

# Ralph Downes

## A biographical sketch

Ralph Downes was born in Derby on 16 August 1904. In a musical autobiography written nearly eighty years later, he recalled with affection the organs he encountered as a boy – instruments by Victorian builders such as T.C. Lewis, Binns, Forster & Andrews, Bevington, and William Hill.

Listening to that kind of organ today, it is easy to understand Downes's enthusiasm: low wind-pressures, well developed choruses and the absence of extreme sonorities create an unforced, musical brilliance and ensure that stops blend and that textures are clear and intelligible. But boyhood acquaintance with organs of more recent origin, such as those at St. Bartholomew's, Elvaston, Derby (Ingram, 1904) and St. Mary's, Nottingham (Walker, 1916), made Downes aware of organ-building practices alien to blend and clarity, e.g., the use of heavy wind-pressures; the abandonment of mixtures and other high-pitched stops in favour of powerful foundation stops; pipes of exaggerated diameter (huge for diapasons, tiny for strings); the use of leathery lips and 'nicking' to produce smooth, un-natural sounds, etc. Such things were manifestations of an aesthetic hard for present-day musicians to understand. Part of the problem was that the organ had become a focus for technologists. Of these, the most notorious was Robert Hope-Jones, a telephone engineer who invented an electric mechanism to connect the keys and the pipes, and a range of new stops of extreme tonality.

Hope-Jones's view of the organ as an alliance of state-of-the-art technology and stops that were either very loud or very soft ignored the organ's fine (and at that time largely forgotten) repertoire and led, ultimately, to a new instrument with a repertoire all its own – the cinema organ. What characterised the Hope-Jones approach, and that of other influential organ amateurs of the time, was that it divorced the organ from music and turned it into a kind of noise-making machine – a platform for technological creativity for its own sake. It is a curious fact, but a fact nonetheless, that some of the most influential figures in the history of the British organ in the last two hundred years have been non-musicians. Ralph Downes was the outstanding exception. He was not a telephone engineer, or a banker, or an architect, or a clergyman, or a wealthy eccentric, or a member of any of the other categories into which influential organ amateurs have tended to fall. A professional organist, he pitted himself against unmusical practices in British organ building, determined to reverse the divorce of instrument and music that had taken place in the nineteenth century.

Downes studied at the Royal College of Music (1922-5) and whilst there was assistant organist of Southwark Cathedral (1923-5). After the RCM he was organ scholar at Keeble College, Oxford (1925-8) and then the first Organist and Director of Music at Princeton University Chapel (1928-1935). On returning to Britain, in 1936, he became Organist of the London Oratory (he had converted to Catholicism in 1927), where he remained until he retired, in 1977; and from 1954 to 1975 he was Professor of Organ at the RCM, influencing a great many distinguished pupils, e.g., Nicholas Danby, Gillian Weir, Nicolas Kynaston, and Thomas Trotter.

Downes's roots, then, were in the Victorian organ and in the Anglican tradition of organ playing, but his musical tastes extended far outside the organ loft, and in the 30s, exploring organs in countries such as France, Germany and Holland, he became deeply



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interested in continental organs and how the music of J.S. Bach and his contemporaries (and of later composers such as Franck) sounded on the kind of instrument it was written for. In particular, he made a study of 'scaling' (i.e., the relationship between the diameter of organ pipes and their length, and the way in which the diameter:length ratio varies with pitch) and came to realise that here was a key to the restoration of some of the characteristics the British organ had lost c.1900.

So when Downes was chosen to design the RFH organ, the LCC acquired not an establishment figure knowing little about organ building and happy for the new organ to follow traditional designs but a fine performer with a considerable knowledge of the repertoire and of all that was best in European organ-building practice. He wanted the new organ to break the mould of the Hope-Jones-inspired British Cathedral Organ and to enable organists to give a satisfactory account of substantially the whole of the organ repertoire. To the extent that he achieved this aim, he did so through his choice of stops, many of which were of continental inspiration, the scaling of the

pipes, the use of low wind-pressures, and by incorporating what for the 1950s was an unusually large complement of mixture and mutation stops (which caused Vaughan Williams to use the word 'Baroque', disparagingly, to describe the new organ).

Downes, though inspiring to work with, was not entirely an easy man: his integrity ruled out compromise, and his perfectionism and trial-and-error approach made him a demanding colleague. The construction of the RFH organ was indeed a protracted and at times exhausting episode for the builders, Harrison & Harrison Limited; but its completion marked the beginning of a new and fruitful period in British organ culture. The example of the RFH organ was impossible to ignore, and both builders and players, except those hidebound by tradition, were greatly influenced by it. Other instruments with which Downes was involved included Buckfast Abbey (1952-63), London Oratory (1954), St. Alban's Cathedral (1963), Fairfield Halls, Croydon (1964), Paisley Abbey (1968), Gloucester Cathedral (1971) and St. David's Hall, Cardiff (1982).

As performer, teacher and organ designer and consultant, Ralph Downes left an indelible mark on the history of the organ in Britain. Made a CBE in 1969 and a Papal Knight of St. Gregory the following year, he died on Christmas Eve 1993.