

## The door

A small boy sitting at the organ in a village church. This is where it all starts.

The village was a windswept, sheep-farming community high in the Pennines. I'd played for services at the Methodist church every Sunday from age 8 or so and, in the absence of anyone else, it wasn't long before I ended up playing for weekly services at the parish church as well.

The evening services had long periods of silence. During the dark winter, the evening services were held before milking and then the silences would be punctuated by persistent mooing from the cowshed next door to the church. When the silences got too long I smuggled a novel up to the organ and read quietly.

One day there was a funeral at the church and I was to be the organist. It was the first funeral I had attended. The organ is at the front of the church and the entrance door at the back. I sat and played nervously, awaiting the arrival of the coffin, glancing up and to the right every few seconds to see whether the door was opening. Suddenly there was a tremendous crash from immediately to my left. I leaped up and nearly knocked the organ bench over. A pile of hymn books fell over and slid onto the floor. A door in the organ itself had been flung open and the coffin was being carried through it. I knew there was a second outside door there but had never known it to be used. No-one had thought to warn me that this was the door used for carrying in coffins. Heart thudding and fingers trembling I got ready to play "Rock of ages".

## Haslingden

St James' Church in Haslingden is a local landmark, its square tower standing proudly on the hillside, visible for miles around. Although my concert there was ostensibly to help raise money to repair the roof, in reality I was flattered to be invited. The parish archivist, a delightful and warm-hearted retired solicitor called George Walmersley, gave me an informative guided tour before leaving me to practice in peace. "Mind tha' feet, love" came a voice from behind a large vacuum cleaner. "Tha's new here? Hast tha seen t' pulpit – highest pulpit in Lancashire? It's so that by'time t' preacher's reached 'top he's too done in for a long sermon. An' this is John Carter's pew – that box is where he keeps t' whisky bottle – and over here is where t' last mayor used to sit and I could see him from o'er there and dost tha' know that ...". The pews of various local dignitaries, together with their occupants' attendant failings and scandals, were described at length and I was required to sympathise with the cleaner's lamentations concerning the introduction of electricity to the church. Amongst other things this had led to the organ making a "whooshing" sound when turned on: "it's the electric, do'tha see?"

Being a conceited teenager I carefully read the local paper to see whether it reported the impending concert and I was pleased to see that it did, even though it was only a couple of lines at the bottom of page 17, squashed under a rather longer report about

proposals to repaint a local zebra crossing. Two other stories in the paper were more interesting. The first read:

A man due to appear in court accused of being drunk and disorderly thought he would be sent to prison. So in a "state of hopelessness" he stole lead from Forest House, Bacup, a brass table top from Heightside Mission, a table from Bainbridge Slipper Works, an antique clock from Bethel Baptist Church Hall, and a bottle of sherry from outside a supermarket. "He felt he might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb," said Mr Philip Whittaker, defending, at Rossendale Magistrates Court on Monday.

If this news story seems to read like a parody of northern comedy, the second one seems like the plot of some Victorian whodunit:

After being tricked into leaving his home by bogus policemen, a diamond merchant who became goat farmer returned to find items worth an estimated £186,519 missing, Burnley Crown Court was told last week.

There are so many questions I would love to ask. Did the diamond merchant become a goat farmer because he had lost his property, or for some other reason? Bogus policemen? How did he come to have £186,519 worth of removable items in his home (at that time an average house would have cost perhaps £20,000)? And how is a value estimated to £186,519 (rather than £186,520, for instance?). In any event, Rossendale life was never dull.

## **A mint from the doctor**

"This is Dr Brown, the churchwarden". Dr Brown was a pleasant man with a broad smile. Back in my home village the local doctor had been churchwarden, so things had a familiar ring to them. It was my first term as a student at a university in the south of England and I was very aware of being the "northerner" with an accent and attitudes to life that were different. This little village in the Hampshire countryside promised a comfortable and homely community as well as a church with a wonderful new organ, for which I was first to give the opening recital and then remain as organist.

"And this is the other churchwarden, Dr Williamsen. And Dr Pamber, the verger". The local surgery evidently had a monopoly on running the church. The congregation was beginning to arrive. A middle-aged lady with a handbag was introduced as Dr Evans and was followed by Dr Baines, Dr Parker, Dr Pickles and Dr Wood. When Dr White was added to the epidemic I ventured, "Doctor of ...?". "Nuclear physics, of course". The other end of my "normal" Hampshire village was Aldermaston, home of the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment.

The week of the opening recital for the new organ I played two recitals – the other being in central London. Both experiences were terrifying. Both times I hardly slept the night before and suffered from painful throat and trembling hands during the actual concert. It really didn't seem as though I was cut out for giving concerts.

Three months later I found myself giving another recital in my adopted village. I stood at the front of the church and read out some half-hearted comments about the

pieces I was to play, though privately I wondered whether I was wasting everybody's time; whether I was just too nervous to make it all come together.

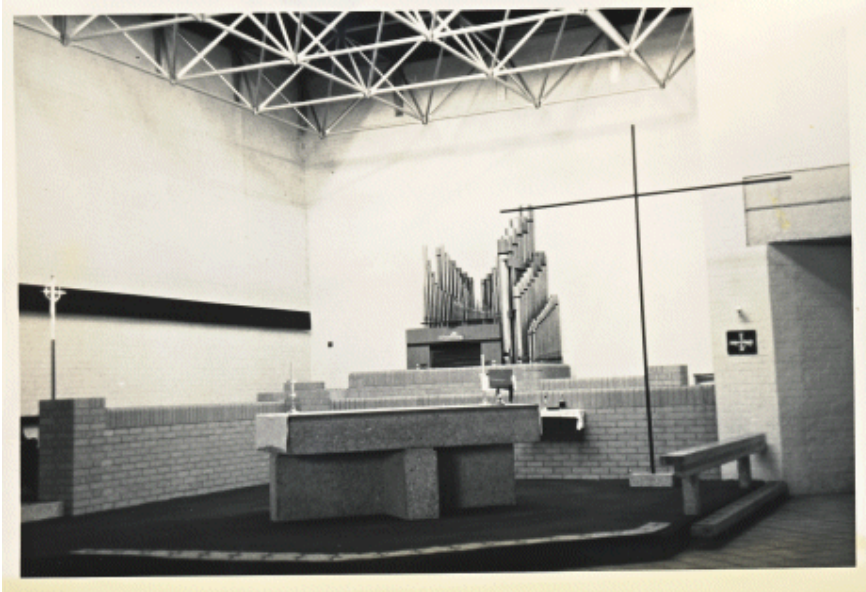
Then something astonishing happened. Charles (by then I was on first-name terms with the congregation) interrupted and asked a question. I had to think, and as I gave an explanation – freed from the prepared script – I found myself talking about the music as something that I really wanted Charles to understand and enjoy. “If you just listen out for ...” “Thanks”, he said. “I will. Here, have a mint”. I sucked at the mint and played the piece. Rather than worrying about whether I got it right I played it simply to demonstrate the point to Charles so that he could enjoy the effect he'd been asking about. Afterwards I realised that the terror of playing had gone. It has never returned.

