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The Organ Sets Them Singing

Unique opportunities at Oundle's Summer School

Every July for the past five years more than 40 enthusiastic young organists have converged on Oundle where the focus is a 1984 Frobenius organ. Most years applications for the summer school are double the number of places which can be offered.

Why do these teenagers want to spend a week playing organs day and night?

"It's a whole symphony orchestra if you want it to be. The colour and timbre potential are fantastic."

"It turns me on. Playing the organ puts you on a high."

"Other instruments pale in comparison; the organ is so exciting I rarely play anything else."

"It's the sheer power of it."

"Every organ is different; your interpretation changes with each. That's the challenge for me right now."

Just a few of the comments – enthusiastic, deeply-considered, spontaneous, confident – from students who came to Oundle in 1989. Aged from 15 to 23 they came from around Britain, from Sweden and from the USA to expand repertoire and hone technique with some of the best international organ players and teachers. Almost half of them were attracted by the course focusing on requirements for Oxford and Cambridge scholarships, aspiring organists' sought-after prizes.

In the past five years, over sixty per cent of the students on the pre-university course have won Oxbridge awards.

Study and practice periods, master classes and discussions filled the days. The schedule for half-hour private sessions on the Frobenius was filled up within hours of arrival and extended far into the small hours. Luckily the chapel's location meant few residential slumbers were disturbed by bars of Bach or Buxtehude as students wrestled repeatedly with problem passages.

Just six years ago the Oundle International Summer School for young organists was founded to provide the coming generation of organists with opportunities that previously had been unavailable to them. In Britain it is still difficult for aspiring organ students to encounter the quality of playing and breadth of enthusiasm necessary to inspire them to serious careers in churches and concert halls.

While British choral traditions and the standards achieved by British organists are



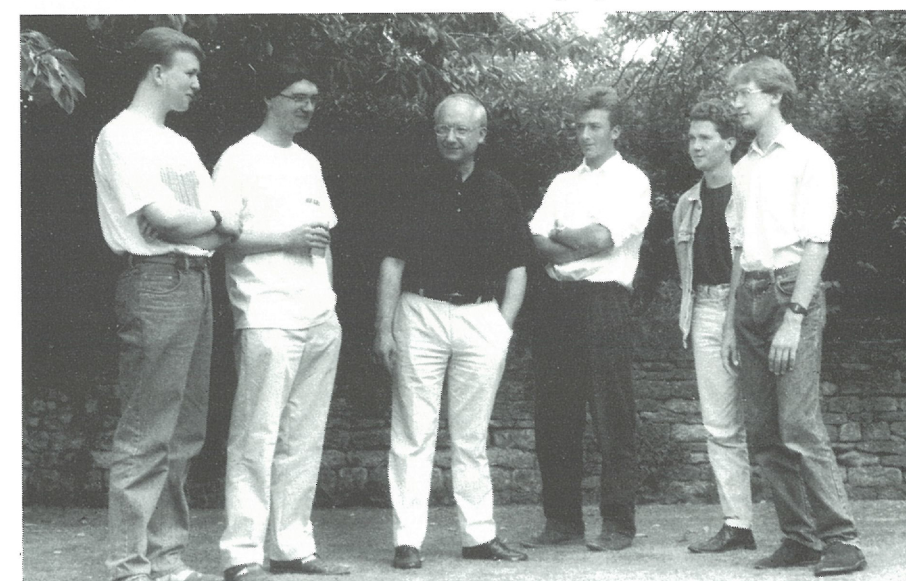
internationally admired and organists in Britain come 'on stream' at an earlier age than anywhere else, organ teaching in Europe and America does not have the 'blinkered' attitude engendered by British religious customs and conservative examination boards.

The brain-child of James Parsons, Oundle School organist and festival director, the summer school is not competitive. Students are enrolled in one of four courses, specially designed to suit age, ability and career needs. The ratio of tutor to student is very low; teaching is almost on an individual basis.

Two levels encourage young organists to develop repertoire and style, while the Advanced Academy benefits potential recitalists. Those preparing for organ scholarships at Oxford and Cambridge are coached in the requirements and prescribed trial pieces.

The chance to play some of the famous organs in the area, including those in Oxford and Cambridge chapels and Peterborough Cathedral, enhances the tutorial sessions.

Among the celebrated organists who have been tutors are Gillian Weir, Nicolas Kynaston, Catherine Ennis, Lionel Rogg, Martin Haselböck, Peter Hurford and István Ella.



Reviewing Reubke. Nicolas Kynaston and students have a lively lunch time discussion.

This year David Sanger, universally recognised for his outstanding teaching and performing skills, is one of the tutors. Joining him is Jacques van Oortmerssen, early music specialist from Amsterdam, returning for the fourth year. Gordon Stewart, organist of Manchester Cathedral, is welcomed for the second successive summer and Jane Watts, the first Royal College of Organists Young Performer of the Year, brings fresh enthusiasm.

Johannes Geffert, organist of the Kreuzkirche and the Beethovenhalle in Bonn and Anne Page, one of Britain's fine young organists, along with James Parsons complete the list of 1990.

Every year it is the custom for the tutors to give public recitals. These attract organ buffs and concert-goers from around Britain and abroad and are an important part of the public side of the Festival.

Now recognised for its high standards of teaching and creative stimulus, the 1988 week was the subject of a Central Television documentary programme, 'A Celebrated Instrument'.

One of Britain's leading independent schools, founded in 1556, Oundle was already known for its music school when, in 1984, the Governors agreed to install a three manual Frobenius organ in the school chapel. Not only did this far-sighted decision enhance the school's musical reputation, it made possible the summer school.

For the young organists whose development and futures the event was conceived to help shape, the summer school is a unique opportunity to listen and learn, not only from excellent tutors with individual styles and backgrounds, but from each other. An atmosphere of relaxed camaraderie combined with intense music making pervades, from organ loft to picnic lunches, from recital to midnight practice.