

Globe Trotter: A conversation with Thomas Trotter

Joyce Johnson Robinson

Not too many of today's organists have a listing in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. One who does is Thomas Trotter, who has made his mark with a dazzling, effortless technique and compelling interpretations. In 2001 the Royal Philharmonic Society presented their Instrumentalist Award to Trotter, citing him as "one of the foremost exponents of the organist's art" who "makes the organ one of the most warmly romantic of instruments. His technical and musical accomplishments have played a significant role in raising the profile of the organ, an instrument at the heart of British music-making." Trotter was the first (and so far, only) organist to win this award.

Trotter has a busy schedule, underpinned by his position as City Organist in Birmingham, England; he is now also Artistic Adviser and Resident Organist of the Klais organ at Symphony Hall there, where he gave the opening recital in October 2001. He also serves as organist at St. Margaret's Church, Westminster Abbey, along with teaching, and performing concerts in Europe and the U.S. Trotter presents upwards of 50 concerts a year (about half of those, in Birmingham). He has performed with many orchestras, including the Vienna, Berlin, London, and Royal Philharmonics, and the San Francisco Symphony. His appearances at major festivals include Salzburg, Vienna, and Edinburgh; he has performed on major instruments, including at Woolsey Hall at Yale (where he recently served as visiting artist-in-residence), St. Ouen in Rouen, France, St. Bavo in Haarlem, Netherlands, Weingarten Abbey in Germany, and the Klais organ at the new Esplanade Concert Hall in Singapore.

Trotter's performances, both live and recorded, have received critical acclaim. A review of his most recent CD, *Sounds Phenomenal*, praises the "mastery of musical pace and flow" and "beautifully sensitive playing in the lovely Schumann canons."¹ Trotter played the dedicatory recital on the Klais organ at Overture Hall in Madison, Wisconsin; a reviewer commented on his "impeccable articulation" and "deft foot work."² The playing in Trotter's recording of (his own) arrangement of Mozart's two Fantasies in f minor (K. 594, K. 608) was praised for its "technical brilliance and conservative, yet satisfying schemes of registration."³

The most recent addition to his discography, which numbers over 20 recordings, is *Sounds Phenomenal*, recorded on the 4-manual Klais instrument in Birmingham's Symphony Hall. He is represented in the U.S. by Karen McFarlane Artists.



Thomas Trotter in front of the Klais instrument, Symphony Hall, Birmingham, U.K. (photo credit: Adrian Burrows)

We spoke with Thomas Trotter by phone in March.

JR: It's lovely to talk to you, and thank you so much for agreeing to do this. Are you in Birmingham right now, or are you in London?

TT: I'm actually in Windsor where I live.

JR: Are you near the castle?

TT: Yes, quite near, about five minutes' walk.

JR: You were an organ scholar there, yes? At St. George's Chapel?

TT: Yes, for a year before I went up to Cambridge, while I was still at the Royal College of Music. Until then I had no experience of church music, so it was a great preparation for life as a Cambridge organ scholar.

JR: How did you become interested in the organ?

TT: I had always wanted to play the piano and started having lessons at the age of five. My piano teacher at my secondary school was also the organist there, and when I was 11 he introduced me to the organ. From then on I became much more enthusiastic about the organ than the piano, but I continued to study the piano seriously until I left the Royal College of Music. So it was via the piano that I came to the organ.

JR: Did you continue your piano studies because you felt that you needed that as a foundation, or was it continued interest in the piano?

TT: Both! I wanted to play the piano repertoire, and anyway when I was eleven I was barely tall enough to reach the pedals. I realized that I wasn't going to be able to play the organ properly for another few years, so in the meantime it was prudent to continue at the piano. It was also much easier to find a piano to practice on than an organ—we had one at home for a start!

JR: There is a new organ method approach, in which one doesn't need to start with piano; students go directly to playing the organ.

