

Restoring the sleeping giant

Benjamin Saunders

Background

Leeds Cathedral serves one of the larger Roman Catholic dioceses in England, comprising all of West Yorkshire, and extending to include parishes in the East Riding, North Yorkshire, Greater Manchester and Lancashire. Within the Diocese are some of Britain's main population centres: the cities of Leeds and Bradford as well as other significant areas such as Wakefield, Dewsbury,

Huddersfield, Halifax, Harrogate and Ripon. Musically, the Cathedral is the centre of the largest choral outreach programme in the UK, with some 1,300 children singing on a weekly basis, and is one of only three English Catholic cathedrals to maintain daily sung services of Vespers and Mass. A central location coupled with wonderful acoustics makes for a dramatic liturgical setting and also an attractive concert venue within the city.

The large worshipping congregation means that Leeds is the second busiest Catholic cathedral in the UK, after Westminster.

The first St Anne's in Leeds was raised to Cathedral status in 1878, but was purchased and demolished by the city council in 1901 in order to make street improvements. The three-manual Abbott & Smith organ from this building was moved to All Saints' Church, Ealing Common, and survives to this day in a



Simon Vine Photography Leeds

The East End of the Cathedral, looking slightly north, where four divisions of the organ are located. (The other three divisions are in the South Triforium.)

Leeds Cathedral specification

I. NAVE GREAT C-a3			III. CHORAL SWELL C-a3			IV. NAVE SWELL C-a3			IV. NAVE SOLO C-a3		
Double Open Diapason	16	1904	Rohr Flute	8	1904	Bourdon	16	1904	Tuba	8	1963
Open Diapason I	8	1904	Salcional	8	1904	Geigen Principal	8	1904	Octave Tuba	4	1963
Open Diapason II	8	1904	Viole Céleste	8	2010	Lieblich Gedeckt	8	1904	Solo Flute	8	2010
Hohl Flute	8	1904	Principal	8	2010	Gamba	8	1904	Clarinet	8	1904
Principal	4	1904	Flauto Traverso	4	1904	Voix Céleste	8	1904	CHORAL PEDAL C-fl		
Harmonic Flute	4	1904	Mixture	III	2010	Gemshorn	4	1904	Sub Bass	16	2010
Fifteenth	2	1904	Cornopear	8	2010	Lieblich Flöte	4	1904	NAVE PEDAL C-fl		
Mixture	III	1904	Oboe d'Amour	8	2010	Mixture	III	1904	Harmonic Bass	32	1904
Trumpet	8	1904	Tremulant			Double Trumpet	16	1904	Open Diapason	16	1904
II. CHORAL GREAT C-a3			Sub Octave			Horn	8	1904	Violone	16	1904
Open Diapason	8	2010	Super Octave			Oboe	8	1904	Bourdon	16	1904
Bourdon	8	2010	Unison Off			Vox Humana	8	1904	Quint Bass	10 ² / ₃	2010
Dulciana	8	1904				Tremulant			Octave	8	1904
Principal	8	2010				Sub Octave			Bass Flute	8	1904
Flute	4	2010				Super Octave			Trombone	16	1904
Gemshorn	2	2010				Unison Off					
Cornetto	III	2010									

Couplers		Combination couplers and exchanges	
Choral Great to Nave Great	Solo to II	Nave Great & Pedal Pistons combined	
Nave Great to Choral Great	Solo to III	Choral Great & Pedal Pistons combined	
Choral Swell to I	Choral Great to Pedal	Generals on Swell Toes	
Choral Swell to II	Nave Great to Pedal	Swells on III	
Choral Swell to Nave Swell	Choral Swell to Pedal	Exchange Swells	
Nave Swell to I	Nave Swell to Pedal	Exchange Greats	
Nave Swell to II	Solo to Pedal		
Solo to I			

rebuilt form.

The new Cathedral of 1904 was designed by John Henry Eastwood and is situated on a very central site near to the Town Hall, museums and commercial areas. A new organ was built by Norman & Beard to a specification of the then organist, Arthur Grimshaw (son of the famous painter John Atkinson Grimshaw), and was also installed in 1904.