I've played a thousand concerts since then but I've never stopped being grateful to Charles for that interruption and the peppermint.

## **A thousand years of church music in Reading**

Reading in the 1970s was an unpretentious red-brick town, a station on the London to Oxford railway or, for the more leisured, a stopping off point for Thames boats heading between the same two cities. With its little scattering of urban churches it has never given an impression of the kind of long musical tradition of which its larger neighbours can boast. It can, however, lay claim to one of the most astonishing pieces of British music from any period – the round “Sumer is icumen in”, which is found in a thirteenth-century manuscript from Reading Abbey. The music is remarkable in lots of ways, but most of all because it still sounds so good that people want to hear it. The text of the song is about the delights of springtime, with cuckoos singing, sheep bleating and goats farting (or leaping, depending on which translator you believe). The funny thing is that the manuscript has an alternative text, in Latin, about the Passion – almost as if the monks enjoyed singing their rowdy (and perhaps a little bawdy) version but if anyone came in they immediately assumed solemn faces and switched to the Latin text. It's a bit like the London commuters you can still see today in Reading station, reading a comic hidden inside their copy of the Financial Times. Of course, it's not surprising given that one of the original owners of the manuscript was the music-loving monk William of Winchester who had something of a reputation with the nuns. Perhaps the good churchmen of Reading have not quite forgiven their maverick monk: at any rate, our concert there did not include the piece (with either text), which is rather a pity, really.

## Architecture



“Would you give a recital to mark the re-opening of an organ?” Given that this was the second “opening recital” that year I couldn’t resist a private smirk of self-satisfaction whilst confirming that “I could probably fit that in”.

It was a strikingly modern church in a suburb of Reading, and its pleasant little organ – like most of the rest of the church – was still packed up in plastic whilst a leaky roof was being repaired. The organ (though relatively new) had received a small makeover whilst the church was closed, so its unveiling, and that of the rest of the church, was an event worthy of celebration.

The organist, the minister and the churchwardens all met up to show me round, clearly proud of the now-watertight building. “What do you think of it?” It was a fine, light, practical space and there were a hundred compliments I could and should have paid it. “It’ll look good when the scaffolding comes down”, I said. A lengthy silence followed this remark and glances were exchanged to decide who was going to point out that the tubular-steel bars criss-crossing the ceiling had earned the distinguished (and knighted) architect an award.

I still did the concert, of course, and asked my friend and fellow-student Steve to play the violin as well, for moral as well as musical support, but somehow my copybook was blotted and, unusually, I remember very little of the concert other than telling myself “don’t mention the roof!”

## A competition

"Please make yourself comfortable". What a ridiculous idea - anything less comfortable for a naive student than sitting in a concert hall for a competition in front of a distinguished judge and small and unsympathetic audience can scarcely be imagined. "You may play the pieces".

Playing music in this kind of situation is an odd and unnatural experience: playing "correctly" is so important that there's no room left for personal expression - or humour, even. Music shouldn't really be competitive (it should be about communicating feelings rather than about showing how clever the performer is), but student life is competitive, exam-based and without the luxury of a conscience. The competition involved playing a couple of prepared pieces and a completely unfamiliar piece "at sight" before a judge, who in this instance was a distinguished composer.

I survived the set pieces, somehow, without catastrophe. The distinguished judge then placed some music on the organ; a recent publication by an important university press. "Take a minute to look through it and then play this". I took a minute. Evidently a tricky exercise in coordination, made worse by the fact that it was in a "modern" and thoroughly unpredictable idiom. The music seemed "cold" and without any particular meaning, but I struggled through it after a fashion and was pleased, or rather relieved, to make it to the end without complete disaster.

The joy and relief of finishing almost made the ordeal seem worthwhile as I finally relaxed into euphoria. "Who on earth wrote this stuff?", I enquired of the distinguished judge, handing back the sight reading.

"I did".

How I came to win that competition I'll never know.

## **The Fairy Queen**

Reading University's Professor of Music in 1980 was the often-jovial and always eccentric Peter Wishart. I've always been grateful to him for deciding to stage *The Fairy Queen* because it convinced me what a fantastic composer Purcell was.

The opera contains some sections for choir, some for soloists and a little orchestral music and, for whatever reason, Peter decided that he wished to conduct the choral and orchestral bits but to play the harpsichord during the soloists' sections. This meant, of course, that someone else had to conduct during the solos and play the harpsichord during the orchestral and choir sections. This job fell to me.

The only problem with this system is that Purcell's music, rather than being divided into distinct sections, runs from the one number to the next without a break, meaning that there were no obvious opportunities for Peter Wishart and myself to swap tasks. Undeterred, Peter designed a cunning and novel solution - a long and well-polished harpsichord bench. As one number drew to a close the person conducting would sidle across to the right-hand end of the bench, sit down and begin to edge towards the middle, conducting with the right hand and taking over the flow of harpsichord notes with the left. The harpsichordist would edge off the left-hand end of the bench and take up the conducting.

The system worked well and enabled regular, seamless handovers between conductor and harpsichordist. Nevertheless, it can't really be described as a success because the audience was so enthralled by the comic double-act being played out between the musicians that they found it difficult to pay attention to the drama that was taking place on stage.

## **The insult ceremony**

Degree ceremonies are formal, rather stuffy, affairs; not, at any rate an occasion for light-hearted joking. For four years I played the organ for the degree ceremonies at Reading University - both for the awards of honorary degrees and for the annual congregations for undergraduates and postgraduates. Dealing efficiently with the large number of students receiving awards demanded careful planning. The students entered at the rear of the hall in a long line, two abreast, processing up the middle aisle towards the platform where, one at a time, they shook hands with the Vice Chancellor and received their awards, before leaving by the back door. The official with the ultimate responsibility for the ceremony, as indeed for all administrative aspects of studying and students, was the Registrar; and Reading was fortunate indeed to have in that role the distinguished, kindly and long-serving James Johnson, known to his colleagues as "Johnny".

It was Johnny's last degree ceremony before his retirement and his colleagues at University House came to me with an unusual request. "Would I", they asked, "play as the final music after the ceremony some variations on the old wartime song 'When Johnny comes marching home again'?" I wasn't sure whether I dared break so

radically with tradition but I was anxious to please, and besides I liked Johnny and wanted to make the event memorable for him.

