

The complete organ voluntaries of John Stanley

Programme notes.

After the death of Henry Purcell in 1695 a craze for Italian music swept across England. In particular the music of Arcangelo Corelli was so popular that his newly published works were immediately pirated by all England's major publishers. His style left an ineradicable mark on English music for over a century, and, together with that of Antonio Vivaldi, led to an eclectic and totally cosmopolitan musical language which at its best formed the basis of a bright and lively polyphonic style and at its worst stifled originality in English composers for many decades.

It was John Stanley who popularised the use of this style in organ music. His illustrious predecessor Handel had written surprisingly little music for solo organ, and the voluntaries of Stanley's teacher Maurice Greene had never achieved more than a moderate popularity. Stanley's ten voluntaries op.5, however, sold so well that the composer followed it up by the publication of a further set, issued as op.6 though the pieces were written earlier than those of op.5. He eventually published a third set as op.7. Other composers followed his example but though literally dozens of sets of voluntaries were published in the following 50 years none of them were comparable in quality or originality with those of Stanley.

In addition to the thirty published voluntaries, a number survive in unpublished sources. Several are found in the five manuscript books compiled by the organist John Reading in the 1730s, now in libraries at Dulwich, Manchester and Tokyo; others in the Southgate manuscript at the Royal College of Organists; and a fugue in E minor (to be played after op.7 no.5 on 26 November) in Fitzwilliam MS 668, transcribed for this recital by kind permission of the syndics of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

The two main types of voluntaries are the fugue with slow, French-overture-like, introduction, and the solo-stop voluntary. The latter generally uses two contrasting timbres, provided by different distinctive stops or by one 'imitative' stop set off against the Swell or Echo manual. In each of the published sets the last three or four voluntaries contain fugues.

In the printed programme, the symbol ¶ means that the voluntary has been transcribed from one or more of the Reading manuscripts; the symbol † means that it is from the Royal College of Organists manuscript. The voluntary marked †§ (26 November) is also taken from the R.C.O. MS and is here preceded by an anonymous Diapason movement. Both pieces are published in H. Diack Johnstone's An RCO Miscellany, as is the Largo and Fugue in G minor (12 November).