A splendid tradition of liturgical music centred on Gregorian chant sung by boys and men survived at the Cathedral until the early 1960s. As in most Catholic churches, the period following the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) was characterised by the wilful destruction of much musical heritage, and Leeds was sadly typical in witnessing the disbandment of the boys' choir, the re-ordering of the sanctuary without choir stalls, and the neglect of the organ.

In 1988, Bishop Konstant decided to appoint a full time Director of Music and to re-establish a boys' choir. This key decision provided the groundwork upon which a strong musical foundation could develop. As the space for the choir in the sanctuary had been lost in the 1960s reordering, the choir was relegated to a transept and an electronic organ used to accompany the voices. The first such instrument was a prototype computer

organ, developed by Peter and Lucy Comerford at Bradford University. This was succeeded by a second British electronic organ, this time from Phoenix Organs. Meanwhile, the original pipe organ was forgotten, sleeping through the subsequent decades unplayed, but crucially in a largely unaltered condition from 1904.

In 2005, a decision was made under the new Bishop, Arthur Roche, to close the Cathedral for one year to enable a full restoration of the Arts and Crafts interior and to reorder the sanctuary, including the provision of choir stalls at the east end. This major work provided the opportunity to reconsider the need for a pipe organ in the building.

Many organ schemes

The history of the ideas for restoring, replacing or changing the Cathedral organ dates back to the late 1980s and could warrant a dedicated feature in itself! Over the course of 25 years, the archives show that many eminent organ builders and expert consultants contributed various schemes. None of these came to fruition. It is not a great exaggeration to say that plans have been drawn up for an organ of almost every conceivable type and located in almost every possible part of the building. These well meaning attempts

were a response to a space that has posed many challenges to those concerned with its liturgical music, and also reflect different approaches to ecclesiastical organ design.

In some early schemes a new mechanical action organ was deemed the only sensible option, driven by the arguments that the long term maintenance costs would be reduced and the playing experience might be more satisfactory. Ideas ranged from the architecturally eccentric – the erection of a disproportionately large gallery at the west end to house both choir and organ; or the removal of the east end reredos to be replaced by an organ – to the technologically bold – an organ in the triforium whereby the triforium wall would be removed to accommodate a 'crow's nest' for the player; or an organ on both sides of the triforium with a console at ground level with an 'experimentally long' action running up to each side. Most of these were rejected on the grounds that they were unacceptable in a listed building, or that they would not best serve the liturgical function of the organ, or might even not work reliably. Less disruptive use of mechanical action was also proposed using the 1904 organ chamber, but such are the logistics in this area, that the resulting indirect action

would have been at best heavy, and at worst unplayable.

An advanced scheme had also been drawn up for a large French Classical style instrument – possibly an imaginative incongruity for an Edwardian West Yorkshire building! Further proposals had suggested combining the pipe and electronic organs together, or rebuilding the Norman and Beard instrument as a giant extension instrument. Redundant organs were also considered, including some famous instruments in England, but such were the special demands of the site, that these plans made little progress.

The most curious of all the proposed designs seemed to be driven by superficial principles such as, ‘the Parish Church and the Town Hall don’t have Classical organs, therefore the Cathedral needs one’, or plain barmy conceptions of instruments based on stoplists, with the rationale that an organ of size X with a 32ft reed and chamades would put the Cathedral on the organ lovers’ musical map!

A fresh vision

The arrival of a new Director of Music in 2002 prompted a fresh look at the organ issue, an acceptance of realistic architectural parameters, and a degree of pragmatism in terms of finding a solution that would satisfy the liturgical demands so that progress could be made and funding secured.

The new musical team was committed to making the Cathedral significant on the national music map, but this was to be achieved through an excellent choral programme, centred on children, with a fidelity to the best traditions of the Catholic Church, in particular Gregorian chant and Roman polyphony. As the majority of this repertoire does not demand substantial organ accompaniment, any light organ tone was provided during the daily services by a three-stop Peter Collins box organ. Accompanied music of the 19th and 20th centuries, however, was

neglected, and organ support for congregational singing was inadequate. The many opportunities for organ improvisation in the liturgy were also impoverished, as was the scope for preludes and postludes.

