Interesting London Organs

By Gilbert Benham

This very fine and lofty church built to the design of William Butterfield, was consecrated on February 21st 1863. The site and surroundings were probably never very salubrious, but now the church stands so obscured by blocks of dwelling and factories that many may pass through the district daily never discover it. These are other entrances, but the church can best be reached by way of Brook Street, where in the year 1770 Thomas Chatterton, the marvellous boy, ended his sins and sorrows by suicide. The congregation, like that of All Saints' Margaret Street, comes largely from without the parish, for the fame of the service is widespread. Arthur Henry Stanton, a great priest and a fine man, labored here during many years, lighting candle before he passed on that will burn through the ages. One of the chapels at the main entrance is deservedly considered an architectural gem, though greatly marred by later alterations. The reredos and side altars are extremely beautiful.

There have been several organists at St Alban's among whom may be mentioned Sydney Marks, Thomas Adams, Dr. Oldroyd, and Mr G D Cunningham (now of Birmingham). The present organist is Mr Owen Franklin, FRCO., to whom and to the Rev. H. Ross are due may thanks for help in connection with this article. Unfortunately, there is not choir school, with the result that the whole resources of the parish have to be drawn upon, aided by all the outside help that is available. It is, therefore, all the more creditable that masses such as those of Beethoven, Dvorak, Schubert, Mozart, Hummel, Silas Gounod &c., are sung, alternated during Advent and Lent with the works of Palestrina and Byrd. The church is remarkably good for sound.

Turning now to the organ, we find that it was built by Father Willis in 1893; consequently it is a delicate task to speak candidly of an instrument that has so many years of service to its credit. There are those who will speak strongly in favour of everything in the instrument, and some who are not quite so convinced of its merits. For my own part, I feel drawn towards both camps, but still hope to present a carefully considered and unbiassed opinion. Prejudice is a poor staff to carry one through life, but it is more than dangerous when approaching an organ, because a name greatly honoured is apt to close our cars to shortcomings decidedly present. Heard in accom¬paniments, the ensemble of this organ is glorious; but in the way of quiet stops, we notice a considerable dearth and much duplication of fairly power¬ful flute tone. This is my brief summing up of the general characteristics of what is really a fine old organ. An instrument such as this places the organist in an invidious position, especially when playing for his choir or when using solo stops, though the church may be very good for sound.

We may conveniently investigate first the department of the great, which is the home of one or two surprises. Some will hold up their hands in horror at the mention of slotted diapasons as the backbone of any organ. Yet these diapasons are slotted, and I have always admired them "down the church." When trying them myself, I sought to forget that they were slotted and to judge their worth by what was actually heard. I maintain that the diapason chorus, with or without mutation work, is most satisfactory and efficient, and an ample foundation for the three fine reeds. Of course, one does not, in a Willis organ, look for diapasons of the type:, associated with the names of other great builders, though all have equal merit. No. 2 open has a somewhat brighter upper range than No. 1, but otherwise their tone is similar, the difference being in their relative power. The large open is a fine, virile fellow with great carrying power and body. The addition of No. 2 increases its power considerably. The whole of the flue-work is on quite moderate wind pressure.

Slotting has for its object the blending of reed and flue work. Willis was essentially a reed voicer: and so, in order that the effect of his reeds might not be spoilt by having to speak with heavy-tone flue work, he minimised that heavy tone by slotting. Cavaille-Coll would slot every open metal pipe, mixtures and all! And that great French artist was renowned for his reed work. (Also, by the way, I

am credibly informed that Estey's, the American builders, believe firmly in slotted diapasons.) Thus, what¬ever may be the merits or demerits of the practice, it is not dead. Cavaille-Coil and Willis were both men who had thought deeply on this subject: yet each bad manifest shortcomings when we consider some of their flue work. Still, nothing of this affects my opinion of the St. Alban's diapasons, which it is difficult to believe are slotted at all. Certainly, it seems clear that slotting need not always destroy good diapason tone.

Another surprise we meet is in the double diapason, which has a stopped wood bass! Whoever imagined that Father Willis could have done such a thing? Space may have been the reason, for the organ has not much height to stand in. The practice here followed is skilful, fur the harmonics of the stopped wood pipes have been kept prominent, and consequently it is hardly possible to tell where the change occurs. The "join" is quite the cleverest I ever heard, and the more so as the metal pipes are slotted. The double suits the 8ft opens admirably, as it adds much body without making the tone too muddy. Although I think open metal pipes are preferable, this Willis example is worthy of serious thought where money and space are factors. I have long marvelled at the way in which Father Willis sometimes voiced his bourdon pipes, when compelled by circumstances.

Speaking of the Willis diapasons reminds me of a visit I made recently to Winchester Cathedral. As the old builder left the organ, the great had only two small 8ft. opens and a mild double and octaves. The foundation was quite swamped by the upper work and the reeds (trumpets). Though the tone was good, it was simply non-existent as regards power. Hele subse-quently added two larger opens, a No. t double, a principal, and so forth: and to me these stops seem to be the very making of the organ, and on low wind blend perfectly. As the old stops are retained, an interesting compari¬son is easy.

