

Westminster Abbey by Canaletto, 1749

Super Organ CDs



Don Scott



On April 29, 2011, Fleur de Lis Recordings released a highly enhanced and cleaned-up recording of the 1937 Coronation of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth II. This was a timely two-disc release to correspond with the recent Royal Wedding, which also took place in Westminster Abbey and used the same basic organ. If you have experienced listening to old mechanical and electronic recordings, you may have noticed that sometimes the trueness of the performance sneaks through despite clicks, scratches, and surface and electronic noise. The ear/mind can tune out the imperfections and the music flows with analog magic.

the Coronation. The voice restoration is surprisingly good, especially on a bonus track: "A Message to the Empire from H.M. King George VI," broadcast from Buckingham Palace on Coronation Day, May 12, 1937. This selection is akin to a modern-day recording with no noise, clicks, or buzzes. On the point of musical enjoyment, I found no other content for the audiophile to gush over. An exception is perhaps the ending of the last musical selection on disc 2: Recess, "God save the King," where the might of the Harrison & Harrison organ (a revamping of the Hill organ of 1848, installed for the 1937 occasion), still sneaks through.

Details of the organ in Westminster Abbey.

Good organ recordings are tough to find. Inspired by the British Royal Wedding, Fleur de Lis has issued CDs of historic remastered 78-rpm discs of the 1937 Coronation of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth II.

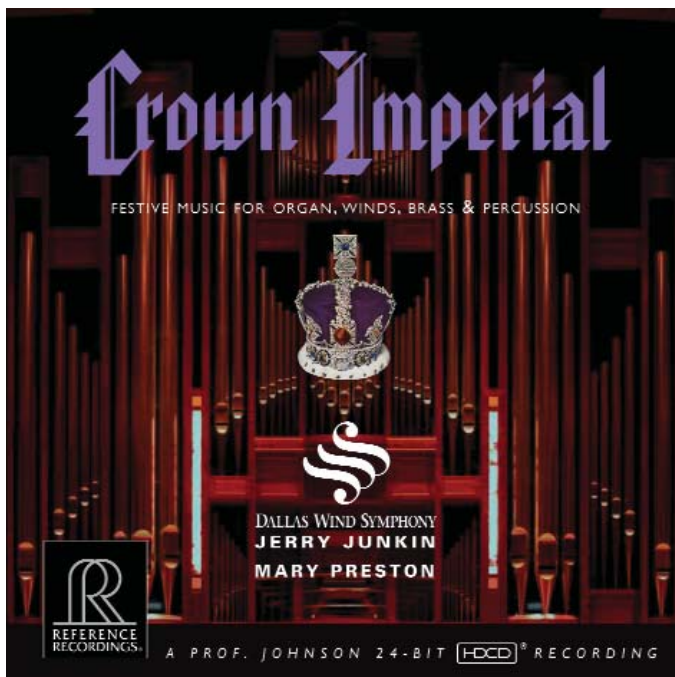
In this recreation, Ward Marston, a pioneer and master in the field of audio restoration, applied his skills with finesse and pomp over the aged circumstances to remove those unwanted artifacts. The results are sound quality of limited merit for the audiophile, all electronically sifted

Westminster Abby was the site of the wedding of William and Kate earlier this year, as well as the 1937 Coronation of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth II in 1937.

from a set of original issue of 28 78-rpm records sold shortly after

Overall, the two-disc set is an excellent revisited preservation of a historical event with a side-line of a few blurbs of audio nirvana. It is available at www.fdl-recordings.com. For comparison, you may wish to listen to a copy of the original 78 of the King's speech; for this, and to see other Coronation footage, go to www.britishpathe.com/record.php?id=49839.

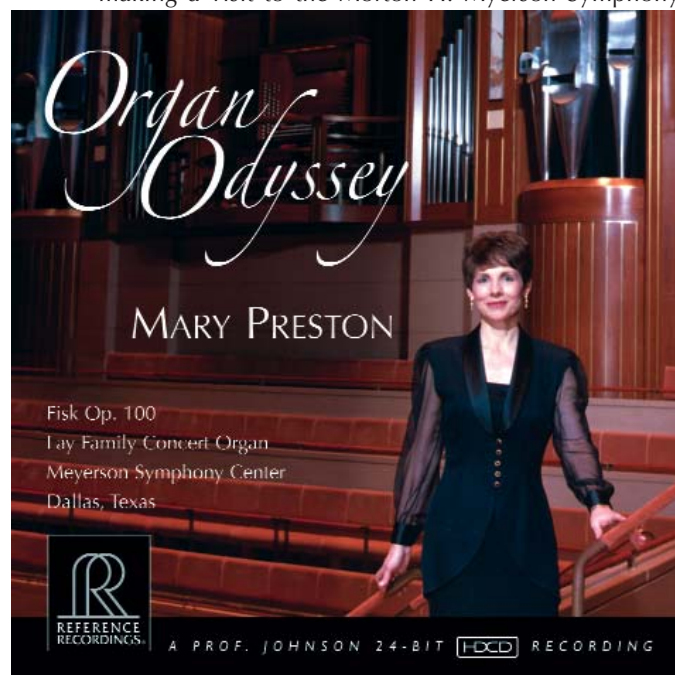
A little about Mr. Marston: Ward was born blind, began playing the piano at age four, and later gradually developed jazz-playing skill as well. As a teenager, he studied organ with Pierre Cocherau, the organist of