At the end of the ceremony I played "When Johnny comes marching home again" followed by a compact set of home-made variations. I expected an amused reaction to such a break with tradition - a chuckle, perhaps, when people realised what I was playing, or an appreciative comment afterwards. The music was met with silence and no-one spoke to me on leaving (though I had an impression that one or two people muttered things under their breath). It obviously hadn't gone down very well at all. Not even Johnny came across to chat. As I slunk away, the temperature seemed to have fallen by several degrees.

It was several days later when I met one of my more outspoken colleagues in a corridor. He brought me to a stop with an icy frown. "What on earth were you thinking of, playing such a thing?" I explained that it was just a bit of fun, that the request had come from the University Registry, that I really didn't see the harm in it. "No harm in insulting the students?", spat my colleague. I had clearly committed a graver offence than I imagined, but it was (surprisingly, perhaps) some time before the truth sank in. The tune "When Johnny comes marching home again" is far better known to an entirely different set of words -- the children's song about Noah, "The animals came in two by two". Neither the students nor their parents knew James Johnson as "Johnny", nor was his impending retirement at the forefront of their minds; their whole attention that day was naturally on the students, coming two by two into the hall to receive their degrees.

## **The perfect volunteer**

"The Excellent Art of Voluntary" is the imposing title given by the seventeenth-century diarist Roger North to his essay on organ music. The peculiarly English term "voluntary" referred at that time to a particular form and style of music, designed to be played at church services. By study and dedication, writes North, the organist will eventually become "the perfect volunteer".

John Stanley, one of the greatest English-born composers of the eighteenth century, wrote many "voluntaries". 30 were published at the time and half a dozen others survive in manuscripts scattered around the world. In a series of three concerts in London I was to play all these works: almost certainly the first time all of the published and unpublished voluntaries had been brought together in one concert series. Playing the unpublished works involved making copies of the manuscripts, which is why I found myself one day in Cambridge's Fitzwilliam Museum, receiving stern instructions about how to handle the museum's treasures. "When you want to see the next page, please raise your hand and an assistant will turn the page for you. Do not under any circumstances touch the paper, and try to avoid breathing on it if possible". Was it a trill or just a smudge? After an hour or so of concentrated and painstaking work I'd copied out most of the piece, working bar by bar and then double- and triple-checking for accuracy. The notes were beginning to blur and I bent low over the manuscript (not breathing, of course) to try to make them out.

Plop. A little puddle of blood had arrived on the desk, almost touching the manuscript. It is said that a shock is the best cure for a nosebleed and I can attest to the fact. As I glanced round, convinced that if touching the manuscript was an offence then bleeding on it would surely be worth years in jail, the nosebleed stopped instantly. No-one had noticed and I furtively wiped the desk.

Was it worth the effort? Certainly. The piece was attractive enough and it made the series complete. Or at least it would have done if I hadn't left my copy on the train on the way to the concert.

It was a dilemma, though with years of hindsight neither the concert nor my decision was as significant as it seemed to me at the time. Should I confess my stupidity - admit that the "complete Stanley" series was not in fact complete at all because one movement of it was presently in a cleaner's bin bag at Paddington station? Or was there another way? What would the great Roger North have done? I decided just to make it up.

Roger North's "perfect volunteer" understood the style of the music so well that he could improvise at the drop of a hat, just as (according to North) "common fiddlers can play whilst fast sleep". So improvising a missing movement was actually thoroughly in the style of eighteenth-century England and therefore authentic. In fact, it was more authentic than playing the real thing would have been. Or so I told myself. One further problem remained. My intended page-turner was unable to get to the concert, so a gentleman in the audience volunteered to help out. He diffidently hoped that he would manage the task and asked me to give a clear nod whenever I wanted a page turning. I promised to do this and generously told him a little about John Stanley, organs and music in general, information he seemed glad to have. "At least", I thought, "I now don't have to explain the missing movement to my page turner, so no-one will ever know".

The concert proceeded well enough. I gave clear signals to the volunteer page turner so that he would know when to turn and at the appropriate moment I slyly improvised a short movement in the style of John Stanley, without the page turner noticing. "Ah, this one's my favourite", observed the page turner suddenly, just before I played the final piece. This innocent comment was disconcerting. It implied that the page turner could read music well enough to recognise his favourite piece, which meant that he undoubtedly had noticed the fake movement. Not only that, but the wide-ranging knowledge of John Stanley's music implied by the fact that he had a favourite movement at all, was not in the least what I wanted to hear.

The stranger was very gracious, thanked me for the concert and said that he had enjoyed the experience of page turning. And he did not refer at all to his recent book, which had dealt in some depth with John Stanley's organ music. He was, in fact, the perfect volunteer.

## Smethergell

We often think of composers as somehow almost superhuman people, sitting in their towers directing the flow of notes onto the page. They're not the sort of people who forget to feed the cat or let the milk boil over. Even someone like JS Bach, who all his life worked in a succession of fairly ordinary musical jobs, seemed to be able to pour out consistently wonderful music. So it's rather refreshing to find a composer like William Smethergell. He spent 50-odd years as the organist of two different London churches (both at the same time), played viola in the band at Vauxhall pleasure gardens, taught private pupils, was steward of a pub concert society and anything else that he could find to do. He was, in short, about as ordinary a jobbing musician as you could hope to find. He seems to have been a thoroughly likeable person too. His churches obviously liked him because they allowed him to retire on full salary: something they probably regretted afterwards since he lived to the age of 85. Quite a bit of his music was published, but most of it was pretty uninspired stuff 'in a familiar pleasing stile' 'for the improvement of juvenile performers'. Then suddenly, inspiration struck and he composed a piano concerto which was published in 1784 as his "Favorite Concerto". I played the work together with a little chamber group for a concert in Hampshire one summer's evening. It's a delightful piece with more than a dash of Mozart; far, far better than anything he'd ever written before, or ever wrote again for that matter.

The young William had learned his composing craft by being apprenticed to another local organist, one Thomas Curtis, composer of *Divine amusement: a selection of psalms and hymns* and *The Jessamine: six new songs*; the latter apparently sung at the "grand lodge of the Noble Order of true Brittons" and containing texts such as:

Ye true BRITTONS all whose brave Loyalty Dares,  
To face the French King and his Popish Snares;  
Exert all your Might in sound Liberty's cause,  
And Stand by true BRITTONS and Stand by their Laws;  
Then haste to the Bottle, & Joyously sing,  
To Glory & Health, & long life, of our KING,  
In a Bumper drink lasting Success to our Arms,  
That BRITTONS may ever be free from Alarms.