We might well learn a lesson from a comparison of the organs at Win-chester and Westminster Abbey. In both the diapasons were inadequate: but while at Winchester two low-pressure 81t diapasons of different power were added, at Westminster one heavy-pressure open of greatly increased power was inserted. Perhaps there was no alternative.

The principal at St. Alban's is similar in power and tone to the smaller open, but not so strong as may be found in other Willis organs. It can be used to brighten either open. The 8ft. flute is beautiful, on the powerful side, and might by some be regarded as a species of open diapason, so widely do diapasons differ. Although not of true diapason tone, this flute resembles a soft diapason far more than do some gamba-like diapasons. The aft stop blends well with it, and I should think that these flutes, with some of the swell, would be adequate for the usual week-night services, as their effect down the church is considerable. The twelfth, fifteenth and mixture all fill their offices well, and nothing is overdone. An effective selection is that of great flue work with the pedal reed and 32ft. Lynnwood Farnam says that this is one of the finest greats he has ever heard.

The three trumpets are fine, either alone, together, or with full flue-work. Each is distinct, although rather alike in power and quality of tone. They are certainly trumpets, and not trombas, though somewhat richer, especially in the bass, than I have sometimes found. The double is of slightly thinner tone throughout. When this organ is rebuilt, it is to be hoped that these three reeds will be placed on a piston by themselves. This practice is already followed by several builders in the case of the three swell reeds.

The choir organ is of exquisite tone, but much too loud,— a difficulty that would be removed by placing it in a box. There is nothing quiet enough for use with the hautboy, vox humans, &c. I have found this a repeated shortcoming in Father Willis's organs, which is equalled only by the great similarity of his flutes. Yet I cannot think of Willis enclosing his choir organs. Of course, in his day, we did not look on enclosure as we do now; perhaps future builders will enclose all their pipes, for everything points that way. The dulciana is a delightful little diapason, and fills that role when other choir stops are added. The blend of everything is noticeable: gedacts, flutes, 2ft., all mix, no matter

how they are changed about. Therein lay the art of the old builder. As was always the case, the gamba is keen and loud, pure string tone being present to a degree that must have been surprising when this organ was built. The two 4ft. flutes are very beauitiful, the lieblich having perhaps a little more "interest" than any other flute in this instrument. Beautiful as all the flute tone is, I certainly miss one of the old builder's exquisite spitz flotes : they were in a world of their own, and quite unlike the ordinary " soft and mellow" flute, resembling more a kind of salicional or quintadena. Their utility is beyond question, for they combine well with everything and are timbre-creators with stops of similar power. These spitz flotes are to be found in many organs built by Father Willis, which makes one wonder why they are not to be found here.

It was surely in this class of tone, the quintadena, that Robert Hope-Jones did so much good work. We see his influence in the tone of our modern viol and thick-lip diapason; but I do not think that we have profited as much from his teaching as we might have done. His organ at Hanover Square had a lot of delightful upper-partial quality about some of the quieter stops when I reviewed it for this magazine, and this I hope will never be destroyed. In his own way, Hope-Jones was a thinker and strove for ideals he could not always attain. That he had much to teach is shown in his own organs and more or less in many organs that are built to-day. John Compton, also, is pointing the way to many another invention that merits the most earnest consideration of every organ builder and critic. What are we to think of his 32ft. cubes, his 32ft. "reed" at St. John's Wood, and the Shepherd's Bush diaphones? Hope-Jones swept away mixture work, substituting stops rich in overtones, though not with complete success. Stops of the quintaton and spitz flote type are a necessity to-day, and the more we recognise this the greater will be our progress. The choir reed at St. Alban's is very much like that on the solo: good of course, but quite needless in both places. There is no tremulant to choir.

There is an interesting bourdon in the swell: its voicing is hard, and it provides a very beautiful effect when used with the salicional and tremulant, to which the gedact may be added. It is metal above middle C, although the change is cleverly made. I have no great objection to a bourdon so long as it blends, which is what so few do I Bourdons generally impart no definite tone to anything, except perhaps an indescribable fluffiness quite alien to any manual they speak on. No more unsuitable tone could possibly be found than that of the ordinary swell bourdon. A manual bourdon is useful when it completes a family of similar stops: gedacts, for instance, as in many a fine old T. C. Lewis organ. However, St. Alban's has a bourdon much better than the ordinary; so we will recognise the genius of its maker and pass on to the lovely angelica-salicional effect. Peace seems to come with these beautifully voiced stops. In these days of keen viol tone, we seem rather to have overstepped the object of "soft strings :" and I notice that one builder at least—at St. James's, Muswell Hill—has reverted to the Willis angelica type of string. The swell reeds are what we expect in a Willis organ, the cornopean being a fine specimen for its age: blend is everywhere apparent. The contra posaune is a noble specimen, with a fine rich tenor and bass.

The mixtures throughout this instrument arc "inseparable" by which I mean that they draw as three ranks, and only so. I am glad to sec that the present custom of the firm is to separate the ranks,—a plan affording many synthetic and other possibilities. The vox humana is by far the best I have ever heard: but as there is nothing quiet enough with which to accompany it, very limited use can be made of the stop. The quietest available background is the solo flute, with the box shut! The hautboy is typical of the builder's work, being as regards tone something midway between trumpet and horn.

