

# The giant awakes

The renovation of York Minster's famous organ has sought to recapture its late-romantic opulence. **Chris Bragg** assesses the result

Like so many Brits bitten by the organ bug, I listened frequently as a child to Francis Jackson's famous EMI recording of Norman Cocker's *Tuba Tune*, the York Tuba Mirabilis obliterating all around it. Visiting the Minster at the tender age of five and gazing at the organ, shrouded in plastic following the lightning strike of the previous year, was a particular formative thrill. Following Harrison & Harrison's

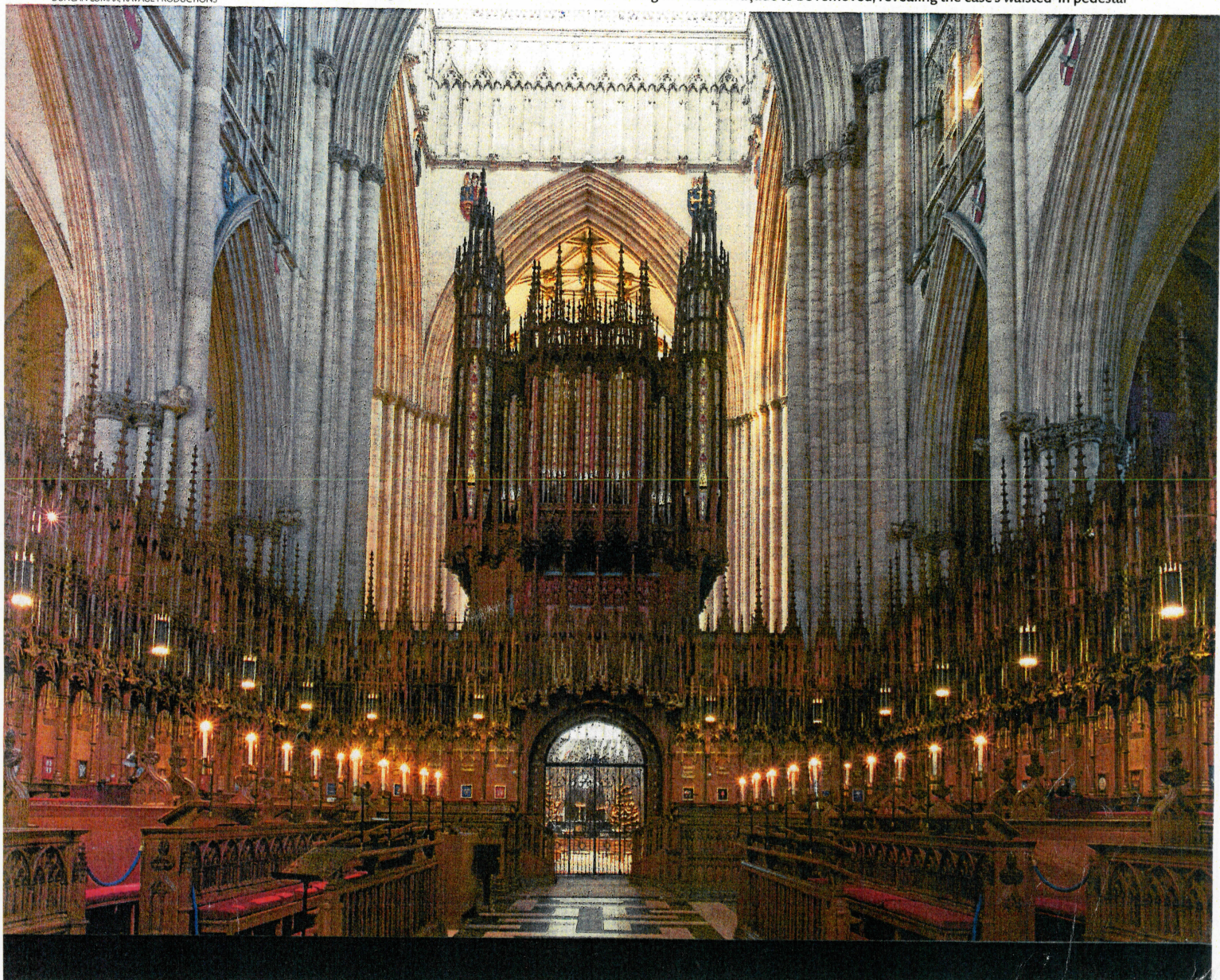
recent rebuilding, that same organ has taken on an altogether more exciting persona, rooted both in the more remarkable achievements of imperial English organ building and in the unique hurdles any organ in that mighty space has to overcome.