I just had to quote this because it's so awful and because I do wonder what was in the Bottle to which the True-Brittons were hastening (smuggled French brandy, perhaps?). Another Curtis song "On the intended French invasion of England in 1798 ... in which is introduced his imitation of the Trumpet, as performed by him in Private Concerts" (such a loss to the public) includes the immortal lines:  
"Their flat-bottom'd Boats, and the Rafts, and their Schemes  
Will soon glide away like a drunken-Man's Dreams"  
– with any luck the only song ever to feature the words "flat-bottom'd Boats".

With such a teacher we have to admire Smethergell's accomplishment and wonder what he would have composed if he'd had the advantage of being taught by a Handel or a Mozart.

## To Bangor

I had spent a year studying in Manchester. It had been interesting and rewarding. There were distinguished people, great libraries and world-class resources. There was also traffic, crime (people kept car doors locked whilst driving for fear of being robbed at traffic lights), dirt and overpowering security. Getting into university buildings was like moving around a gaol – it meant ringing a bell and showing identification through a hatch in the wall.

Bangor, where I was studying for a doctorate, was a different world. A sleepy porter went round every morning and unlocked every door he could find before returning to his tea pot. The miles of lead downspouts on the main buildings would have vanished like snow in summer had they been in Manchester. And fresh, salty air blew in over the sandy beaches of Anglesey so that the rigging on the yachts made that wonderful twanging sound against the masts. The mountains of Snowdonia rose invitingly in the background.

But even Bangor wasn't entirely without crime, as I found out one morning when I turned on the radio.

"... and you saw the intruder, Mr Jones?"

"Oh yes. You see, there was this knock on the door, see. And I opened it, and there was this man standing there. And he had a stocking over his head and a big stick in his hand. And he asked if Mrs Jones lived here. So I said no, old Mrs Jones lives next door at number 37. So he said thank you and went away".

"And what happened next, Mr Jones?"

"Well, I went back to *Pobl y Cwm*, see. [a Welsh-language television soap opera]. And then a few minutes later there was a lot of banging and shouting next door. I thought Mrs Jones was being a bit lively this evening, but I didn't think anything of it. It was a real shock when I heard she'd been robbed".

Bangor is a mostly Welsh-speaking town. I was there at a time when Welsh activism was at its height. English-language signposts were spray-painted out, some holiday homes were burned (making the coal board's current slogan – "come home to a living fire" – rather unfortunate) and phrases like "English go home" were occasionally found sprayed on walls. So it was entertaining to watch visiting drivers heading up the main road through Upper Bangor glance nervously at the words "DUW CARIAD YW" which had been roughly painted in large, white letters on the wall. It means "God is love".

## A new teacher

"Allo. Zis is Susi Jeans". The words were enough to make me sit down with a bump, though part of me felt that I ought to be standing to attention. Not only had I had grown up with *The Oxford Companion to Music* whose entry on the organ had prominently featured a whole-page photo of "Susi Jeans at her house organ" but all the people who had taught me about the organ had reinforced the message that Lady Jeans was one of the world's most influential organists and authorities on the organ. I had respectfully and rather daringly written to her to ask whether I might look at some Herschel manuscripts in her private library whilst I was speaking at a meeting at the nearby University of Surrey in Guildford. I'd entertained a vague hope that she might find time to reply (if only to say no), but here she was on the phone. I struggled rather with the heavy Austrian accent but I made out that not only was she agreeing to let me see the manuscripts but that I was invited to her home, Cleveland Lodge. Detailed instructions followed. I was to get off the train at Boxhill Station (not Dorking), turn right along the road and ring the doorbell at the big house on the other side of the road. Then I was to walk back up the road, past the station again, turn right into a car park, cross it to the opposite diagonal, down some steps and ...

It was a bitterly cold winter's day. To get to Boxhill I had to change trains somewhere; there was a coal fire in the station and I warmed my hands gratefully. At Boxhill I set about obeying the instructions, though rather hesitantly. Had I misunderstood? Ringing the doorbell and then walking off seemed so very eccentric, but ...

And there I was, in Susi Jeans' stone-flagged kitchen, being invited to huddle closer to the stove so that I didn't freeze, and being presented with a priceless manuscript in one hand and a mug of tomato soup in the other (for warmth). The kitchen looked alarmingly like a Victorian museum that I'd visited the week before, except for piles of books and journals on every flat surface and bottles of vitamins and curious potions in every cupboard. Nothing in the room looked as though it had arrived since the death of King Edward VII except for an electric orange squeezer. "When you go back to Ze university, vill you take zis orange squeezer to ze technical people and ask if zey can fix it?". In utter bewilderment I found myself back at Boxhill Station in the snow, clutching a disfunctional 1950s orange squeezer and somehow – astonishingly – an invitation to return to the most extraordinary home and remarkable person I'd ever encountered. "And do call me Susi, everybody does".

As the years went by I returned regularly to Cleveland Lodge for organ lessons – Susi Jeans' organ lessons were like nothing else on earth yet somehow she managed to infuse a bit of her remarkable wisdom into all her pupils – and to enjoy Susi's boundless friendship and hospitality. I even lived at the house for half a year whilst writing up my doctorate, but of this, of course, I had no inkling as I headed back towards Guildford, wondering what on earth I should say to the university technicians (assuming I managed to find any) when I, a guest at the place, turned up with a stranger's orange squeezer. No-one else could have made me do it.

## Recording

"Almost there", I thought, then chased the distracting thought firmly out of my mind. It was the third take of a recording of a Bach movement. Both of the two previous takes had been unsatisfactory: a "chipped" note on the first, an entry a moment too early on the second. I never really liked recording. Perversely it seems less nerve-racking to play "live", knowing that you just have to make the best of any imperfections and carry on, than to make a laid-down recording which demands clinical perfection. A recording engineer tiptoed silently across the room on some errand or other. Another two lines and the movement would be safely "in the can" - and this time everything had gone well. Very well - there was that wonderful sense of the music expressing its story, functioning as an entity. And there was an almighty crash as the engineer tripped over a microphone stand. And a stream of industrial language first from the engineer and then from his supervisor. I still have it on tape and might sell it one day to the Oxford English Dictionary, as a source of new words and idioms.