Naturally, one must speak first of the tuba on any solo organ built by Willis. To me it sounds like an old reed, having much fire and body: to those who pin their faith to the ultra smooth, stifled kind of reed, it may possibly sound rough. So will all reeds that possess vitality and brilliance. I am inclined to think that organs with "close," very smooth chorus reeds can never sound "alive." No amount of mixture work, or of diapasons, can atone for poor reeds, any more than good reeds can compensate

for bad diapasons. (By diapasons, I mean those of 16ft. 8ft., 4ft. and 2ft.) Many an organ is ruined by its reed work being too thick.

The solo flutes, clarinet and orchestral oboe arc very pleasan : though the last mentioned, however good in parts, is not noteworthy for its even tone. The solo organ is enclosed, with the exception of the tuba. One regrets the absence of a tremulant.

It is often said that no two organs are alike. I firmly believe this to be a fact, even when they have been built by the same mart. Many individual stops may be identical, but there is sure to be something distinctive in each ensemble. The 32ft. sub-bourdon in this organ, and the perfect one by Hunter I found at Spanish Place, are as unlike each other as they possibly can ha This Willis specimen shows again what the old man could do with heavy tone. At Salisbury he made the 16ft. bourdon so like a twelfth that it hardly sounds like a bourdon: and Dr. Alcock told me that he generally uses the violone instead! We have just seen the wonderful "bite" in the bourdon bass on the great. Now we hear a 32ft. that has very little of that deep, soft foundation that more enlightened folk like to hear. Certainly a note here and there is fairly good, but the rest are hard, and suitable for use only with moderately loud manual work, thus defeating the ideal of this ethereal pitch. All the same, this bourdon is vastly superior to the resultants one meets, many of which are best not heard at all. There is more bite in this 32ft. than in any metal 32ft. I have yet met. What is its use? Is it too loud? Its use seems to be to fatten the other pedal stops without destroying their pitch. In this way there is success, but only in this way. It is not, therefore, too loud; so that the cost of the 16ft. stopped pipes is well merited. For my part, I am sure that a stop like that at Spanish Place is much more useful; in fact, it is as useful as open pipes on a very low wind, and at infinitely less cost. I earnestly commend a comparison of these two 321t.'s to all thinkers on tonal design. The open wood is of fair scale, and not very ponderous. As at Margaret Street, its octave (extension) imparts to it more strength and seeming depth. The violone is useful and is not a metal diapason. I think the 'cello is extension, and neither are at all powerful.

The reed is a fine, impressive stop of the free-tone family, sounding better right down the church than at the console. It is certainly a fine old reed. The mixture is evident, even in full pedal, and I thought it lacking in blend. I think, for a pedal mixture to blend, a strong 8ft. and 41t. stop is needed, although there are so few pedal mixtures about that one's experience is necessarily limited. At the same time, Mr. Clay thinks this mixture is principal (8ft.?), twelfth and fifteenth. I take it that "principal" on the pedal organ signifies 8ft. pitch, and that is why I suggest a good 4ft stop to "meet" the mixture. In this particular pedal organ, I certainly feel that a good firm metal 16ft. diapason would have been more serviceable.

The drawstop action is very heavy indeed, being mechanical, excepting the pedal stops, which are pneumatic. The three pistons affect their stops in a very leisurely way, and the composition pedals are not easy to work. The organ is divided, being placed on each side of the chancel, with the console on the south side, not detached. As may be seen, for an organ of this size, the "cases" cannot be considered impressive: both are alike, and are practically flush with the wall.

GREAT

Double diapaso	... 16
Open diapason	... 8
Open diapason	... 8
Claribel flute	… 8
Harmonic flute	... 4
Principal	… 4
Fifteenth	... 2
Twelfth ...	... 3
Mixture ...	3 rks
Double trumpet	... 16
Trumpet	… 8
Clarion	… 4

PEDAL

Contra bourdon	... 32
Open diapason	… 16
Vlolone	... 16
Bourdon	... 16
Octave ...	... 8
'Cello	... 8
Mixture ...	3 rks
Ophicleide	... 16

SWELL

Bourdon	… 16
Geigen principal	… 8
Lieblich gedact	… 8
Vox angelica	… 8
Salicional	… 8
Gemshorn	… 8
Flageolot	… 8
Mixture	3 rks
Hautboy	… 8
Vox humana	… 8
Contra posauue	… 16
Cornopean	… 8
Clarion	… 4
Tremulant	

SOLO

Tuba	… 8
Clarinet	… 8
Orchestral oboe	… 8
Hohl flote	… 8
Wald flote	… 4

CHOIR

Viola da gamba	… 8
Dulciana	… 8
Hohl flote	… 8
Lieblich gedact	… 8
Concert flute	… 4
Lieblich flote	… 4
Piccolo	… 2
Corno di bassetto	… 8

COUPLERS

Choir to pedals
Great to pedals
Swell to pedals
Solo to pedals
Swell to great
Solo to great
Swell to choir