TT: I'm sure it's possible to play the

organ without having played the piano, but there is much to be gained from playing more than one keyboard instrument. Bach himself advocated the clavichord for developing a sensitive touch. A sensitive touch and a good ear are crucial on the piano, and that can surely only benefit organ playing too. A good piano technique is also very helpful when it comes to playing the Romantic and contemporary organ repertoire.

JR: Describe organist training in England. What does the college curriculum comprise?

TT: There are two main options for organ study in Great Britain. One is the music college (for example, the Royal College or Royal Academy of Music in London or the Royal Northern in Manchester) and the other is university, with both kinds of institutions offering courses at degree level. The courses have a more practical bias at the music colleges, but often the performing opportunities can be greater at the universities where music students are in the minority. The "apprentice" system exists in both music colleges and universities (at least those with links to cathedrals), but it is most strongly associated with the Oxbridge colleges, where an organ scholar will act as assistant to the director of music (or be the director if there isn't one!). This is an extremely effective and comprehensive training, particularly useful for those wishing to pursue a church music career.

JR: Which track did you follow? Did you have aspirations for a cathedral post or were you more interested in concertizing?

TT: I was always more interested in concertizing, so I first studied at the Royal College of Music, London with Ralph Downes, who is best remembered today as the designer of the Royal Festival Hall organ.

I never planned to pursue the Oxbridge "apprentice" path and had little interest in church music, but the idea was put into my head by the then director, Sir David Willcocks, who pointed out that an Oxbridge organ scholarship would be a good springboard for any performing career. So a year later I applied for and won the organ scholarship to King's College Cambridge, where I read for a degree in music and acted as assistant organist to the director of music Philip Ledger. At this time I studied with Dame Gillian Weir, who was a marvelous teacher and a great inspiration to me. After leaving Cambridge I moved to London, where I embarked on a freelance career which included playing harpsichord and organ continuo, accompanying on the piano, some church work, and most importantly giving solo recitals. I had just won the St. Albans International Organ Competition, which resulted in a number of recital invitations. I also continued my studies with Marie-Claire Alain, traveling over to Paris once a month for lessons. Her scholarly approach made me look at the music from a different perspective, and I played French Classical and Romantic instruments for the first time. My big professional break came when I was appointed Birmingham City Organist in 1983.

JR: Let's talk a little about Birmingham. You are the City Organist there, and also the Resident Organist at Symphony Hall. Are those two actual different roles?

TT: No, since my residency at Symphony Hall is an extension of what I was already doing at the Town Hall. As city organist I present a regular series of concerts at the Town Hall, and, since the arrival of the new Klais in 2001, at Symphony Hall also. In theory,

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A very young Thomas Trotter

you could have a different organist playing at each venue, but the musical scene in Birmingham is not big enough to support two resident organists. There have only been five city organists since 1842, and they have mostly served for between 30 and 50 years. I'm in my twenty-third year now and I'm planning to be around for a good few more years!

JR: It seems that there are many more town hall organist positions in the U.K. than we have in the U.S.

TT: Well, the whole tradition was born in this country, so it's not surprising that there are more positions here. The English are by nature very conservative, and they jealously guard their traditions. Another reason might be the system of public funding. All of these town hall positions are funded by local councils, whereas in America the arts rely much more on sponsorship by wealthy individuals. The thing about public funding is that it's available in good times as well as bad, whereas private sponsorship can be more precarious. There have been regular organ recitals at Birmingham Town Hall since 1842, and the commitment from the City Council is as strong as ever.

JR: How's the attendance these days? Has it changed at all?

TT: We're in an interim period at the moment, because in 1996 the Town Hall closed for a huge renovation project, and for the last nine years the concerts have been presented at the nearby St. Philip's Cathedral. Before the hall closed, the regular attendance was 400 or 500 people, whereas at St. Philip's the attendance is half that number. At Symphony Hall, the attendance is usually around 400, but some of the events—the Christmas carol concerts for example—can attract up to 2000 people.

JR: Do a lot of young people come to the concerts?

TT: Nearly all of the concerts take place at lunchtime, and so our audience consists mainly of retired people. We'd like to attract more young people, but generally the younger people are preoccupied with earning a living, and the really young people are at school! A couple of years ago at Symphony Hall we had a very successful event aimed at children, but this was a one-off event, and the regular support comes mostly from the older generation.

