

EUREKA!

Yes, it began in the bath!

I've never been much of a man for showers; detrimental to 'net-zero' as my habit may be, a warm immersion has for me always proved conducive to spacious thought. 'Think spaciously' had been one of the maxims of the redoubtable Oundle School Headmaster, F W Sanderson, who steered the School through the horrors of the First World War; this exhortation has always appealed to me.

It was 1984, when I was Organist and Assistant Director of Music at Oundle School. Miraculously, I had played a significant part in a team- effort to commission for the School Chapel a three manual and pedal organ from Frobenius in Copenhagen - with thirty-five stops, only the simplest of mechanical registration aids, and nothing electrical apart from the blower and the console lighting: a Danish blonde, dressed in natural oak!

Headmaster of my day, Dr Barry Trapnell, had espoused the project as his final 'gift' to the School before retirement, and had made it abundantly clear that this beautiful new instrument was not just intended for hymns on Sundays, but should put the School on the map, and address 'the realm of the human spirit' (the sort of romantic flash-phrase that this brilliant and ever-unpredictable man would throw into some tough, pragmatic negotiation). Director of Music, Peter Allwood, and Organ Consultant, Dr Donald Wright of Newcastle University, played key roles as we consulted half a dozen prominent British and European organ builders - encounters which generated many sagas on which to dine-out!

In 1983 I was generously (and prematurely) awarded a sabbatical to play concerts in Holland, Denmark and the USA, as also to forge international links with organists and diverse cultural figures. I was seeking a formula to celebrate and share our new organ, and indeed the 'destination' qualities which Oundle itself embodies: so, perhaps a well-hyped and glitzy competition for student organists. 'Let's put the roof on first' proposed Noddy to Big Ears as they built a house; gentle remonstrance suggested otherwise. I hadn't considered at that time where was the solid tuition in organ playing necessary to elevate teenagers to 'competition' level?

'Talk-of-the-town' in organist circles at that time was the St Albans International Festival, which from 1963, its founder, Peter Hurford, celebrity-hosted to enshrine the UK's first-ever international organ competition, essentially for those

of conservatoire-level and beyond. The success and influence of St Albans, as a flourishing sapling, was even then a king-making endeavour: many of the great organ virtuosos of the latter 20th century emerged at St Albans from cathedral organ lofts as celebrity concert organists. So, could Oundle offer complementary opportunities for teenage organists?

I visited Peter Hurford. I was excited, but found his response dampening: 'it wasb important not to dream of founding an event as a temple for one's own ego'. Oh, and 'competitions, festivals, musical promotions of all sorts were expensive; they tend to lose money'. Maybe his counsel was well-calculated, though it was tempting to regard it as protectionist.

However what eventually moved the tiller in a new direction was a realisation of my own (gradually gestating in the bath); as an L-plated organ teacher, I saw that many premier items of the organ repertoire as specified for the higher-grade exams were wrecked-for-life in the noble attempts made by most young organists. Adequate technique and any helpful inkling of style or context were sadly lacking in their clutch-slipping, mud-splattering hill-climbs up to the dizzy heights of say Bach's *Fugue in g (540)* and those ever-alluring French Toccatas. Ambitious young organists were not receiving enlightened teaching; indeed I knew that my own background and perspective was blinkered and inadequate. What was desperately needed was an internationally-enlightened theatre for organ teaching and inspiration (a fun-filled-forum, just as at St Albans) - not a competition to reward the most convincing busker. UK organ culture was slanted towards our unique cathedral choral tradition (such as would never be well-served by an Organ-Reform contraption made in Scandinavia! - as we were told when the Frobenius took shape). Organ teaching largely followed an unstructured acolyte-process of following in the aura of some great church-musician.

Enter Richard Phillips (now-) MBE: he proved a crucial, generous counsellor in those embryonic days. Himself an Old Oundelian, he had forged a distinguished career in arts administration - creating York Early Music Festival, Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, the Early Music Network and the Regional Contemporary Music Circuit, then directing Norfolk & Norwich Triennial Festival and concerts throughout the Midlands. He introduced me to the tangled UK world of arts promotion, funding, and PR, prompting me to write to the great and the good announcing (yes, 'a major ...') new venture, some two years before the launch of *Oundle International Festival and Summer School for Young Organists*. Richard focused my fuzzy vision for a complete, multi-faceted Music-Festival week at which school- and conservatoire-level organists would be tutored in a non-competitive, encouraging environment; they would be

musicians who played the organ, incubated in a multi-music-cultured context; Oundle School with summer-vacant boarding houses could offer accommodation and every necessary facility; the general public would attend the concerts; sponsorship and ticket sales would, we hoped, meet the costs - though the School had generously agreed to underwrite risk. The handsome 35-stop organ would sit central and itself prove a revelatory attraction particularly for both young players, and the famous names in the business: thus, no competition but a spacious, cultural landscape with top-flight organ tuition illuminated by international perspectives.

Come January 1985, Carlo Curley drew some 600 from School and local communities to hear the new organ; his was an idiosyncratically memorable programme, displaying astonishing feats of memory and virtuosity. It was a cold night to remember.