Microphones are dangerous things and not to be trusted. I sat on another organ bench on another day in connection with a live radio broadcast. I wasn't enjoying it. Nowadays I never play any music that I don't like - not to be awkward but because unless musicians are passionate about the music they play they can't possibly make other people excited by it, which is after all the whole idea. But as a young performer, conscience is spelt h-u-n-g-e-r. I played the music and grumbled about it to my page turner. "You know, just listen to this next bit: can you imagine anyone composing something so dreary?" My page turner agreed: "There's a lady with a pink hat over there and I think she's asleep". Only afterwards did someone helpfully point out that there was a microphone placed immediately above my head. At least anyone who was bored by the music would have been kept entertained by the comments, but it was one of several occasions when I started investigating career openings for fishermen in the south seas or shepherds in Argentina.

## Practicing Schmidt

It was 2 in the morning and the sound of an ascending pedal theme was coming up through the floor and into my bedroom at Cleveland Lodge. I turned over and tried to get back to sleep. It stopped and re-started. Again. And again. Around 3 o'clock I woke again. The same music. There was something pleasingly inexorable about it, I thought, as I dozed off again.

I've never been able to concentrate for more than half an hour or so at a time on any one bit of music and it struck me the following morning, as I moved a couple of half-full mugs of peppermint tea away from the organ, that Susi had evidently been practicing the same piece of Schmidt nearly all night - something that made me thoroughly ashamed of my own laziness. Worse still, the same happened the following night and the night after.

A week or so later, back home in Wales, there was a call from Susi. She was due to give a Schmidt concert at the Royal College of Organists in London in less than a

fortnight but was too ill; would I be a dear and give the concert for her? Looking back I wonder whether this was another instance of Susi's selfless generosity; the concert was a high-profile event organised by the BBC and the Austrian Institute at a venue where all the best organists would be present. Why ask a young student to stand in when there were many better-qualified individuals who would have leapt at the chance? Was it because her illness was not actually so serious at all but she was offering this opportunity as a gift? Whatever the reason, it was a powerful lesson about encouragement. It was also a great challenge. On the programme was Schmidt's C-major Toccata – the piece that I'd heard during the nights. It was hard. And very long. I spent most of the intervening days and nights learning it – and the rest of the Schmidt programme – for probably the most nerve-wracking concert I've ever played. In the event, Susi was well enough on the day to play a part of the programme and I took the rest (including the Toccata). Given the short preparation time and the stress of the event I don't know how well the performance went but the audience was kind and simply being there was a huge privilege. Even now whenever I play that Toccata I hear the pedal notes as if they were still drifting up through the floorboards on those long-ago nights at Cleveland Lodge, and wish I could turn back the clock and be woken by them again.

## **A wedding**

There's something about weddings that makes them a storehouse of wonderful stories. Every organist has treasured memories of inappropriate hymns and all manner of disasters. As a very inexperienced child, playing for a wedding in our village church, I was asked to play Widor's famous "Toccata" as the wedding march at the end of the service. Never having played the piece before I was worried at the thought of learning so many notes in the space of a couple of weeks, especially with school work taking up so much time. The redeeming feature was that although the piece is long, the church is small and I reckoned that everyone would be gone long before the end of the second page, which meant that I could safely concentrate on learning the opening bars and forget the rest. The wedding was a happy and well-attended occasion and as the bride and groom prepared to leave I confidently launched into the newly-learned piece. As the end of the second page approached I managed a quick glance down the church to make sure that there were no stragglers left and was horrified to see the entire congregation sitting and listening with rapt attention. They had apparently been told that I'd learned the music specially, so they'd better sit and listen to it. Approaching the end of the page was a feeling similar to driving a car with no brakes towards the edge of a cliff. Many, many years later, in another county, I stood at the back of a church about to play for another wedding and chatted with the churchwarden, swapping tales of weddings gone by. When I mentioned this childhood experience his smile broadened. "I never did thank you for learning that music for my wedding", he said, "it was just fine".

The opposite problem enlivened my own brother's wedding. Whilst the bride and groom signed the registers in a little room at the side of the church I played a selection of pieces. The organ was on a rear gallery. Although the organist could not see directly down into the church a pair of "wing mirrors" provided visibility and the door to the room was clearly visible in one of these, so I was to stop playing when the couple emerged. Time went by and I had long since exhausted the stock of music and

embarked on improvised variations which became steadily more tedious as inspiration dried up and boredom was replaced by desperation. Eventually there was a thundering of footsteps coming up to the gallery. "Is it possible to wind down soon -- they've been waiting at the door for ten minutes and want to go". I glanced again at the mirror but the door was still firmly closed and deserted. My visitor pointed to the wing mirror on the opposite side, which revealed the long-suffering couple standing outside another door trying to look interested in the by now sorry trickle of notes.

People make some odd requests of their organist. At the one extreme, a couple optimistically asked me for "The Messiah" at their wedding, whilst at the other extreme (from sublime to ridiculous) someone else wanted "I'm for ever blowing bubbles". I read an article about wedding music once in a bridal magazine which recommended Sweelink's beautiful variations on "Mein Junges Leben hat ein End" – a fantastic piece of music but the author didn't seem to understand or appreciate the irony of the title ("my young life is at an end")! I've never been asked to play "Fight the good fight" (though a prospective Anglican minister did want to go out to "The War March of the Priests"), but without question the most memorable choice was at a wedding in Wales. Although the couple (and, so far as I know, their families) spoke only English, they had decided to add some "local colour" to the proceedings by including a Welsh hymn. I can only imagine that this hymn was selected randomly from the hymn-book pages headed "weddings", without noticing that the section heading had actually changed half-way down the page. I believe (and hope) that the minister and myself were the only two people in the church to understand what we were singing. We tried to avoid each other's eyes as we both struggled to maintain an appearance of respectful composure whilst singing:

*Arglwydd mewn trugaredd, Moes dy nefol hedd  
I'r eneidiau ffyddlon Aeth drwy byrth y bedd.  
Yma, mewn gorthrymder, blinder beunydd ddaw,  
Yno, wedi'r ymdrech, boed eu rhan heb fraw.*

To give a very literal word-for-word translation:  
Lord in your mercy, grant your heavenly peace  
To the faithful souls going through the gates of the grave  
Here, in oppression, daily troubles come,  
There, after the struggle, let them be without pain.

And so it continued, verse after verse. As the antithesis of a wedding hymn it could hardly have been better chosen.

## **Odd jobs**

What do you do with a doctorate in music? My "work" today was sorting through a heap of second-hand music on behalf of a local bookseller. Yesterday's job was writing music for horses to dance to. The day before I'd been carrying a penguin. This was a six-foot-high stuffed penguin whose progress around the lanes of Anglesey was being sponsored to raise money for repairing a local organ. And the remainder of the

week involved taking posters and leaflets for the Welsh National Opera's season around tourist attractions and shops in North Wales. All these tasks were enjoyable, but I was looking forward to starting my new job in a couple of weeks.