David Sanger was appointed Cathedral organ consultant in 2003 and together with the Director of Music became convinced that the exceptional quality of the dormant 1904 instrument made the suggestion of replacing it tantamount to an act of cultural vandalism. This view was supported by organists of a sufficient age to have memories of playing it, and also by the recordings made in the Cathedral by BBC Radio 3 in the 1970s. It was decided that the Norman & Beard organ should form the basis for a new concept able to work with the new situation of the choir at the east end. The tonal vision was not to follow the well trodden path of producing yet another eclectic organ, supposedly capable of playing any repertoire, as



New pipework by Klais in the Choral Great division

such apparent versatility had too often produced bland and bloated instruments in the past. Instead, the goal was to achieve an instrument of great personality in harmony with the spirit of an Edwardian Arts and Crafts building, and within the embrace of the richness of the Catholic liturgical tradition.

This concept was put out to competitive tender and responses from major builders centred on the need to improve egress of tone into the nave from the 1904 pipework and a solution to choral accompaniment in the sanctuary.

The new organ

Schemes and submissions were received from leading organ builders in England and Europe and a critical evaluation was made of their current work. Many site visits were undertaken by the Director of Music to ascertain the quality of recent major organ projects, and the sympathy exhibited by the builders towards the historic styles. The views of the clients of these companies were also given weight, especially in the case of the organ builder's willingness to sort out any problems with a finished instrument with the minimum of fuss and avoidance of wrangling. Other areas investigated concerned the ability of a company to comfortably undertake work of this scale, keep to deadlines, its financial strength, and the historical retention rates of key members of staff such as voicers and pipemakers. The control system of the Leeds organ in terms of the console is unique, and the best creative partner in developing this part of the project was also evaluated.

The decision was finally made to engage Johannes Klais Orgelbau of Bonn. The conclusion not to use an English builder sparked a little furore among some armchair pundits; however it was not seen as significant by the Diocesan authorities. This may reflect the fact that the Catholic Church is not a national state church and that bounds of geography have less significance within the psyche and decision making process compared with the C of E.

Coincidentally, the organ that preceded Leeds in the Klais workshops was another Norman & Beard, that of Auckland Town Hall, and the workshop



The new console, showing the trapezium motif in departmental labels, music rests and key cheeks

team were able to draw usefully on this project. The Leeds instrument was removed to the workshops in Bonn in 2005 for storage whilst the Cathedral was closed for internal stone blasting, and the restoration and construction of the new sections of the organ began in 2008.

After much consultation, including a good measure of acoustic tests using both singers and instruments in different locations in the building, planning developed into its final stages. A problem with the 1904 design was that so much pipework had been crammed into too small a space. It was also very difficult to access the working components of the organ, and this was a contributing factor to its poor state of repair. The 1904 Choir organ had blocked much of the tone in the chamber as there simply wasn't enough room for it, and so it was removed entirely and its small number of stops incorporated into the new divisions.

The resulting Nave Organ is composed of the restored 1904 Pedal division (with the addition of a new Quint bass), the 1904 Great, moved much further forward to speak more directly into the building, and the 1904 Swell organ, in a new spacious box with a double set of shutters, facing south and west. All the materials that could be saved (and indeed most of it could be) from the organ were, and all the 1904 pipework was preserved with its original voicing and wind pressures. A Larigot had been added to the organ in 1960, however this was not reinstated.

Most of the new pipe work is in the Choral Organ, comprising a Great, Swell and Pedal, occupying the bays in the triforium directly over the choir stalls. The Choral Great is entirely new pipework except the Dulciana from the 1904 choir. The Choral Swell incorporates 8ft and 4ft Flutes and Gamba from 1904,

the rest is new. The Choral Pedal Subbass 16ft is also new. The original plan had been to place some solo stops in an aperture in the bell tower staircase, but acoustic tests showed that this division would be more useful and aid the tonal cohesion of the instrument if placed in the south triforium, opposite the Nave Organ.

The pipe façades of the main organ are original and have been copied in the new choral sections. It was felt that it was out of character with the subtle nature of the building's architecture to have a new flamboyant case, conservative pipe racks being more typical of Edwardian instruments.