For York is a particularly difficult building to fill with organ sound, especially if the source of that sound is a single instrument located east of the crossing.

The challenges posed by the lantern and transepts, especially when accompanying congregational singing in the nave, prompted Elliot and Hill, at the instigation of John Camidge following an act of organ-induced arson in 1829, to build an organ on a hitherto unknown scale in England. In doing so, extensive – and inevitably futile – levels of duplication were employed, together with some wild experimentation as ▶

DUNCAN LOMAX, RAVAGE PRODUCTIONS

▼ The resiting of the Solo has allowed the curtains along the eastern façade to be removed, revealing the case's wasted-in pedestal





## York Minster

HARRISON & HARRISON (2021)

**PEDAL**

1.	a	Double Open Wood	32
2.	a	Double Open Diapason	32
3.	h	Open Wood I	16
4.	a/c	Open Wood II (from 1)	16
5.	c	Open Diapason	16
6.	e	Violone	16
7.	c	Sub Bass	16
8.	c	Gamba	16
9.	h	Octave Wood (from 3)	8
10.	d	Principal	8
11.	g	Flute	8
12.	g	Fifteenth	4
13.	f/h	Mixture (12.17.19.22)	IV
14.	h	Double Ophicleide (from 16)	32
15.	c	Double Trombone (from 17)	32
16.	e	Ophicleide	16
17.	c	Trombone	16
18.	g	Fagotto	16
19.	e	Posaune (from 16)	8
20.	g	Trumpet	8
21.	h	Clarion (from 16)	4

I Choir to Pedal II Great to Pedal III Swell to Pedal  
IV Solo to Pedal V Pedal Divide

**CHOIR**

22.	b/c	Lieblich Bourdon	16
23.	b	Open Diapason	8
24.	b/c	Lieblich Gedackt	8
25.	c	Gamba	8
26.	b	Gemshorn	4
27.	b	Claribel Flute	4
28.	b/f	Nazard	2 <sup>2/3</sup>
29.	g	Flautina	2
30.	b/f	Tierce	1 <sup>3/5</sup>
31.	g/h	Mixture (15.19.22)	III

VI Tremulant  
VII Octaves Alone VIII Solo to Choir  
IX Swell to Choir X Choir and Great exchange

**GREAT**

32.	b/c	Double Open Diapason	16
33.	b/c	Double Stopped Diapason	16
34.	h	Open Diapason I	8
35.	d	Open Diapason II	8
36.	c	Open Diapason III	8
37.	b	Open Diapason IV	8
38.	b	Salicional	8
39.	c	Hohl Flute	8
40.	b	Stopped Diapason	8
41.	d	Octave	4
42.	b	Principal	4
43.	c	Harmonic Flute	4
44.	c	Octave Quint	2 <sup>2/3</sup>
45.	d	Super Octave	2
46.	h	Harmonics (17.19.21.22)	IV
47.	d	Mixture (15.19.22)	III
48.	h	Mixture (15.19.22.26.29)	V
49.	c	Contra Posaune	16
50.	c	Posaune	8
51.	h	Clarion	4
52.	c/d	Tromba	8
53.	c/d	Octave Tromba	4

XI Posaunes on Choir XII Posaunes on Pedal XIII Trombas on Choir  
XIV Trombas on Solo  
XV Choir to Great XVI Swell to Great XVII Solo to Great

**SWELL**

54.	b/c	Bourdon	16
55.	b	Open Diapason	8
56.	c	Violin Diapason	8
57.	b/c	Rohr Flute	8
58.	c	Echo Gamba	8
59.	c	Voix Céleste (low A)	8
60.	c	Principal	4
61.	c	Wald Flute	4
62.	b	Fifteenth	2
63.	c	Mixture (15.19.22)	III
64.	b/c	Dulciana Mixture (19.22.26)	III
65.	c	Double Trumpet	16
66.	c	Trumpet	8
67.	c	Horn	8
68.	c	Oboe	8
69.	b	Clarion	4