Notre Dame, Paris. Interestingly enough, he managed the college FM radio station at Williams College, which I often visited a few years later in the early 80s as a broadcast equipment salesman. At Williams, Marston developed skills as a recording engineer, which led to further projects at Columbia Records, the Franklin Mint, and Bell Laboratories, where he restored the earliest known stereo recording (1927). In addition, he would sometimes jam with big-band artists and formed the Ward Marston Orchestra, which still performs at private parties. But all along, he was developing listening skills: What should a restored recording really sound like and by what electronic means can that “real” aural image be transferred onto a hard drive?

Back Home

On a trip to Dallas in April 2011, I could not resist making a visit to the Morton H. Myerson Symphony



Center, one of the better concert halls anywhere. I hit it lucky: The place was empty and the guard on duty let two family members and me explore to our hearts' contents. I did the hand-clapping experiment to check out decay times with the place empty and with most of the massive adjustable concrete slab reverberation chambers and panels closed. Only moderate (Ricola-type) echo came back. My thought is that this is a great place for full orchestra even with a full house, but lacks the longer multiple reflections and longer decay times of larger European cathedrals that augment massive organs. With this thought in mind, here are two recordings of required listening to prove my point — the first for full orchestra, the second for solo organ.

(1) Grab a copy of the 2007 Reference Recording (RR-112) and listen to the last selection of Michael Daugerty's "Niagara Falls" (1954) featuring the Dallas Wind Symphony directed by Jerry Junkin and Mary Preston on Organ. The recording engineer was Keith O. Johnson, who without his skills this would have been just another mediocre recording, but it is not. It is wonderful. It is a confluence of skills that will take you on a ten-minute thrill ride in and around and over the falls. There is always an edge of excitement and an undercurrent of irresistible energy, with a few periods of peacefulness just before the barrel breaks open and exposes you to the fury of the falls. In this recording, Mary Preston does her magic by adding monstrous low-frequency foundation and power to this recording using the Lay Family Organ — well-played, Mary. To me, this is the most enjoyable piece of classical music I have ever experienced, perhaps because I have a picture of the might of the falls cemented in my mind. If you have ever been to Niagara Falls or plan on going, you will understand and most likely agree: the musical representation is vivid.

(2) On a separate, slightly less squeaky-clean Reference Recording (RR-113), also recorded by Keith O. Johnson, Mary Preston gives a fine rendition of Charles-Marie Widor's "Symphony No.5 — Toccata," with an accurate, exciting, and energetic performance of this selection. She was restrained at the times where that is needed and forceful where it is not, yet all the time painting a picture of beauty, with masterful strokes of hands and feet. In this selection, I was most mindful of her skills rather than of the particular instrument she was playing or the hall acoustics. I should say that the other musical selections are notable too. One thought I had was that the same organ in a stone-walled cathedral would sound much better. This is due to the frequency shifts and different time relationships of the multiple reflections (decays) in such a cathedral, which change pitch and add and subtract to a given fundamental note and contribute heavily to the overall tonal signature of a particular organ. Without these laws of physics, an organ can sound uncomfortably “dry” and not musical at all; one cannot live without the other. Here are two thriller selections on YouTube that demonstrate the importance of acoustics and organ as musical mates: Daniel Roth plays Widor — Mache from 3rd Symphony St. Semin, Toulouse, France. The main sanctuary of St. Semin is 378 x 203 x 67 feet and features a monster Cavaille'-Coll organ, basically built in 1888. My other listening suggestion is McNeil Robinson plays Dupre at St. Mary the Virgin Church, which is on 46th Street, just off Times Square. This is a 1970 record-

ing of "Ave Maris Stella IV" from Marcel Dupre's Op.18 "Vepes du Commun". The low-frequency growl of this organ is amazing and is no doubt acoustically amplified by the standing waves being additive as ideal reflections in the sanctuary. The church has frequent concerts featuring the organ (now updated); consult its website for schedule: www.stmvirgin.org.