From the point of view of the player, the organ can be thought of essentially as three instruments:

- Firstly, as an accompanying instrument for the Cathedral choirs, using the three choral divisions (Great, Swell and Pedal) and adding colour with the four nave divisions if required.
- Secondly, as an accompanying instrument for congregations or other singers in the nave using the nave divisions (Great, Swell and Pedal) with solo colours on the Solo organ and echo effects available with the choral divisions.
- Thirdly, it was desired that the instrument has unity of a single entity, using Nave and Choral Divisions together, for the authentic performance of romantic repertoire and imbuing the maximum drama to the liturgy through the tonal possibilities for improvisation.

To allow for this flexibility, whereby nave and choral organs are controlled from one console, new control concepts were devised by Benjamin Saunders to establish the rules by which the console operates. These ideas were tested and refined by many others before being put into production. Basically, the concept rejects the traditional ways of coping with an instrument with many divisions through banks of transfer stops, and replaces them with manual exchanges. The device of a manual exchange is not unique to Leeds, but the extent to which this idea is developed throughout the manuals and divisional pistons is. Basically it means

that a whole army of conceptually difficult transfer stops can be replaced by three manual exchange stops, capable of positioning the tonal resources of the organ in the physically optimal position for the player depending on the musical role the organ is performing at a given moment: accompanying a choir, a congregation or playing solo repertoire. In Leeds, the bottom two manuals control the Great organs and the top two the Swell organs. They can be exchanged between the manuals along with their divisionals and pedal couplers through the exchange stops.

The console is of an English Romantic style and the ergonomics of the stepped stop jambs, curved toe boards, toe pistons and pedal board are influenced by the console at Huddersfield Town Hall. The stopheads, department labels, thumb pistons and maker's plate were hand made by the small English firm, Thomas Harrison, and were then hand engraved by a specialist firm in Newcastle. The keys are of bone and ebony and the inlay of the console oak is ebony and swiss pear. The console reflects architectural detailing in the Cathedral, especially the predominant trapezium motif found throughout and the tooth edging design. The number of materials used is specifically limited as far as possible, and so the metal surrounds of the Swell pedals are the same material as the toe pistons and the Swell pedals themselves are made from the same material as the stop jambs. The aim is harmony without recourse to fussiness, keeping a slightly artisan feel, and softening the impact of any easily datable components, such as display screens, power switches and

midi recorders so that these can be replaced in future years without destroying the overall aesthetic. Nigel Morris of St Chad's Cathedral Birmingham was an enormous help in refining the look of the console as the project developed.

The re-installation of the organ began in June 2009, the work being completed in the spring of 2010 with the final voicing carried out by Frank Retterath. Gary Owens of GO-Organ Builders worked alongside the Klais team in the final weeks and will assume responsibility for the instrument after the official inauguration. The organ is the fifth to have been completed over the last 12 months in the Diocese of Leeds. It ends a busy year which has seen restorations and re-sittings of organs by Binns, Willis and Schumaker as well as a new organ by Škrabl at St Patrick's in Huddersfield. The Cathedral instrument was used to broadcast Midnight Mass on BBC Radio 4 in December 2009 and featured again in Choral Vespers on BBC Radio 3 in February 2010.

The new organ will be blessed by Bishop Roche at Vespers on 16 May 2010 at 3pm and inaugurated by Benjamin Saunders on the same day in an opening recital with music by Vierne, Britten, Howells, Dvořák and Kuchner. Herald will also launch a first CD of the organ to coincide with this date. Subsequent concerts in the inaugural series by David Sanger, Simon Lindley and Kevin Bowyer take place on 20 June, 12 September and 10 October at 3.30pm.

Further details regarding the organ specification and inaugural concerts can be found at www.dioceseofleedsmusic.org.uk

Benjamin Saunders



Benjamin Saunders was organ scholar of Downing College, Cambridge and sub-organist at the Cathedrals of St Giles' Edinburgh and Blackburn, before becoming Assistant Director of Music at Chester Cathedral in 1998. Since 2002 he has been Director of Music for the Diocese of Leeds. During this time, he has been privileged to act as consultant and advisor to a number of the UK's other musically pre-eminent Cathedrals and schools.

As an organist, he has performed for HM the Queen, Princess Anne and US President Carter and worked with conductor Carl Davis and jazz virtuoso, Dick Hyman. He has given solo organ concerts in France, Italy, Holland, Germany, Russia and the United States. He was the first British organist to be invited to play at Kaliningrad Cathedral, Russia.