XVIII Tremulant  
XIX Octave XX Unison Off XXI Sub Octave XXII Solo to Swell

**SOLO**

(70-81 enclosed)			
70.	c	Echo Dulciana	8
71.	e	Viole d'Orchestre	8
72.	g	Viole Céleste (low A)	8
73.	c/h	Harmonic Flute	8
74.	c	Concert Flute	4
75.	h	Harmonic Piccolo	2
76.	c	Bassoon	16
77.	h	Clarinet	8
78.	c	Orchestral Oboe	8
79.	c	Vox Humana	8
XXIII Tremulant			
80.	c	Contra Tuba	16
81.	c	Tuba	8
82.	d	Tuba Mirabilis	8

XXIV Octave XXV Unison Off XXVI Sub Octave  
XXVII Enclosed Solo on Swell

**Combination couplers**

XXVIII Great and Pedal Combinations Coupled  
XXIX Generals on Swell foot pistons  
XXX West shutters On

**Accessories**

Eight foot pistons to each of the Pedal and Swell  
Reversible foot pistons to II, XXVII; 15  
Eight thumb pistons to each of the Choir, Great, Swell and Solo  
Reversible thumb pistons to I - IV, VIII, IX, XV - XVII, XXII, XXVII; 1  
Eight general pistons and general cancel  
Stepper, operating general pistons in sequence  
16 divisional and 999 general memory levels  
Balanced expression pedals to the Swell and Solo

**Origins of pipework**

a 1834 Elliot & Hill  
b 1859 William Hill & Son  
c 1903 J W Walker & Sons  
d 1917 Harrison & Harrison  
e 1931 Harrison & Harrison  
f 1960 J W Walker & Sons  
g 1993 Principal Pipe Organs  
h 2020 Harrison & Harrison

The manual compass is 58 notes; the pedal 30 notes.  
The key actions are electro-pneumatic.  
Adviser: Ian Bell





DUNCAN LONAX, RAVAGE PRODUCTIONS

▲ The screen console

◀ the shortcomings of the insular movement gave way to the Gauntlett-et-al-inspired German revolution. In 1859, Hill returned to rebuild and rationalise. Nevertheless, just four years later, a second Hill organ was installed in the nave. With son Thomas now in partnership, this was undoubtedly significantly more accomplished (and loud). It survives, partly altered, in the church of St Thomas and St John in Radcliffe, Manchester.

In 1903 a technically new organ, largely in the existing case and with pneumatic key action, was built by J.W. Walker in their distinctive version of the imperial style. Much Hill material was rescaled and recycled, although the façade pipes were silenced, Walker's flue basses being housed within the case to the detriment of tonal egress. From the outset, the organ was warmly received: smooth, refined, and with a pedal division which elicited particular admiration. Its impact in the nave, however, was evidently meagre. In 1904 the influential writer on organ design Colonel George

Dixon, in a slightly tawdry article in *Musical Opinion*, even reported that despite the console of the screen organ being relocated to the south (it returned to the east in 1960), thus enabling the accompaniment of singers both to the east and west, the nave organ remained in use.<sup>1</sup> Its departure to Manchester followed, nevertheless, the following year.

