professional label, but, as yet, have been unable to unearth one. We are not claiming the first professional recording status (on an acknowledged label) of the



The organ of St Bavokerk, Haarlem

Reubke at St Bavo, as we cannot confirm this with absolute certainty. However the claim appears reasonable as our research efforts have not found one to date.

It is not over egging the pudding to say that recording the Reubke at St Bavo presented several significant challenges. The most obvious is that the keyboards sometimes ran out of compass and a few notes are omitted or, as in one passage in the middle section, it had to be played entirely down the octave. The manuals, when coupled together, did indeed require a strong technique, especially when facile finger work was required. There is no Barker lever mechanism to help the player at St Bavo as at Merseburg Cathedral!

Managing and coordinating the registration and registrants on either side of me was also a major difficulty, especially maintaining the timing of additions or subtractions of many stops, spread out widely and horizontally, in different takes. Jeroen Koopman and David Mason did a wonderful job in this regard and it goes without saying that I fundamentally had to play the Reubke from memory in order to coordinate the music with the registrants. Every stop has been given a number as reading the stop names are difficult for the registrants to see. They sit below the stops so are more easily read by the player whose eye level is well below that of the standing registrants.

A lesson was taught to me at St Bavo that I had experienced to some extent on the great Cavaillé-Coll instruments in France recording my Widor cycle for Signum Records. This lesson is that such historical instruments teach and inform the organist as they play and not vice versa. The most potent form of this type of organic control from an organ had been at St Sulpice, Paris, but this 'control of the player by the

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organ' took on a whole new meaning at St Bavo. Anything that was too fast just sounded and felt terribly wrong, and it is a matter of interest that my interpretation of the Reubke from St Bavo is over two and a half minutes longer than my first recording of the work from Ripon Cathedral in 2001.

Grammy award winning engineer, Mike Hatch, has done his usual superlative job with the placing of the microphones and to my ears at least, the detail is clearly audible without losing the immense sense of space and acoustic of the Church. Listening to the edits through to the final mix, I would like to think the Reubke is very convincing from St Bavo and offers something new and interesting for the avid organ enthusiast and general listener alike. Thomas Trotter's fabulous recording for Decca is, obviously, a benchmark in terms of historical performance practise with the recording utilising the Ladegast organ of Merseburg Cathedral where Reubke himself gave the first performance of the 94th Psalm.

I also greatly enjoy the wonderful recorded performances by Roger Fisher and Simon Preston at Chester Cathedral and Westminster Abbey respectively. However, like Ripon Cathedral, there is an argument to be made that the colour and actions of these organs are not really authentic in terms of historical performance practise. This is all rather akin to whether you should play Widor on anything else that is not a Cavaillé-Coll, but Widor clearly did perform his music on other organs – I am now opening up Pandora's box of course and a deluge of letters to the Editor of the Organ Magazine!

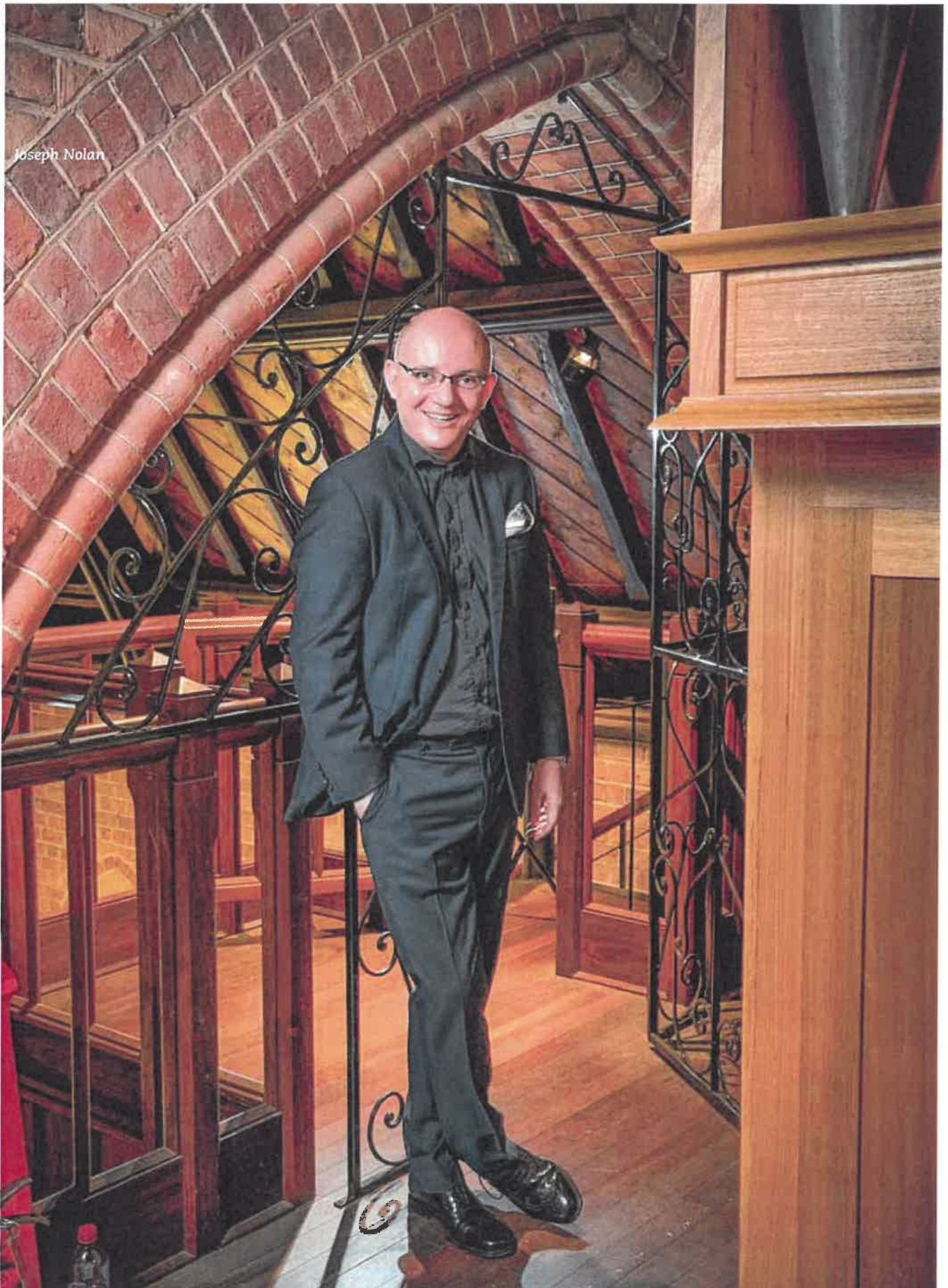
Although there are many differences in terms of registration and colour used