JR: Your commitments include Birmingham, serving as organist at St. Margaret's Westminster, teaching, and concertizing, often in other countries. Do you have flexibility built into your commitments so that you are able to travel?

TT: Absolutely, yes, because traveling around playing concerts is my main source of income. The Birmingham position provides me with a very solid base, and I receive other playing invitations as a result of being there. At St. Margaret's Westminster I am responsible only for the organ playing, so my commitments are not great, and with the help of deputies I have complete flexibility. For the last three years I've been teaching several of the organ scholars at Cambridge, which involves two or three visits per term, so not a huge commitment there either. My priorities are the recital series in Birmingham and my recitals elsewhere, and everything else comes after that.

JR: What level are your students? Are they concertizing already?

TT: Yes. They all play in public to a professional standard, and the King's scholars especially are used to working under pressure whether it be in chapel, concert hall or recording studio. Nearly all of them will be professional musicians when they leave university. Sometimes they learn things rather too quickly than they ought to because they're very good sight readers, which is an essential quality for an organ scholar. But they're very clever, and smart, and talented, so I feel lucky to be teaching them.

JR: Do you have enough time to practice? How do you fit that in?

TT: Well, the older I get, the less practice I seem to do, which is a dangerous thing to say. But I think I use the time more efficiently. My organ at home has a very revealing touch, and two hours practice on that is equivalent to four hours on a lesser instrument. I rarely practice for more than three hours a day, but rarely less than two either. Sometimes practice means preparing the registration for a concert at a venue, sometimes it's learning a new piece or revising an old one, sometimes it's just keeping your technique up to scratch—a bit like an athlete keeping fit!

JR: You seem to play mostly larger instruments—huge instruments!

TT: That's true, certainly in America and Britain. And obviously, if you're playing on a large organ, then you've got to cut your cloth accordingly and play the big pieces—which I enjoy. But I also play a lot of smaller instruments, especially in the Netherlands and Germany, where there are many beautiful historic organs.

JR: Smaller instruments can be limiting for a lot of repertoire.

TT: Yes, but it's not a problem if the instruments are well designed. This June I will play a concert in the Handel Haus in Halle on a one-manual organ with rudimentary pedals, built in 1770. At first I was rather daunted at the prospect, but after some thought it wasn't so difficult to put together a program. I'll play a Bach partita, some Elizabethan music, some of the smaller Mozart pieces, and a pared-down arrangement of one of the Handel organ concertos.

JR: I associate you with the larger—I'll say "swashbuckling"—kind of pieces, with orchestra.

TT: I'm certainly better known for playing that repertoire, but I've always wanted to explore other areas of the repertoire. And it's true I do quite a lot of concerto work, which started with Simon Rattle in Birmingham. I enjoy it, but not more than playing solo. There are so many technical difficulties associated with playing concertos—making sure the balance is right, coping with acoustical delays, watching the conductor and making sure the ensemble is



The formal Thomas Trotter (photo credit: Adrian Burrows)

good—these difficulties don't exist when you are playing solo. You can always tell more about an organist in a solo context!

JR: Yes—it's nice just to have your own canoe to paddle!

TT: Exactly! In the last few weeks I've been working on a new concerto for wind band and organ by Piet Kee, who was the former city organist in Haarlem in the Netherlands. The concert will be at the Concertgebouw, which has a Cavaillé-Coll organ recently restored by Flentrop. He sent me a computer-generated recording of the piece, which is quite comical in places, really. But it's helped to give me an overview of the piece and how the organ fits in with the orchestra.

JR: You've recorded in the Netherlands.

TT: Yes, that's right! I did a Mozart disc on a beautiful 2-manual instru-

ment in Farmsum, which is a little town in North Holland. We were there in the depth of winter where the average temperature was one degree centigrade—and that was inside the church! The organ is by Lohmann and dates from the 1830s, but stylistically it's very much within the 18th-century tradition. It has these wonderful sweet-sounding flutes that you often hear on a fairground organ—you know, a caliope, or whatever you call it in America. I love that sound—that pure sound; it was perfect for Mozart. I've also recorded music by Jehan Alain on a very large 4-manual instrument by Van den Heuvel in Katwijk, further down the coast of Holland.