## Finally, York Minster has an organ whose gesture parallels the space it inhabits

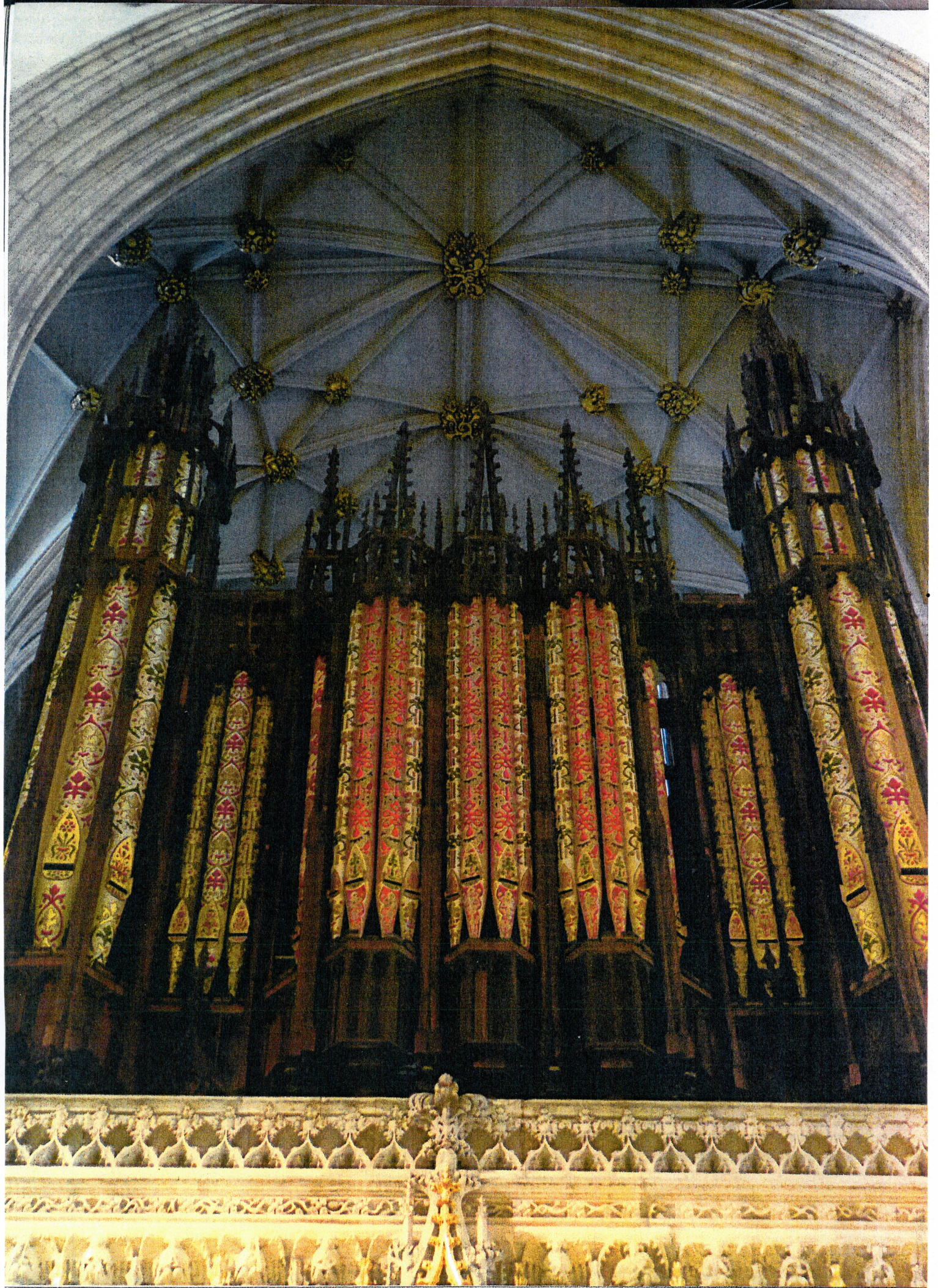
This incarnation didn't last long, with the arrival in 1913 of Edward Bairstow bringing Arthur Harrison to York. His first intervention, four years later, sought to remedy the Walker organ's perceived shortcomings. The Great high-pressure chorus was largely replaced, voiced on 7", with a new 'harmonics' mixture and a heroic, leathery Open Diapason no.1. The Great trumpets became trombas, initially on 12", and the famous Tuba Mirabilis, its horizontal resonators mounted in the base

of the case facing west following Bairstow's experiment with a human trumpeter, made its entrance. In 1930 Harrison returned to complete the job; the action electrified, the Great trombas' pressure further increased to 15" and the Walker tubas enclosed in the enlarged Solo box on 20" (previously 12"). The pedal gained a 16ft/8ft/4ft Ophicleide

unit sharing the pressure, and the clout, of the Tuba Mirabilis. 'Mr Harrison would like a more powerful 32ft reed,' reported Reginald Whitworth in *The Organ*.<sup>2</sup> He would have to wait.

