

### Felix Aprahamian



*Felix Aprahamian, British music critic, writer and broadcaster has been a contributor to the musical press since 1931 and a broadcaster since 1942. Among his many appointments he was Assistant Secretary and Concert Director of the London Philharmonic Orchestra, deputy music critic of the Sunday Times, music editor of The Listener and visiting professor and lecturer at numerous Universities. He was co-founder and organiser of the Concerts de Musique Francaise from 1942-1964. His many publications include Ernest Newman's Essays from the World of Music, Essays on Music from The Listener and The Heritage of Music (vol 4): The Twentieth Century.*

## The Rise of the Organ Music Society

Organ recitals have been a feature of London music-making for years. Sacred or secular, original or transcribed, the music played and heard at those events has varied considerably. The present essay is concerned specifically with a period beginning in 1931 with the foundation in London of The Organ Music Society and the essential continuation of its work in the recitals given at the Royal Festival Hall from 1954 until abandoned in 1989.

Another feature of London music-making, certainly in my octogenarian memory, has been the down-grading if not rubbishing of anything that reflected credit on the on the immediately preceding generation: administrators, orchestral managers and composers included. So it was with a series of recitals that sustained itself financially by the use of the Royal Festival Hall between 5.30 and 7.00pm on Wednesdays in Autumn and Spring until needlessly abandoned in 1989. True, audiences never maintained four figures except for all-Bach programmes. On the other hand, even the smallest audiences never fell below 500. At £2 a ticket this produced £1000 and a prestigious continental player might receive £500 to take care of his travelling and hotel expenses. Since the Hall had to be lit, cleaned and stewarded for an evening concert anyway, the income still provided a profit, even enough to print and pay for programme notes distributed free. (I know because I wrote them.)

The Organ Music Society, aesthetically the basis of those RFH organ recitals, was the brain-child of Archibald Farmer, an odd but very remarkable man who always had a clear idea of how The OMS – he always insisted on the definitive article, with a capital T – should go about its work. I remember its start, in the vestry of St Peter's Church, Eaton Square, following a Tuesday evening recital on February 10, 1931 by the then organist C H Trevor, an equally odd and remarkable man. Both musicians were Fellows of the Royal College of Organists and memorable recitalists. The first OMS committee consisted of Farmer, its instigator, Caleb Trevor, Harvey Grace, Editor at the time of *Musical Times* (to which Farmer was a regular contributor in the 1930s) and the young Nicholas Choveaux, who became the first Hon. Sec. of the OMS.

In 1930, Farmer and Choveaux, together with Godfrey Sceats, had been the three organisers of the Karg-Elert Festival. It was that event which had brought Max Reger's successor as Harmony Professor At the Leipzig Conservatorium to London as honoured guest and central figure at a Karl-Elert Festival in the church of St Lawrence Jewry. Eight organists, including the three organisers, were the recitalists. Notices appeared in the national as well as musical press. It seemed the moment for Farmer to think of a more permanent foundation to further the cause of original organ music. Hence The OMS, Archibald Farmer's printed prospectus of the new group remains a model of its kind.

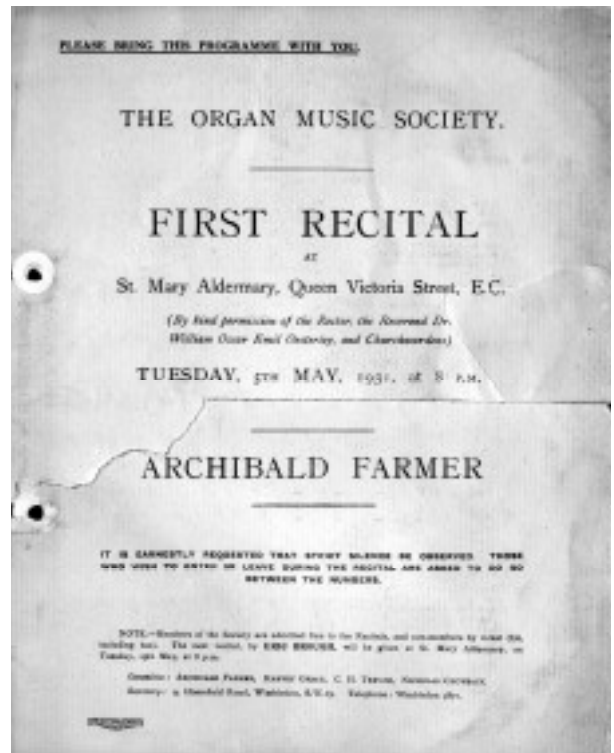
*The Organ Music Society was formed with only one intention: to be a mechanism for promoting organ recitals of the finest kind. It is not an organists' society. It is for the musical public, of which organists and listeners are both part. It is a league of those who wish to see the organ recital placed on its proper level, and it is no less a league for those who would begin to enjoy the organ recital if it were placed there – beside the recitals of other solo instruments.*

