

A Tribute to Nicolas Kynaston SELBY ABBEY ORGAN MASTERS SAOM007

It was the time of Thatcher, Reagan and Gorbachev; three towering political leaders who between them, irrespective of whether or not one approved of their policies, changed our view of the world forever. In the 1980s, the organ world, too, had its triumvirate of towering figures – coincidentally also a woman and two men - who, whether one liked the way they played or not, changed public perceptions of the organ as a musical instrument forever. Gillian Weir and Simon Preston have, in recent years, received their due recognition on record with retrospectives marking their retirements from active performing. Now it is the turn of Nicolas Kynaston, whose ill-health has kept him out of the public arena in recent years. By far the least represented on record of the three even in his heyday, a recorded tribute to him is long due, and it is thanks to producer Jonathan Wearn and the Selby Abbey Organ Masters label that we now have one; albeit one which does not provide more than the tiniest glimpse of his vast repertory and enormous interpretative outlook. These original recordings date from the mid-1980s, with the Karg-Elert performances appearing for the first time in the public domain.

The Widor Symphony was first released as an LP on the Mitra label in 1984, when it was coupled with the Roger-Ducasse Pastorale – and what a great shame it is that we do not have a chance to hear Kynaston's wonderful performance of that magnificent exercise in contrapuntal complexity heavily overlaid with exquisite French perfumes. It was recorded on the 1956 Paul Ott organ of the Kreuzkirche in Bonn, which, at the time of the recording, had just been revised by J. W. Walker. With a specification strongly biased in favour of the neo-Baroque ideas much in vogue at the time, it would seem a wholly inappropriate instrument for one of Widor's symphonies, with feet firmly planted in French romantic soil. But Kynaston sees music where other merely see colour, and as an interpretation, he reveals rather more of Widor's creative genius than is customary. Indeed, I would put this as one of the most compelling and absorbing performances of the work currently available on disc. And while others may find the distinct lack of a French accent a barrier, I would suggest that listening to the second movement (*Moderato cantabile*) with open ears, will reveal some divinely beautiful sounds which are more than a match for anything those who play the work on a Cavallé-Coll ever come up with.

Sigfrid Karg-Elert's music has somewhat fallen out of fashion today. But in the 1980s it was all the rage, and it was rare to attend an organ recital where something by him was not performed (even if it was only the ubiquitous *Nun danket*). Recorded on the Klais organ of St Maria Magdalena in Bonn possibly in 1982, the instrument has more than enough on it to satisfy most of Karg-Elert's extensive (some would say excessive) registration demands, and Kynaston draws some fabulous sounds from it, bringing this music vividly to life, going so far as to get it to sound almost Wurlitzer-like in a jaunty account of the charming *Valse Mignon*. He opens the Karg-Elert statement with the scintillating *Toccata on Jerusalem du hochgebaute Stadt* with glittering registrations crowned by a magnificently regal *Trompette* and a glorious feeling of space in music which can so easily sound just like a heady assemblage of unnecessarily complex chromaticisms all crowded together yet ending with a typically smoochy passage. There is also a spectacular performance of the lengthy *Gregorian Rhapsody* which few players ever seem to bring off effectively; yet it all falls so easily into place here given Kynaston's broad overview of the piece and his genius for registration. Karg-Elert the impressionist is well represented by several character pieces where, again, Kynaston roots out ideal sounds yet keeps everything in some kind of coherent order, the decoration never fully obscuring the architecture. And, revealing another facet of Karg-Elert's remarkable compositional eclecticism, the 31st of the 33 *Portraits* (here re-titled "*Eros*") superbly recreates the exotic sound world of Scriabin.

With such an interesting and perceptively-chosen cross-section of Karg-Elert's output, played with real insight and registered with the utmost effectiveness, Kynaston provides here one of the most worthwhile introductions to his music for anyone who either has never heard it before or has dismissed Karg-Elert as merely a Reger-clone prone to unnecessarily complex chromaticism. The Widor is exceptionally fine; but the Karg-Elert is something special here.