Given the historical narrative around the organ's impact to the west, Walkers' 1960 project, under the auspices of Francis Jackson, the necessary mechanical renewal notwithstanding, seems curious indeed. Sixty years on, it's difficult for organists of my generation to fully understand how ▶







◀ the mid-century reform dynamics were experienced by English players. Fashion was surely at play, but fashion tinged with received dogmatic ideal nevertheless. Writing in *Musical Opinion* in 1964, Jackson refers to a 'Damascene moment' on encountering modern Danish organ building during a recital tour in 1955. 'I see no reason,' he writes, 'why a sympathetically voiced baroque organ, totally unenclosed, could not cope with an English service... We are so used to the swell pedal and inter-manual couplers, but we are not yet used to the subtleties of classical voicing which make the swell box all but redundant.'<sup>3</sup> It seems especially telling that, writing in *The Organ*, Jackson frames the changes entirely in the context of the organ reform's preoccupations, quoting Albert Schweitzer's writings on the ideal Bach organ. The comparative lack of liturgical activity in the nave at the time must be acknowledged when Jackson reports the Ophicleide, Open Wood and Open Diapason no.1 as

having fallen into disuse. But it is surely also indicative of his being torn between inherited tradition and the prevailing 'Neue Sachlichkeit': 'Had we any need to worry about clarity of counterpoint so long as there was enough volume available for a good crescendo?' he asks rhetorically.<sup>4</sup> The Open Wood dutifully departed, as did the Open Diapason no.1 (migrating to the pedal on the Open Wood's chest). The Great high-pressure chorus was reduced to just 4<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>", with the trombas, whose 1917 pressure of 12" had proved inadequate, revoiced on the same pressure. The Ophicleide was reduced in pressure from 25" to a mere 6". The Choir's Dulciana Mixture became a Cymbal, the Solo Clarinet a Crumhorn. Only the swell remained comparatively intact.

If the result of this operation was to render the organ, once again, ineffective in the nave, it was nonetheless the organ on which Jackson made the famous recordings which, I suspect, imprinted the 'York sound' in the collective subconscious of many reading

this article. Indeed, the internationally popular legacy of those LPs (and the music conceived by Jackson for the organ) could easily have become a preoccupation for those planning the recent reconstruction by Harrison & Harrison. Instead, associative value has been firmly pushed to the side in favour of a unifying concept rooted in the physical fact of the organ's core material. This represents a brave decision, quite at odds with recent projects elsewhere (Selby Abbey, for example) but those responsible have been more than vindicated.

In appearance, the organ presents a much happier vista than previously. The collapsing 1830s case pipes have been restored visually, as well as to speech, stabilised at the foot, cleaned, and retouched in matching oil paints by Robert Woodland. The pipes in the corner towers, however, were deemed to be beyond redemption and have been replaced with exact copies. More impressively, the resiting of the Solo box in the base of Robert Smirke's case, from its previous position on ▶

◀ Old and new: restored front pipes and replica corner tower pipes in the west façade HARRISON & HARRISON

▼ (l to r) The reconstituted trombas on the upper Great soundboard; the Solo, now located in the lower part of the case, with the new Clarinet nearest the passage board





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▲ The 1830s case pipes have been restored both visually and to speech

◁ the north side of the pulpitum, has allowed the removal of the curtains which obscured the impost along the eastern façade. As a result, the upward contour from the case's lower pedestal has been revealed. Light from the west window now peeks round into the quire, somewhat freeing a case characterised by Nicholas Thistlethwaite as 'unenterprising and cumbersome'<sup>25</sup> from its previously dumpy appearance. The combined effect of bringing the Solo into the case, the return of the 1903 Walker 32/16ft Trombone to the north quire aisle from the south transept and the metal pedal Open Diapason across the south aisle, where it once again finds itself adjacent to the Double Open Diapason, has been to make the organ more compact and more focused, while the return of the case pipes to speech has obviated the need for Walker's internal flue basses, to the benefit of the organ's layout and projection. A glance inside reveals meticulous planning, as well as the ubiquity of the man-made wood substitutes now common currency in Durham in the pursuit of mechanical reliability.