between St Bavo and Ladegast, St Bavo exudes a great sense of history, scale and clarity in its speech, especially in the dense contrapuntal lines. Beauty of tone is also to be found in the more lyrical and evocative moments of the Reubke, and I hope that this recording at least stimulates interest and considered dialogue even if some do not like either the interpretation or feel I have taken a misguided step in the first place.

I felt it was only logical to keep the surrounding programme Germanic, although the transcription of Bach's famous Chaconne in D Minor is by a Frenchman, Henri Messerer. Colour and clarity are again the bywords here and the organ of St Bavo is naturally so majestic which is so in keeping with the music's main motif and overarching musical plan. Managing the registrants successfully was again an issue throughout this work with its many changes of mood and dynamic colour.

Buxtehude is represented by his compact, but very attractive, Toccata and Fugue in F Major BUX 147 which suited the organ very well. Bach's chorale prelude on 'Nun Komm der Heiden Heiland' BWV 659 and the trio 'Jesus Christus Unser Heiland' BWV 688, though also well suited to the organ and being attractive examples of Bach's work, were actually very challenging to balance successfully. I was very keen on utilising the famous cornet on the Rugpositief with an added tremulant and the pedal 16' and 8' flues worked well, but I could not really find a 8' flue or principal that was clear or loud enough to balance against the prominent cornet in the Rugpositief forward case. In the end I had to add a 4' octave on the Hoofdwerk (second manual). This sounded 'all wrong' at the console, but worked in the nave.

The trio 'Jesus Christus unser Heiland' BWV 688 also presented issues of balance as I felt the cantus firmus heard in the pedal needed to be strong and present given the meaning of the text (I used the Schalmei coupled down



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to the pedal from the Bovenwerk-the top manual). The RH 8' and 2' on the Rugpositief (bottom manual) worked

well, but finding the clarity and matching volume in the Hoofdwerk was also more difficult than you might

imagine. The three independent voices also seemed to speak at different times, so co-ordination was also an issue, especially when trying to keep the articulation and phrasing logical.

Mendelssohn's masterpiece, his Sonata No 6 in D Minor for organ based on 'Vater unser im Himmelreich' seemed to fit like a glove at St Bavo (which Mendelssohn himself played) and balanced the programme of the disc well. The Sonata calls for an organ of beauty, grandeur, depth and well-balanced sounds, and in this repertoire the organ of St Bavo delivered effortlessly.

I have listened to the disc many times from first edit to the final mix, and it is without doubt that the organ is the star of the show. To conclude, the experience was an immense privilege and I am very grateful to Anton Pauw and the City of Haarlem for being granted permission to record at St Bavo. Additional thanks go to my registrants, Jerome and David, and to recording engineer Mike Hatch and producer, Tim Oldham. Special thanks go to the MD of Signum Records, Steve Long, for his unerring support of me and my career. ■

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