Full of Wind

Since my days as a child, and before I could walk, my mother used to carry me with her to hear the Great Organ in the auditorium of the Ocean Grove (NJ) Camp Meeting Association. (There are scheduled organ recitals during the summer: Check http://www.oceangrove.org/pages/ORGAN_RECITALS11). Then, at age six, I would just camp next to the organist at the Asbury Park Convention Center and become fascinated by the Wurlitzer's unique sounds. Since then, I have frequently been entranced by the impressive sound of what is currently the largest church organ in the world in the Cadet Chapel at the West Point Military Academy. Three summers ago, the north tower of the chapel and organ were hit twice by lightning, and the strikes cleaned out most of the miles of control wiring, console controls, and a few blower motors. At my last visit on April 3, 2011, about 80 per cent of the 874 speaking stops and 23,236 pipes (and counting) were restored. Thanks to W. Grant Chapman, Curator of Organs, USMA, and others, the organ is regaining and refining its might into an instrument as good as any good organist wants it to be. Since the chapel (especially when full) lacks the long, multiple decay times of large European cathedrals, the "big" sound is created by duplicate ranks being played both at the front and rear of the chapel. Sit in the right spot along its 275-foot interior and the sound is immersively captivating — surround sound without electronics.

During my last visit in April to West Point, the featured organist was Dr. Jung-A Lee, who is a well-known and a highly sought-after performer. She is Korean-born and received a good share of her musical education at Yale. She is currently an organist at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Newport Beach, CA, an adjunct professor at Vanguard University, and holds a multitude of other positions to promote music. To add depth to her desire to especially promote organ music, she founded Music Mission International in 2009, and she is chair of that non-profit organization which has 12 board members. A full list of her education and many achievements is best read at www.musicmissioninternational.org. Also, her recording can be purchased on this site, along with viewing her bi-coastal concert schedule. Because I appreciated her fine performance at West Point of Widor's "Allegro (Symphony No.6 in G," I simply had to meet her after the concert. As a result of that meeting, Dr. Lee kindly sent me a copy of her latest DVD/CD set, "Beauty in the Wind." One selection especially fascinated me because of the skill which it required to play on the organ: "A Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy" from The Nutcracker Suite by Tchaikovsky, recorded at the Geneva Presbyterian Church, Laguna, CA. The fairies were indeed dancing with unusual delicacy. In contrast on the same organ, "Prelude in Classical Style – G," Jung-A presented a quite robust performance, but needed just a few more Wheaties from her to polish it to a higher level. Other selections

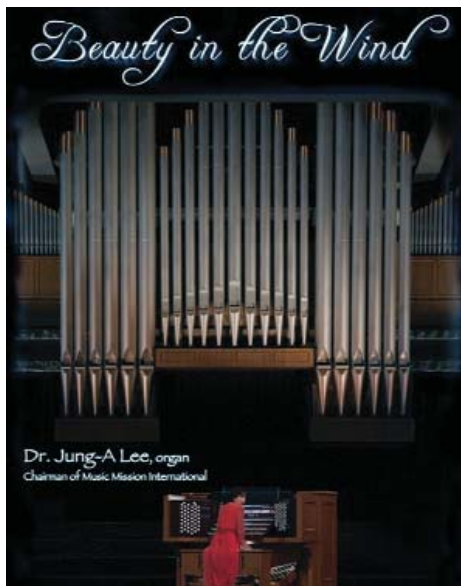


that I found worthy on the disc were "Sinfonia from Cantata No. 29, 'We Thank You, Lord, We Thank You' " by J.S. Bach, especially the let-it-all-loose ending on the organ of The First Baptist Church, Santa Ana, CA. Additional perfection is "Trumpet Tune" of Purcell, recorded at St. Andrew's and in a duet with David Washburn; each artist enhances the other. David Washborn holds the position of Principal Trumpet with the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra and the Los Angeles Opera Orchestra and has been the principal trumpet on several movie soundtracks. Also on the like list is "Theme and Variations from Hommage à Frescobaldi by J. Langlais." The pace and timing just seem to flow in the correct order; I was not agitated and didn't anticipate anything, just experienced calm listening in peace. Overall, I was pleased with the DVD/CD set. No, it is not a block-buster or woofer-smoker. In fact, the sound suffers some digitus, with rather harsh limiting snafuing the music's wide extreme dynamic range, but the audio quality is still good enough to appreciate the artist, who is exceptional. (Note: I am being super critical.) The DVD duplicates many of the preferred cuts, and appears to have an edge in audio quality. The CD is 5.1 surround, the DVD is a two-channel mixdown from 5.1. The video playback quality is excellent.