Following extensive research (including

much study of private pre-1960 recordings) by Robert Sharpe, director of music since 2008, the decision was taken to restore to the organ the sounds by which Arthur Harrison gave it its impact in the nave: the trombas on 15", the gargantuan Pedal Open Wood I (with its 8ft extension) and the Great high-pressure chorus. Experiments in 2012, returning the Harrison 4ft, 2ft Super Octave and the lower three ranks of the Mixture, a separate stop since 1960, to the higher pressure of 7" prompted much excitement and pointed the way forward. In addition, and especially bravely, the organ has regained that leathered Open Diapason no. 1, on the same pressure. As much as increasing the organ's presence beyond the lantern, it acts as a telling binding agent. The three-rank mixture has been retained as a separate stop, joined by a new harmonics mixture, with the peculiar and wonderful zing of its flattened 21st, and a further, grand five-rank quint mixture. The resulting chorus is courageous indeed: hardly subtle, but subtle was hardly called for. The reconstituted Great trombas, meanwhile, have a pealing, almost Willis-like quality, perhaps a nod to

Bairstow's taste, or a particular solution to the challenges of the space. On the pedal, 'Mr Harrison's more powerful 32ft reed' has finally been realised, with the Ophicleide unit, returned to its original pressure, receiving its cataclysmic 32ft octave. The 1960 Mixture has been partially retained but with an added twelfth and tierce orphaned during the recent rebuild at King's College, Cambridge. The resulting composition matches Arthur Harrison's equivalent stop at Westminster Abbey. On the Solo, the new Clarinet and harmonic flute chorus (the 8ft having become a Chimney Flute in 1960, the 2ft entirely new) are symptomatic of the accomplished ear of voicer Andrew Scott, who was able, uniquely, to work unfettered during the day as lockdown forced an otherwise unwelcome silence.

The only real concessions to the peculiarities of the organ's previous incarnation are found on the Choir, where the mutations frequently required in Jackson's music have remained. The Nazard, of wood, is actually Hill's Suabe Flute transposed, the Tierce in metal, formerly the Dulciana. Having lost the Great mutations, Cornet and Sesquialtera tacked on during a somewhat unhappy operation in 1993, their retention is defensible, but it would be hard to argue that they contribute to the organ's overwhelmingly orchestral opulence. The 1993 Mixture, which replaced the 1960 Cymbal, has been partially recomposed, rather than – as in 1930 – duplicating the Swell's reconstituted Dulciana Mixture, a stop which provides a telling, colourful definition whether used conventionally or with the strings.

The greatest surprise has been the effect of additional shutters added to the west side of the swell box. With the Great and Swell soundboards running east/west, the south-facing Swell shutters spread diffused sound effectively to the east. The additional shutters have given the Swell perhaps 40 per cent more presence in the nave. Bairstow's love of using the Open Diapason as a solo stop with the tremulant (made possible once again by the provision of tremulants on both pressures) is all the more lovely when heard from the west, where the extent to which Swell and Solo can be used interchangeably (one accompanying the other) is unexpected and ripe with possibilities.





# Freestyle

BY GRAEME KAY

The worst – and best – of international reviewing

There's a real sense in which, finally, York Minster has an organ whose gesture parallels the space it inhabits, dominating the nave perhaps to a greater extent than at any time. The legendary Tuba Mirabilis no longer dwarfs the remainder of the tutti, but rather emerges as the entirely logical denouement of a crescendo coloured by increasingly noble reeds of similar hue. But while this new-found firepower was surely the point (and a post-pandemic Christmas Eve with 2,500 voices is eagerly anticipated), what is especially fascinating here is the extent to which the organ's embodying of the manner of cathedral music-making during the interbellum, by figures such as Bairstow, has been emulated so extensively. This is now one of the England's great ultra-late romantic organs, free from fashionable compromise and, as such, proposing a new path for many a much rebuilt cathedral organ in the future. York's singularity of voice, characterised by the uniquely dark, throaty core of Walker's pepper-pot reeds, its seamless and vast dynamic spectrum and highly sophisticated breadth of colour, are testament to the rigour and single-mindedness of Robert Sharpe, whose legacy will be an organ his successors will surely leave well alone. Go and listen for yourself. It's a triumph. ■