Distributing the publicity material was particular fun because it meant that I was able to visit all the attractions that I'd never got round to seeing before. It also meant meeting a constant succession of eccentric and fascinating people. I arrived at the local shop and post office in a very remote village, far up in the mountains. It was an almost bare room with a dusty, solid table and a few shelves of groceries. There was no-one about but hens were clucking in the yard round the back. It didn't really seem worth leaving any information about an opera season in such an unlikely place, but there was a good chance that the shopkeeper would be interesting – they generally are. I pictured an elderly man with a strong dialect for whom a monthly trip to Caernarfon was a major expedition. I opened the door to the yard and shouted "hallo". An elderly man arrived and spoke to me in Welsh with a strong dialect. A real village character, precisely as I'd imagined. We chatted for a while and he offered me a cup of tea. Before leaving I asked if he would put the poster up. He examined it. "The Barber of Seville?", he said, labouring a little with the English words. "Yes, I saw it a couple of years ago, in Madrid. Interesting production." He glanced further down the poster. "The Magic Flute? Ah yes, I went to the production in Vienna last year – that was really good. And what's the third one? The Love for Three Oranges? I like Prokofiev. I saw it in Moscow three or four years ago." I hastily stuffed my music doctorate in my back pocket and gave way for superior knowledge and greater experience.

## **Cold recording**

Just as I'd been told, it really was the experience of a lifetime. From hearing the first note, no-one could be in the slightest doubt that this unknown small boy from an Anglesey village was the greatest treble singer of the century. Already he'd come to the attention of a record company and had been asked to record an album, backed by a Welsh choir. I was engaged as the organist and it was an experience I would not have missed. For each successive piece the boy simply stood and sang with inimitable brilliance and natural confidence. There were no second takes, or at least, not for his benefit.

The boy, of course, was Aled Jones and he rocketed to stardom so fast that this first record fell foul of a new recording contract and was not released for another twenty years. But there were plenty more occasions to enjoy Aled's singing as we worked together on a number of occasions.

So it was that one icy-cold winter's day Aled and I set off in my car to Clynnog Fawr to record a series of programmes for the Welsh channel HTV. As we drove down the winding lanes, the boot of the car in front of us suddenly opened and a box of eggs flew out. The lady driver was evidently unaware of her mishap and due to the narrowness of the road and the necessity to avoid the tins of beans and bags of flour that one by one followed the eggs every time the car hit a bump, we were unable to get past to warn her.

After a journey that had been anything but dull, we arrived at the historic church of Clynnog. This evocative building was an inspired choice, though not an especially practical one. The facilities were sufficiently limited that the recording was treated effectively as an "outside broadcast", powered and managed from the HTV van parked just outside the church door, which was left open to allow the cables to be run through. Unfortunately, the organ was located just inside the door, through which a sharp wind was blowing a substantial snowfall.

"Try not to breathe when the camera's pointing your way", said the director. "I can see your breath". Every now and again an assistant arrived to brush the steadily-accumulating snow off the organ keys. "Try to look comfortable, won't you?". But it was worth every frozen minute and every numb finger.

## **Smoke gets in your eyes**

Four weeks to the day after recording in an unheated old church with snowdrifts on the organ keys, I was playing in an altogether different and more modern building, with a smart new organ on a gallery. It was the first of many visits to Tyneside and I was struck by the vitality, friendliness and distinctiveness of the area.

During the first couple of pieces I was puzzled by the amount of coughing from the audience. Concert-goers are generally very polite and try hard not to make too much noise during pieces, but Tyneside evidently had an altogether different culture. After a few minutes I jumped off the organ bench to introduce the next work - if nothing else, talking to an audience is a good way of re-establishing personal contact when the organ is up on a gallery. But the audience was nowhere to be seen. In fact, nothing was to be seen except dense cloud.

Within a minute I was coughing as well and the concert was halted for a while. It seems that the under-floor heating system had chosen that evening to explode and release clouds of fumes into the church.

## Getting kicks

The television evening news clearly showed the organist launching a kick at his page turner in mid-concert.

The Chancellor (The Prince of Wales) was visiting Bangor to celebrate the centenary of the University college by distributing honorary degrees. As well as processional music from the organ and royal trumpeters, I was to play a short programme of music at the start of the proceedings.

The College had been in a frenzy of cleaning and painting for weeks, whilst security precautions ranged from checking guests to allocating private facilities to the royal visitor. It did not seem worth the effort of organising security clearance for a page turner to join me on the platform so I asked for someone to be nominated for this task. The nominated page turner turned out to be a lady of ample proportions with the endearing habit of grasping each page firmly by the bottom right-hand corner (thus obscuring the last few bars of notes) and slowly turning the page before carefully wiping her hand a few times across the new page to flatten it out - an effect rather like trying to look through over-active windscreen wipers.

It was hot on the platform. Not only was it a warm day but hall and platform were tightly-packed with people wearing heavy academic gowns. In addition, powerful floodlights were aimed at the platform for the benefit of television cameras recording the event. Sitting at the organ, in the middle of the platform, I was uncomfortably aware of being in full view of everyone present and struggled not to suffer too visibly. My page turner was evidently suffering, too, and found it necessary to sit down. The only seat available was the end of the organ bench, but being generously built she took a disproportionate amount of space, forcing me to move over towards the other end of the bench. As she gradually made herself more comfortable I found myself being pushed further and further towards the edge until it was a struggle to reach some of the higher notes and I wondered whether I eventually would be pushed right off.

Sitting down seemed to offer some respite but now the page-turner's legs were not quite comfortable so she placed both feet solidly down in front of her, completely oblivious to the fact that she was now pressing the pedals and producing discords entirely unplanned by the composer.

"Would you move your feet, please?" I hissed. She seemed surprised and stood on a few more pedals to support her whilst she shuffled into a different position on the bench. "You're playing pedal notes!" I shouted. She looked at me quizzically, trying to work out what this strange organist was asking her to do now.

It must have been a surprising and disturbing experience for her to find her legs being kicked out of the way, but then organists are strange creatures and have to be humoured. And it all created an unusual diversion on film.

## **An open-air concert**

An uncharacteristically cold wind whistled round Brussel's famous Grand Plass as we set up for the concert. The Monteverdi Singers - a Welsh choir - were performing classic choral works accompanied by organ. Being outdoors, of course, the "organ" was a sophisticated electronic device hired somewhere in Wales, driven to Brussels for the occasion and connected to vast loudspeakers.

The programme included an intensely moving and quiet *Stabat Mater* and it was at the most sombre and poignant moment of this work that a particularly forceful gust of wind chose to attack. The choir clung tightly onto their music, the conductor steadied himself and my page turner grabbed wildly at the music rack to stop the book from flying across the square.