Above, the Ocean Grove, NJ, Auditorium; below, Dr. Jung-A Lee at the keyboard of the West Point Cadet Chapel organ.

On November 20, 2011 at 3:00 p.m., Felix Hell, a most prominent organist, will be giving a recital at the





West Point Cadet Chapel. This should be a spectacular event and worthwhile attending. Search: West Point Cadet Chapel, then go on to "Events." Felix Hell's CDs can also be purchased from Reference Recordings: www.referencerecordings.com.

Moving On

On the subject of DVD CD sets, I received a copy of Telarc's "Cameron Live, the DVD." Cameron Carpenter is a something of a controversial artist in that he uses his own idiosyncratic interpretations of Bach, in particular, perhaps to make his recordings more energetic and appealing to the non-organ or non-Bach listener. The editor tells me that he is reminded of Virgil Fox in this regard, but Bach is able to weather such adaptations. Frankly, I don't care much for Bach by Carpenter, but I was pleased to find one selection on the DVD that is fascinating in its creativity: An original 1988 piece by Carpenter entitled "The Clockwatcher." This short (3:40 minute) selection played on his personal practice Wurlitzer organ is sheer story-telling by musical expression. There is no sonic bashing without reason, just pure genius. The background has clock ticking at an unchanging pace. The music builds from a sweet, normal metronomed pace to a more excited one, then it slows down from the peak on a bell-shaped curve of excitement, and returns to the more normal metronomed rhythm. The end is climaxed by a few drum beats, a clang, louder drum beats, then nothing — death and the clock stops t i c k i n g .

C a m e r o n describes this piece in the video interview section of the DVD as

telling a story and that it is "a study in the ominous (impending danger, a threatening)." However, the atmosphere of the music seems a little mild for that harsh thought: Rather I think it is life: being born into innocence, changing to a more hectic pace as man tries to squeeze in too many things before death, then life slows down, and finally death. The constancy of the clock ticking runs a dual theme: Man cannot alter time; he only thinks he can. The video illustrates how precise the artist adds feeling to his own creation and how skilled Cameron is at stretching his hands to simultaneously play three of four manuals on the Wurlitzer. Still for the audiophile, both Bach lovers and those who don't care for his music, the rest of the two-disc set is worthwhile; give it a listen, as there is no doubt that Carpenter is of exceptional talent. The disc number is Telarc 39180-00, www.telarc.com.

Lastly, four suggestions to hear why this magazine, Jung-A Lee, and I are enthusiastic about promoting the cause of reviving and cultivating listening to classical organ. (1) Again visit YouTube with your best-dressed audio card, audio driver updates, audio environment programs, best sounding player software, amp, and speakers to "CM Vidor – Symphony No.6 – Allegro – Matteo Imbruno." This recording was from Concert Breda Grote Kerk, 1995, on a Flentrop organ in the Netherlands. I include this selection, not because Matteo Imbruno is a better organist than Jung-A Lee, but because its artist, organ, cathedral acoustics, and recording techniques all sum and are interdependent to make one fantastic recording. (2) Another fine example of organ on YouTube is "Saint-Saëns, from St Quen." Here Johannes Geffert plays the "Fantaise in E Flat" on the Cavaille'-Coll organ in Quen Rouen. This organ is considered the finest organ in France (built in 1890 by Aristide Cavaille'-Coll.) Of particular note is its superior, super-powerful 32-foot Contra Bombarde. The total organ signature is smooth and pleasant; it just doesn't scream at you, yet it can rattle your innards without strain. I have heard live, in person, the Great Organ of Saint Eustache, in Paris, but prefer the less brilliant sound from Quen Rouen. (3) Another mind-boggling adventure into preserved fidelity via YouTube is an offering, which came from an early digital recording sold on an 80's Mitra LP, then copied to cassette, and finally it made its way to the video. The sound quality is staggering, except for a few record clicks that really don't get in the way. This is a live must-hear organ, if I ever get to northern France. (4) The last entry I found of interest on YouTube is "Louis Viene – Finale from the 1st Organ Symphony". It uses the "sound" of the organ of the parish church of San Vincezo, Martine, in Nole (near Torino, Italy.) The organ was built by Gardini in 1922; however, the church collapsed on November 15, 2006 and destroyed the organ. The amazing sound heard on this YouTube selection is from a NDB-based virtual organ program. The organist, Federico Piglione, who must have an incredible musical memory, similar to Ward Marsten mentioned earlier, saved samples from similar sounding organs, primarily Shirokuma's Notre Dame de Budapest as the main base, plus added the best from a few other favored organs, and recreated as close to his aural memory the sound of the destroyed organ in a computer program. "Wow!" is the word; just give a listen. And "Oh yes," I do like Dave Baby Cortez too.