JR: Most of your recordings were made on organs either outside the U.K., or if they're in the U.K.—let's say "Father" Willis doesn't stand out in your discography! Is that just by chance?

TT: When I was in my twenties I just loved anything that was French. Then I started getting into the German Romantics and early music. And then about eight years ago I realized that I had neglected English music, which audiences, particularly in Europe, expect English organists to play. So recently I've tried to redress the balance, and instruments permitting I always include British music in my programs. The Elgar Sonata is of course wonderful, there are great pieces by Parry, Stanford, Bridge, Howells, Bairstow, and some exciting new music by Judith Bingham, James MacMillan, Michael Nyman, and others. But my recent recordings have been on the Symphony Hall Klais, for which traditional British repertoire is not an obvious choice. But it's my intention to record English music in the future, and "Father" Willis might come into the picture at that point. Authentic "Father" Willis organs can be quite intractable though—they sort of clatter a bit, and the devices for changing the stops can be primitive to

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Thomas Trotter next to Philipp Klais (center) during the inauguration of the Klais organ at the Esplanade, Singapore, December 2002 (photo credit: Te Min Ong)

say the least—they certainly present their own problems!

JR: For a long time England was seen as provincial or parochial in its organ building. This seems to be changing. Are mechanical action and a more classical orientation the norm?

TT: The organ reform movement, which has been so important in shaping organ design in the last 80 or so years, hit these shores rather later and with less force than in the rest of Europe. But today the work of British organbuilders is highly respected at home and abroad, with many new organs now being built for export. For the majority of builders I would say that mechanical action is the preferred choice, but bearing in mind the architecture of British churches and the necessity of placing organs near choirs, this option can be impractical.

Certainly the best electric actions I've ever come across are found in Britain.

JR: You've played on numerous Klais instruments. Were you responsible for bringing Klais to Birmingham? Was that mostly your decision as the organ consultant?

TT: The Symphony Hall organ project first came up in 1989 as the hall was under construction. Because of lack of funds it was decided to commission the organ in two stages, the first of which was to design and install the case façade. Klais won the contract on the strength of their innovative design, and the case was installed in time for the opening of the Hall in 1991. The rest of the money was raised some five years later, which enabled Klais to complete the organ in 2001. In the intervening years the original concept changed, and I think we have a better organ now than we would

have had the organ been completed in 1991. I've opened several other new Klais instruments—the one in Madison, the one at the Esplanade Hall in Singapore; in Moscow, at the House of Music, where Klais collaborated with Glätter-Gotz.

JR: Did you take very much heat for working with Klais in Birmingham rather than championing a British builder? Was that an issue?

TT: Well, we already had that issue at Manchester's Bridgewater Hall in 1997 where the organ was built by the Danish builder Marcussen. I was the consultant and very much in the firing line for that. But as a consultant you have to go with what you think is the best scheme regardless of nationality, and of course the larger English builders do regularly export their instruments abroad.

JR: Are there special considerations when designing a town hall organ other than the obvious things—that this is a large hall, and the organ might have to work with an orchestra as well as performing as a solo instrument?

TT: Well, that is precisely the most important factor determining its design. A town hall or concert hall organ needs very loud stops to match the power of an orchestra and many 8' stops, which will assist with blend. It also needs to have many pedal stops, including 32' registers, because those pitches are lower than what any orchestral instrument can provide. Concert hall organs need a degree of eclecticism in order to cope with many styles of music played by organists from widely different traditions. But of course there are far more similarities than there are differences between a town hall and a church organ.

JR: Playing transcriptions seems to be an interest of yours. What do you think about them being back out there after being out of vogue for so long?