Oundle International Festival and Summer School for Young Organists, the clunky name for the new endeavour, was advertised in those pre-internet days by flyers which now seem simplistic, and disseminated far and wide by Royal Mail. Famous organists from the UK, Austria, USA and Communist-Hungary, were all pictured, but I really hadn't a clue how even to put essentials in place. For example, it took our first Housemaster, Alan Rayden (Oundle School's Second Master in real life) to point out that there really should be a timetable, and more than one organ for some thirty students to play.

I recall Peter Hurford arriving early for the *Week* in order to record the new organ for the BBC; that was on a Friday evening. After his session, I settled to my desk in the Music School and worked until five in the morning to map out a plan (interrupted around midnight by the arrival of 'some bloke from 'Ungary' - István Ella, who, on arrival in London, had been directed onto a train headed for Arundel). In fact we did have several organs besides the Frobenius: that in Oundle Parish Church, plus small instruments loaned by such builders as Woodstock, Bower, Pulham, Tickell, Aldred, Collins, Drake and Church.

Twenty-eight organ students duly rocked up by 5pm on the Saturday, and at 7.30pm John Scott delivered that arresting G minor chord for the start of Poulenc's Organ Concerto, partnered by the young musicians of Chetham's School Orchestra. We were launched! Seven days later, the *Week* concluded with a stunning performance from Gillian Weir, a newly-commissioned work, *Fenix*, by Francis Pott, for organ, brass and percussion - and an undertaking made by inspired student organists to spread the word and return. The full programme can be seen in the archive.

The following July, student numbers grew to forty whilst the entrance of two new tutor-recitalists proved seminal: Kimberly Marshall, fresh from victory at St Albans, played the hardest of programmes on the Frobenius, with a jaw-dropping display of impeccable prestidigitation - whilst the hypnotic allure of Jacques van Oortmessen's performance on a manuals-only organ by Richard Bower, in the Georgian church-in-a-field at Stoke Doyle, touched hearts and minds: historically-informed 'period performance' was no longer the preserve of left-wing organ nerds. Kimberly and Jacques both returned to Oundle frequently thereafter whilst many beat a path to study with JvO at Amsterdam's *Waalse Kerk*.

On we went, and by the third year, the number of student applications exceeded capacity. *Oundle (OIOF)* commissioned a new Organ Concerto from Derek Bourgeois, premiered with the English Chamber Orchestra; 'concerts' included a Rally of Street Organs in the Market Place and end-of-show Barbecue with the *Ooze Valley Stompers* at the Festival Club, the social hub of the show. And, for the first time, the organists morphed into a choir in order to sing at Parish Eucharist in the Parish Church (featuring Schubert's Mass in G) - part of a growing trend towards training organists to become organ scholars.

My two greatest colleagues entered in 1988: Trisha Ryan and Jeremy Sampson, both still very much on board by 2009. They remain truly the architects and master-builders of *Oundle* ...

Trisha, the charming, engagingly informal yet socially sophisticated, and ever-personable administrative assistant; she loved the project and was indefatigable in dealing with its every feature. Much later, Trisha, having developed and expanded the Festival events programme, rightly became its Executive Director; my own role became that of delivering the hugely-grown, round-the-year and around-the-country programme of *Oundle for Organists* courses. Trisha's greatest triumphs have perhaps been that annual succession of Fireworks Concerts which she planned, managed and delivered in the noughties: jazz and tribute bands cajoled the dancing; the idyllic *Poplars Field* was the venue for some five thousand to picnic and dance the night away - and these events essentially became the cash-cow to fund all our activities.

And then, Jeremy Sampson who became Sponsorship Manager ...

From 1976, Jeremy, a fine violinist, had been a sixth-form A -level pupil in my classes. After his studies in London, he forged a free-lance career as a violinist and teacher, returning every week to Oundle School as a member of the visiting Music Staff. Ever-persuasive and unruffled, he forged links for the Festival in the commercial sector and charmed thousands of pounds out of the local businesses.

Year after year, his diligence and success significantly relieved the stress of 'pushing the bus up the hill' to raise funds.

In our fourth year, 1988, our Festival and Summer Schools were the subject of a documentary, filmed by ITV's Central Television. Such publicity proved helpful. The *Week* also featured *Oundle's* first promotion in Cambridge - in King's College Chapel no less: Gillian Weir's Messiaen programme remains a treasured memory. And so the years rolled on; every page of our printed material, 1985 to 2009 is on view at <https://jamesparsons.org/oundle>

Looking back, my memory slightly melds the detail of each individual year, though vivid recollections of countless fine moments - with brilliant young students, the visits of illustrious artists, magical performances, community events, and the enthusiastic support of the Friends - crowd the mind. Dipping into the archive revives the evolving saga. Key developments stand out:

- from 1990 we became *Oundle International Organ Festival*, morphing again in 1993 to become *Oundle International Festival*, reflecting the diversity of the offering
- in 1992 OO architect and media-voice Maxwell Hutchinson joined Sir John Piper, Sir Peter Maxwell Davies and Sir David Willcocks as a Patron (an illustrious group which by 1999 further included Sir David Lumsden, Simon Preston and Dame Gillian Weir)
- organ tutor recitalists featured iconic names in the business such as Ludger Lohmann, Olivier Latry, Naji Hakim, David Higgs, Jeremy Filsell, Simon Preston, Jacques van Ortmeressen, Thomas Trotter, Nicolas Kynaston, David Briggs, Kimberly Marshall, Guy Bovet, Kevin Bowyer, Hans-Ola Ericsson (and many more to be seen in the archive literature) - alongside alumni David Goode (a fourteen-year-old student in the 1985 launch course), Mattias Wager, William Whitehead and Daniel Moulton; and towards the end of the decade, David Sanger began to exercise his wise and inspirational influence as a recitalist, teacher and adviser
- in the 1990's John Miley, retired from a career in the electricity sector and a passionate enthusiastic for choirs and organs began to visit as an Observer - soon mentioning that he was a co-executor of a sizeable estate dedicated to musical causes ...
- which resulted, come 1994, in the amazingly-generous gift of the organ in Oundle's RC Church of the Most Holy Name of Jesus; here was a two-manual and pedal instrument of thirteen stops commissioned by OIF and made for the west-gallery by Richard Bower; the Festival organ!

- most significantly, in 1985, OIF became an independent Company and Charity, whilst thanking Oundle School for ten years of confidence in underwriting the whole exercise. Top-notch advice over necessary procedures was given by Price Waterhouse (their fee negotiated as sponsorship by Jeremy Sampson). Enter Stephen Froling as Chairman - the canniest of anchormen, who laconically nodded-through almost all proposed endeavour on the basis 'carry on if you reckon you can pay for it'!
- Trisha Ryan pressed ahead with festival events, showing enormous creativity in developing and managing community events such as *Murder in the Cathedral*, (and later, community operas by Jonathan Dove, and Janáček)
- 1997 saw an addition to OIF's organ education offering: a new residential weekend for young beginner organists *Pulling Out the Stops*
- in 2000 St Mary's, Fotheringhay, acquired a newly-commissioned organ, built by Vincent Woodstock - another precious resource for worship, concerts and tuition
- 2002 marked a change in the summer provision of organ courses in that the *Prospective Organ Scholars* stream now benefited from its own dedicated week in Cambridge - a trend further extended, later, by the translation of *Advanced Academy* tuition also to Cambridge, where the many College Chapel organs are just minutes apart on foot. More dissemination provided 'Oundle' *Get Ahead* taster-days for young organists around the UK
- come 2001, OIF moved into an attractive new home: the Jemima Creed Chapel in Ashton, merely two miles from the middle of Oundle, offered a dreamy-rural venue, in green grounds patrolled by peacocks. Here was HQ. Musically, we were gifted a two-manual and pedal harpsichord, originally made for Bach-scholar Walter Emery, whilst a small Woodstock practice organ, given by the Douglas May Bequest, took centre-stage in the new space. The Chapel hosted Committee meetings and welcomed guests; the grounds attracted summer visitors to OIF's open-air theatre productions: an English village-idyll (especially in summer)
- celebrity musicians who left an indelible impression at Oundle over the years include Tamsin Little, Courtney Pine, Arvo Pärt, Sir John Tavener, Julian Lloyd Webber, Alison Balsom, Nicolai Demidenko; the archive details them all
- James Lloyd-Thomas, organist and choir-trainer, ever a mate and incessantly ebullient, assisted me greatly in delivering our product; indeed it was he who advocated David Sanger's co-option as a consultant
- Anna Money, from Finland, softly-spoken and formidably intelligent, as *OfO* Administrator in the noughties, crafted new templates for complex residential course arrangements

- a total inspiration too was Trisha Ryan's *Music in Quiet Places* series of summer concerts outside our Festival period, in village churches around Oundle
- William Whitehead enabled and facilitated Oundle *Advanced Academy* weeks in Toulouse in Septembers 2007-9

From the mere bubble of an idea in the bath, and a tentative inauguration in 1985, *OIF* and *Oundle for Organists* (perceived by the mid-noughties as two distinct yet inextricably linked entities) had become a cascade of invention, with every aspect valued by the local community and an international following in organist circles.

However, under the Chair of John Miley and then of Lynda Purser, tensions gradually emerged between the 'festival' and the 'organ' elements. Despite most welcome and significant funding from the Arts Council in Spring 2009, it became clear that I should change course: a new breeze was blowing.

Happily, I'd been head-hunted by the *Royal College of Organists* to continue my mission to inspire young players under the *RCO* banner (in fact, for some years, Oundle's organ courses had been presented in partnership with the *RCO*, and had benefited from the College's investment).

Think spaciouly ...

Those were great days!

Oundle for Organists, now directed by Ann Elise Smoot, celebrates its 40th anniversary this year -

Browse the pages at <https://jamesparsons.org/oundle>
and please send us your recollections -