From the loudspeakers in all directions came a new sound: "cha, cha-cha cha, pling! cha, cha-cha cha, pling!". The page turner and I tried dozens of buttons before we found the one that was bringing an entirely new dimension to the work, while the conductor glared and the choir fought a new battle, this time to recover composure. The electronic keyboard that had contributed to all this trouble was a very long, slender instrument housed for transport in a sturdy box. Although not well disposed towards it I did agree to keep it for a couple of days in my office at the University until it was collected. When the time came for it to leave I asked the porter to help me carry it down the stairs and along the corridors to the main entrance. He suggested that we should protect the box from knocking against sharp corners by covering it with a blanket, to which I readily agreed. It was summer, the students were away and some Americans were holding a conference in the building. As the porter and I carried our long, thin, blanket-covered box past small groups of the American visitors, they stopped their chattering and stood to attention. One man removed his hat. At least it was a delightfully dignified exit for an instrument that had managed so little dignity in its concert.

## **Stockings on the fruit**

"Have you had your plums today?" "Yes, Susi." "Three?" "Yes, Susi." The fruit gardens at Cleveland Lodge were very productive and all visitors were expected – required, even – to take full advantage of the health-giving opportunities. It wasn't just a question of eating the fruit: tending to the bushes was also a part of every-day life at the house. There was always netting to be repaired, birds to be ejected and fruit to be picked or attended to. Some of the tasks, characteristically, were more eccentric than others. Berries and small fruit that grew in bunches (cherries, for instance) had to be protected from the birds by means of nylon stockings. I dread to think how many pairs of stockings Susi must have got through, but I suspect I was not the only one of Susi's young students to be glad of the privacy and seclusion of the Lodge gardens whilst carefully pulling ladies' stockings over the branches. But curiously, the hours in the garden always seemed to be times of learning. It was an odd thing about studying with Susi. You'd sit at the organ and play something and Susi would make some desultory comment and then you'd go away thinking "that wasn't much help". It was later on, whilst picking plums or dressing cherries in ladies' stockings, that Susi would make

some remark which, when you reflected on it still later on, suddenly made sense of the music you'd been trying to play earlier and prompted insights that made it all come together. But you had to be awake to it. It may have been a roundabout way of teaching but it was immensely wise – she was training her students not by telling them what to do but by teaching them to find truths in unlikely places. It was the greatest possible lesson.

## **Eating and drinking and letters**

Catering at Susi Jeans' annual summer school was a major undertaking. Dozens of guests (some staying in the house and some in nearby houses) milled around in good-natured collegiality. It was never quite certain just how many people were eating, but there was always plenty for all the diners, who were perched around the solid old kitchen table or spreading out along the low walls in the garden. Sometimes one of the participants would offer to make a meal (I particularly remember a red-bean chilli dish that had dramatic effects on the digestion); there was never a shortage of willing and good-natured helpers to clear and wash up, repair small appliances (and on one occasion, to clear the drains!).

Another characteristic of Cleveland Lodge was that every room contained a half-drunk mug of cold peppermint tea. Susi's progress around the house would be punctuated by a mouthful from whichever mug was nearest at hand. Once – only once, and on one of my very first visits to the house – I made the mistake of tidying up one of the mugs and washing it up in the kitchen. The absence of the mug was noticed almost immediately and earned a rebuke that left no doubt about the error.

Opening a cupboard door, especially in the kitchen, was an operation that demanded some care to avoid being buried under a cascade of vitamin bottles. Susi kept herself enthusiastically informed about research into the health benefits of Alpha-tocopherol vitamin E in relation to cancer, heart attacks, strokes and joint disease; as well as about a variety of other vitamins. These ideas seemed rather cranky and unfashionable in the 1980s but curiously, a quarter of a century later are receiving a good deal more scientific attention. In any event, Susi kept the local chemist in business with standing orders for specialist vitamins (collecting these was another job for her students!) and the occasional waterfall of pill bottles was a well-known hazard around the house. Eventually the vitamins proved to be a different sort of hazard. Susi wrote to me in January 1989: "I started again a terrible cough, just after Christmas and thought I was in for pneumonia, until I managed to cough up a vitamin E capsule which stuck somewhere low down in the trachea. I soon felt better".

Susi's prolific and long letters to me were always worth reading and re-reading. I've kept over 50 of them and they remain a treasured possession. "Please excuse terrible handwriting. I sit on the floor and try to dry my hair in front of my stove, my hair-dryer vanished while being used to warm up frozen pipes" (1985). "I had 4 wonderful days [walking and mountain climbing in Austria] ... only once got into trouble when a herd of goats and rams with enormous horns tried to push me off into something like a ravine. I found that only by attacking them with a big piece of wood, I managed to shoo them away. ... Here now [back home] life is on the whole quite hard. Had to get onto the roof to sweep the leaves off, help the chimney sweep; and some others to

open the manholes" (1983 - aged 72). "When I type, all the papers, pencils, etc. round the typewriter fall down on the floor! ... I think I might try a computer, could you tell me, where the most knowledgeable one is?" (1983).

## Visiting the Arctic

"Bye! Take care you're not eaten by polar bears!" The station porter nearly swallowed the whistle he was about to blow, I snatched a last farewell to my girlfriend and the train moved off. I re-read for the thousandth time the letter inviting me to give a series of concerts in out-of-the-way places at the Arctic Circle, and wondered again whether it might not have been wiser to go there in the summer rather than the autumn. I had visited a shop specialising in equipment for exploring and expeditions and picked up useful equipment - lined boots, padded underwear, thermal coat and a book on self defence against polar bears - but somehow this bulky baggage heightened rather than reduced my concerns.

It wasn't long before the weather showed its hand. As I waited in Newcastle for the ferry across the North Sea, a cold wind was blowing angry waves across the harbour. As the ferry set off from the dock it was already lurching violently and before we had left the harbour area a member of the ferry's crew was being conspicuously sick in a corner - an ill omen. So lucky, I thought happily, that I never get seasick. Although we spent the next 24 hours crossing the North Sea in the company of Hurricane Charlie I saw nothing of either from the wretched seclusion of a toilet compartment and it was not until we were cruising up the coast of Norway the next day that my eyes began to focus again and the desire for life began to return.