## References

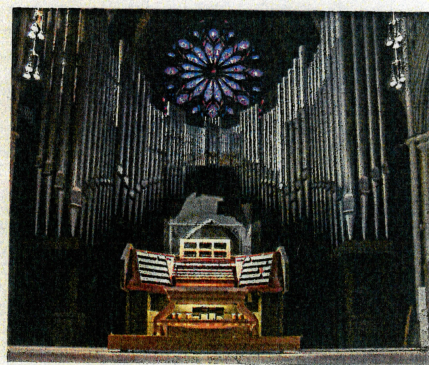
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4. Jackson, Francis: 'York Minster, 1960, and Schweitzer', *The Organ* vol.XXXX (July 1960), p.24.
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Chris Bragg studied organ at the former RSAMD, and the Conservatories of Amsterdam and Utrecht. He is head of programming at the University of St Andrews Music Centre, artistic director of St Andrews Organ Week, and a freelance organist, teacher, writer and translator.

The opportunity to review Christopher Herrick's *Northern Lights* CD recorded in Nidaros Cathedral (see next issue) reminded me of my own trip to Trondheim to cover the organ festival held there in November 2014. Recalling four decades of feature-writing and reviewing at home and abroad, some trips are best forgotten... Oh, all right, the absolute nadir was being sent an invitation to review a performance of *La bohème* at a new theatre in West Palm Beach, Florida. This was years before anyone on this side of the Pond had heard of Donald Trump much, let alone Mar-a-Lago, although I doubt Palm Beach Opera would have been on the former president's radar, even in such close proximity to his (now) home. Anyway, I turned up at Heathrow the day before the gig, only to discover at check-in that the opera company's press office had cheese-pared the invitation to the extent of issuing only a stand-by ticket for the flight, which was routed to Palm Beach via Miami. I couldn't get on the first flight; the second flight was cancelled because the aircraft was faulty; I managed to get on a third flight, but as we passed over the Atlantic, the eastern seaboard of the US was hit by its worst winter storm in living memory, and all flights were being diverted to ... Miami. As I landed, my connecting flight for the short hop to Palm Beach (the last of the day) was taking off... It got worse. Because scores of extra flights were arriving, there were no hotel beds in Miami; and no hire cars, even if one were prepared to risk a road journey knowing that instantly recognisable hire-car plates were being targeted by homicidal bandits in the hinterlands of the city (this is not an exaggeration). So I had to spend the night in the airport, awaiting the first morning flight out. They had run out of blankets for the legions of the displaced, so I lay down with hundreds of others and my luggage. Sleep was impossible because every single minute of the night (again, no exaggeration), the tannoy blared one of two messages: 'BING BONG! Do not leave luggage unattended in this facility.' As if. And, 'BING BONG! Federal regulations prohibit the use of smoking materials in this facility.' I got to my hotel in Palm Beach about 11am, had a couple of hours' kip and as I left for the theatre, it snowed. Later, I pointed out to a shopkeeper that his postcard of Palm Beach, showing a beach and a palm, lacked any authentic snow. He took my card away and grinningly returned a few moments later having added some daubs from a bottle of Sno-Pake. Recognising that, in my jet-lagged condition, the combination of Puccini's music, a warm theatre and dim lighting would make wakefulness an impossibility, I resolved to prop my eyelids open with matchsticks, make notes on the first two minutes of each act and allow fate to take its course. And you think these trips are just junkets?

By contrast, apart from the eye-watering cost of living, Trondheim was one of the best trips ever. Being part of full and enthusiastic houses for organ and choral concerts and services in Nidaros Cathedral and other churches in the city was uplifting beyond measure. There are few ancient church buildings in the world where the west end is so completely and successfully defined, architecturally, by a modern organ; here, the free-standing Steinmeyer instrument with its arched construction of exposed pipes cradles both the cathedral's rose window and any musical activity which takes place within its embrace. Nidaros's multiple choirs, full of a great diversity of young people, gladdened the heart, and to hear one such ensemble perform a demanding programme culminating in Schoenberg's *Friede auf Erden*, sung from memory, was an utterly moving and unforgettable experience. I can't wait to go back. ■

Graeme Kay is a digital platforms producer for BBC Radio 3 and 4.



▲ The pride of Trondheim – Nidaros Cathedral's Steinmeyer organ