*Many people, players and non-players alike, consider the organ a great but rather ill-served solo instrument, whose powers are but imperfectly realised; and there are others who would appreciate the organ more justly if they heard it to better advantage. The enthusiast is in the habit of making allowances for the faults of organ recitals; those who are not enthusiastic stay away. Who can blame them? The organ recital is commonly given in a church under conditions that prevail in no other form of solo performances; no recognised standard of either programmes or playing exists; and the whole thing suffers in a chilly atmosphere of mediocrity and poverty.*

*Even the very existence of recitals is dependent on chance. A little caprice on the part of the authorities, a little laziness on the part of the recitalist, or a drop in finances – any of these is enough to stop a series altogether. At the best of times we are never sure of hearing the players we want to hear, or the music, or the organs. Further, when one or other of these is present, there is still something missing: the audience. Yet we know what the organ recital can be and should be; and we have a conviction that a programme of fine organ music, played by an artist, is as well worthy of consideration as any other musical event.*

*The Organ Music Society is a simple means of bringing together the necessary conditions. Its original members were a group of enthusiasts who had a conception of ideal organ recitals. They formed themselves into a society to promote and finance them, leaving the way open for other enthusiasts, professional and amateur, to co-operate.*

*Season by season, a series of recitals will be given under the best available conditions. The treasures of organ music will be ransacked. Recitalists, who at present too rarely find themselves with an audience, and an occasion, will find both, if we can arouse their kindly interest in the young Society. Both the programmes and the schedule of recitalists will be governed by only one principle – the highest standard obtainable, unhampered by*



OMS programme for the first recital in 1931

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*convention or partisanship of any kind. The recitals will be given in the evening, from 8 o'clock to about 9.20pm, in the most suitable of such buildings as may be open for the use of the Society. Undoubtedly, the ideal for the organ recital is a concert hall with some amount of reverberation. But an adequate instrument is the prime consideration; and as there appears to be no hall in London fulfilling these conditions, and hireable by the Society, the first recitals must be given in a church. The Society aspires to having its own organ and, far off as this may seem, there is nothing whatever to prevent it.*

*The subscription, which has been fixed from the beginning at the very modest price of five shillings, constitutes membership. It comprehends admittance to the recitals, a copy of the programmes and other matter circulated by the Society, and a share in its government. Visitors to the recitals will either be charged an admission fee, or expected to contribute towards the expenses by buying a programme.*

*The Organ Music Society has a place of its own in our musical life, and hopes, as it grows, to attain to considerable usefulness. The extent of its development must depend upon the measure of support given to it.*

From the inaugural series of recitals at St Mary Aldermary in 1931 to its last at St George's Hanover Square, in 1973 ten years after Farmer's death the society fulfilled these declared aims. On the other hand, conditions had changed with the passage of years. The regular series of organ recitals inaugurated at the Royal Festival Hall provided London with events which effectively continued the Society's work. Archibald Farmer's dream had been accomplished.

It can be seen that the London organ recitals provided by both The Organ Music Society and the Royal Festival Hall overlapped for a number of years before the Society wound up in 1973. I wrongly assumed that the continuance of its work was safe with the Royal Festival Hall. A new dispensation had to prove its superiority by abandoning a series that reflected credit on its instigators. Now, in AD 2000, a wrong has been righted: Simon Preston inaugurates a new series of recitals at the Royal Festival Hall.

Of course, things have changed. In the 1930s, The OMS sought buildings housing suitable instruments. Faute de mieux, it was obliged to accept the hospitality of vicars not always in sympathy with its aims. In those days, programmes could not be sold in consecrated buildings, only outside the porch, sometimes in pouring rain. It was unthinkable then that in later times tickets would be sold for London musical events in consecrated buildings. It has since become the norm in cathedrals, abbeys and churches, both Anglican and Roman Catholic. It would seem that the fate of organ recitals, in buildings both sacred and secular, is now assured as the new millennium begins.