TT: Well, it's great that we are allowed to enjoy ourselves again! I first became interested in transcriptions at King's, where I always enjoyed the challenge of recreating the sound of the orchestra in pieces like the Fauré *Requiem* or the Vaughan Williams *Five Mystical Songs*. But my real chance, my excuse for playing solo transcriptions, came in 1983 when I was appointed Birmingham City Organist, as I knew that this tradition had always been associated with such positions. The first one I learned was Wagner's *Meistersinger* overture, which I played at my first concert, and from then on I was hooked. I usually include perhaps one or two transcriptions in most of the programs I play, and sponsors often ask for them. I'm not so keen on playing whole programs of them, and I've noticed that there are a few organists who are doing that now. The legitimate repertoire should always take pride of place, and there is some wonderful real organ music that should not be ignored at the expense of transcriptions.

JR: Well, I don't think you could ever be accused of tilting the balance too far. But I've enjoyed the transcriptions I've heard you play, and it's nice to just lighten the mood a little bit.

TT: Exactly! And it's fun to hear music in a different medium than the one for which it was originally conceived. And you read reports of Edwin Lemare's playing, and apparently he used to bring out details that you wouldn't have heard in the orchestral version. Sometimes music can take on a different kind of life—you can hear things that you can't hear in the original.

JR: I've really enjoyed your recordings, especially things like the Naji Hakim homage to Stravinsky and your recording of *Rubrics*.

TT: *Rubrics* is such an effective piece—it has the perfect number of movements, none of them lasting too long, each of them exploiting a different



Thomas Trotter (photo credit: Adrian Burrows)

color of the instrument, and I so enjoy playing it. I love discovering pieces like that, that are modern and different, but at the same time are accessible.

That's the other thing I've taken to doing in recent times—always playing a piece by a living composer.

JR: You've made some arrangements of pieces—Leroy Anderson's *Sleigh Ride*, the Mozart *Fantasies*, for instance. Did you enjoy doing those, and do you plan to do any more?

TT: It was fun, but writing out arrangements is very time-consuming. The Mozart pieces were not such a problem because I had already performed the music many times, and my arrangements don't differ that much from the original four-stave versions that are currently available. Recently I did my own arrangement of three movements from Stravinsky's *Petroushka*, which was challenging and certainly challenging to play. But it did help me to while away many hours in dreary hotel rooms.

JR: Do you have any projects planned for the immediate future, particularly recordings? Anything new coming up?

TT: I did a recording of English choral classics with the City of Birmingham Symphony Chorus in January for EMI, which will be released in the near future. I'm certainly planning to do more recording at Symphony Hall and the Town Hall when it comes back on stream in 2007—the time of the reopening is October 2007. So there'll definitely be more recordings from there, but hopefully from other places as well. I've not been a prolific recording artist compared to some of my colleagues, but I make up for it with the number of concerts I do—maybe 50–60 every year. Recording—I'm never satisfied with the results! You know, no matter how carefully I prepare, I always want to do it differently three months later!

JR: What are some of your future plans and goals?

TT: I don't really have any long-term plans other than wanting to improve as a player and continuing to broaden my horizons. Discovering and learning new music gives me the greatest satisfaction, and if I still enjoy playing 15 years from now I will be happy!

JR: Well, Thomas, thank you so much for your time.

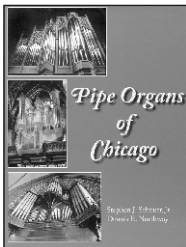
TT: Not at all. A pleasure. ■

Joyce Johnson Robinson is associate editor of *THE DIAPASON*.

Notes

1. Ian Coleman, *Choir & Organ*, July–Aug 2005, Vol. 13, no. 4, p. 75.
2. Matthew Power, *American Record Guide*, Mar–Apr 2005, Vol. 68, no. 2, pp. 22–23.
3. Hugh McLean, *Choir & Organ*, Nov–Dec 1995, Vol. 4, no. 6.

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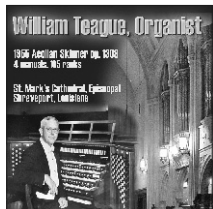
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