

Carol Williams



In Concert

Thursday 11th March 2010, 7.30pm
Hamilton Street Methodist Church,
Hoole, Chester

It is truly remarkable that Hamilton Street Methodist Church is able to attract such an outstanding international organist as Carol Williams to appear in this enterprising concert series, this one being on Thursday evening, 11th March 2010. To quote from the advance publicity: tributes such as “Organ Performances of Epic Proportions” and “The Most Versatile Organist Anywhere”, along with her background stating that she was born in Britain and moved to America to study at Yale University, where she was appointed University Chapel Organist and was awarded the Charles Ives prize for outstanding achievement. The Church’s organist and concert organiser, John Evans, introduced her at the start, after which she introduced all the items in her wide-ranging programme in a warm, entertaining and interesting manner, also telling the audience about her role as San Diego’s Civic Organist: weekly organ concerts are given there, attended by very large audiences. It was splendid that the Big Screen Presentation was used, so that the audience could see Carol’s magnificent work with hands and feet. Carol opened her concert with a piece composed specially for her last year: Carillon-Fanfare by the South Wales composer, Robert Jones (born in 1945), which gave the concert a lively start, showing many features of the organ and her imaginative playing, with delicate sections contrasting with powerful use of brilliant pedal work. There followed a

wonderful contrast in the memorably beautiful central Adagio movement from Vivaldi’s “Concerto in D minor” (not in the major key, implied in the programme), Op.3, No.11 for string orchestra, in which Carol used sensitive contrasting stops for different parts of the lovely, quietly flowing melody; this organ transcription was made by J S Bach, further arranged by the American organist, Virgil Fox. Following this was an “Ode to Thanksgiving”, a cleverly arranged group of some of Beethoven’s music, including the opening of the 2nd movement of his Piano Sonata No. 10 in G, Op.14, No.2, for violin and orchestra, and ending with part of the Ode to Joy from the finale of his 9th (Choral) Symphony, all of which gave Carol the opportunity to display many aspects of the organ, including the Zymbelstern (small bells) stop in the Romance section, and which she explained, after it, that this originally came from America. Her own arrangement of the well-known Hebrew Chorus from Verdi’s opera “Nabucco” came over most effectively, with magical contrasts in her use of stops giving contrasts in the melody line, rising to a vigorous climax before a lovely fade-out at the end. She then spoke about the Canadian composer Denis Bedard (born in 1950) and his “Introduction et Toccata” from his Trois Esquisses, this piece being for pedals only, which showed off her brilliant pedal technique magnificently, enhanced by the audience being able to watch her feet on the big screen, her hands only being used once: for a staccato chord at the end!

Then Carol went straight into an extra item (not in the programme): an arrangement of Irving Berlin’s “There’s No Business Like Show Business”, full of energy, ending with a thrilling downward glissande! Her arrangement of “On A Spring Note”, music by the fine 20th Century British light music composer and conductor, Sidney Torch, was a delight, with many colourful stops used, giving a specially effective lift to the jaunty main theme, and a lovely delicate ending.

Before she played the final item in Part One, the Toccata from Boellmann’s Gothic Suite, Carol spoke about her work as San Diego’s Civic Organist (as mentioned in the introduction of this account), as well as her experiences of playing the great organs in French Cathedrals, including some eerie feelings while practising this Toccata in empty buildings, which could easily be imagined from her fantastic, brilliantly powerful performance here!

Carol introduced Part Two with some interesting information on Antonio Valente (ca 1520-81), a blind Italian organist and composer who worked in Naples, whose piece “Lo Ballo dell’ Intorcias” she played with a wonderfully imaginative choice of stops, cleverly making this organ sound like a Renaissance band, complete with crumhorns! – very jolly! More jollity followed in her splendidly arranged sequence of several of Sousa’s marches, entitled “Famous Sousa Marches” (alternative title, she mentioned, is “Sousa On Parade”), including “The Liberty Bell”, and she gave each march its individual registration, producing good contrasts and including the Zymbelstern (small bells) stop again. We then heard more music from Paris in Lefebure-Wely’s “Bolero de Concert” (in a very different style to Boellmann’s Toccata in Part One), with a lovely choice of stops in the quieter middle section, contrasting so well with her vigorous, strongly rhythmic playing of the outer sections, followed by a jolly, jaunty light-hearted reading (complete with Zymbelstern!) of her imaginative arrangement of Thomas “Fats” Waller’s “Alligator Crawl”. Another aspect of this organ was heard in Will Hudson’s “Moonglow”, where Carol made use of the theatre organ sounds to produce a beautiful, relaxed, dreamy atmosphere, along with some louder contrasts. Music by another Welsh composer came next, in two popular pieces by Karl Jenkins: first, she produced a wonderfully sustained build-up of intensity leading to a contrasting quiet ending in “Adiemus, Adiemus: Songs of Sanctuary”, and second, in “Palladio”, we heard a feeling of great excitement, full of rhythmic vitality and intensity: magnificent! Before Carol introduced Widor’s famous Toccata (from his Symphony No. 5), she made some most generous comments about this Church and its warm welcoming atmosphere and its splendid organ, as well as asking everyone to give John Evans a well-deserved ovation for his excellent concert organising work and his own fine organ playing! She also mentioned her CDs and DVDs on sale, and her husband’s valuable support (he was also there). Widor’s Toccata sounded magnificent! – not only in the great power, but also in Carol’s careful attention to fine detail: in quieter parts she produced fine gradations in dynamics before the colossal effect of the pedals in the closing section. John Evans gave a good, warm vote of thanks, after which Carol played an encore: the “Sabre Dance” from Khachaturian’s Ballet, Gayane, in a very fast, brilliantly exciting performance.

This was a most memorable concert, generating a wonderful atmosphere, with such a tremendous range of music: from Renaissance back to theatre organ via the great French organs! All greatly appreciated by the most enthusiastic audience of 83. It is hoped that Carol is able to give a second concert here in the not too distant future.

The next concert in this series will be on Saturday 22nd May at 7.30pm, when we welcome The City of Chester Male Voice Choir and The Waverton Handbell Ringers.

Reviewed by IAN MILNES ~ 20th March 2010