A 24-hour train journey took me to the northern town of Mo, where I was deposited on a railway platform at 4.30 in the morning. Alone, very hungry and a long way from home I wondered the deserted and silent streets of a town that felt in every sense foreign. At six, some lights came on in a small hotel and I went in to find somewhere warm and light to sit down, hoping to hide out of the way behind a potted plant and wait for morning. Reality turned out even better, however, as the kindly hotel staff took pity and rapidly produced for their lone and unexpected guest the most wonderful breakfast. Freshly-baked breads and rolls of every description, eggs, cold meats, herring in every kind of pickle, cheeses and pastries were all washed down with gallons of coffee and juice. It was a heartened and severely over-fed organist who a couple of hours later set off walking towards the nearby community of Ytteren, in search of the first concert.

Everything was fresh and new: the surrounding mountains had a first dusting of snow, the fjord glistened in the sunshine and even the road signs were somehow novel and exciting. A pair of 8-year-old girls on bicycles rode down the pavement and I stopped them to ask where the church was. They introduced themselves as Camilla and Priscilla and told me the way. The church was a modern, light and airy building with an excellent new German organ at the front; ideal for a concert. The people were warm, friendly and interested; so delightful that a couple of decades later I'm still in touch with several of them.

The following day the bus drove over the mountains towards the coast. Long sections of the road were unsurfaced and occasionally the bus drove over rickety wooden bridges to cross waterfalls and canyons. The road was being improved here and there, and at one point two diggers, which were in the way of the bus, both had to raise their shovels so that the bus could squeeze past between them. The journey ended with a breathtaking two-and-a-half-hour ferry ride amongst small islands; mountains rising vertically out of the sea, an unimaginably spectacular and beautiful landscape. I struggled ashore with my arctic boots and thermals to sit in the warmth of my host's garden with the hot northern sun beating down on a clear-blue sea and thousands of brilliantly-coloured flowers peeping out amongst the grass.

I gave three concerts on different islands in this group: Lurøy, Lovund and Træna. The first of these made such a profound impression that just one year later, as a young newly-married organist, I made it my home, so I'll say no more of it for the moment. The second, Lovund, was a peaceful and beautiful island, home to 350 people and a fish-exporting trade of thoroughly international dimensions. I'd been given a description of the island in advance, which mentioned amongst other things that "the island has a cementary, but not many people are buried there". Curious to see whether the infamous "concrete waistcoat" had indeed made it to the Norwegian coast I found that the islanders had a wonderful longevity. Unusually, there was a funeral whilst I was there, and the whole island turned out to walk behind the "hearse" (a tractor with the coffin tied to the fork). I visited the founder of a salmon-exporting company whose products were familiar in several countries. He was a kindly, quiet man who asked me particularly to play "Jesu, joy of man's desiring" on his grand piano. He was celebrating his eightieth birthday and asked me to join him for coffee and cake. As we sat and discussed his beloved island the front door opened (it's not the custom to knock on the door on these islands) and a sprightly old man walked in and sat himself on the settee. My host turned to me and said: "this is my father ...".

During the concert the local organist translated my remarks about the music. It was an unfamiliar experience to speak to an audience through an interpreter, but it functioned reasonably well. One of the pieces I played was entitled "Elves" and was a 19th-century French tone poem depicting, well, elves. I tried to explain this to the interpreter. "Elves?" he enquired, blankly. I tried a variety of explanations. Small people who weren't really there, that sort of thing. This only made him more confused, until, in a moment of inspiration I said: "like fairies". This he understood and explained at considerable length to the audience, using curious wobbly hand movements. After the concert I asked him to tell me just what he'd told the audience about the "elves". He explained that he'd told them that I'd chosen to play the music because it was so relevant to their situation, being all about island communities and boats carrying people and goods across the sea. Ferries. Ah well.

Træna, a mountainous island far out in the sea, seemed oddly familiar, though of course I'd never been there before. As a small child I'd been fascinated by my parents' atlas, which included a small selection of black-and-white photographs of exotic places around the world. I longed to visit these amazing places and meet the people who lived there. It was some years before I revisited this atlas and found to my astonishment that one of these photographs had been of Træna (though incorrectly labelled in the atlas as being in the Lofoten islands). The organ in Træna was the best instrument in the region, though it suffered from a very rattly pedalboard and rather

cramped conditions. Despite my best efforts from the organ gallery, the rattles and bangs from the pedals were clearly audible down in the church. Even more worryingly, a light switch was placed under the keyboards, just at knee level, which turned the gallery lights on whenever I played an F#. A group of teenagers (the "Træna tearaways" or some such) came to the concert (there obviously wasn't a lot else to do on the island). I don't think they thought much of the music, but at least the percussion and lights show provided some entertainment.

The tour continued, first to nearby mainland and then to southern Norway, but it was these islands that were the really memorable part of the trip: and the excitement has never faded.

## **Arriving in Lurøy**

The man at the town hall told us that the Major would sort out our telephone and we walked back towards our new home, marvelling at the mountains, the sea and puzzling about the military telephone system. Tracy and I, newly married, had just arrived at the small Arctic island of Lurøy, where we were to live, and were spending our first day trying to get things sorted out. To hang pictures on our wall we'd borrowed a hammer from a neighbour, whose name, we had noted with great satisfaction, was Thor (which meant we could write to friends to say that we'd borrowed Thor's hammer). Our next stop was the bank, where we needed to open an account and get some money out. It was closed. As we stood, pondering our next move, a car pulled up and a friendly-looking man jumped out. "You need the bank?", he said in English (naturally he knew exactly who we were), and pulled out a bunch of keys. "I am the Manager". He ushered us inside, pulled out a little instant camera from under the counter, took our photographs and before we knew what was happening had made us bank cards, produced some money for us and invited us home for tea. We'd expected life to be different on our little island, but perhaps hadn't realised quite how different it would be. As we sat in the Bank manager's lounge enjoying tea and cake the door opened and another man walked in. We recognised him – it was the same man who had both tied up the ferry when it arrived, driven the bus and then had been out ploughing the road whilst we were walking to the town hall. (The only road on the island was unsurfaced, and whenever it got too rutted and bumpy the local authority pulled a mechanical rake over it to even it out). He proffered us a plastic bag. "Your telephone." Our multi-functional telephone supplier turned out to be the local Mayor (who naturally had heard immediately that we'd been picked up by the bank manager and had come straight there to deliver our phone rather than wasting time at our house). "Major" had been a slight mispronunciation, though somehow the explanation seemed no more likely than the error.

As we returned home from tea with the bank manager, we noticed a lonely figure with a paint brush, high up the church spire, painting. It was the "Major".

## In Aldersund

My first concert after moving to Lurøy was at Aldersund. Aldersund is a narrow sound, or strip of water between the mainland and the island of Aldra. Along the mainland runs a narrow road – part of the national coastal road in Nordland county and one of the least-known glories of Norway. The road winds along between the sea, with its constant succession of spectacularly-mountainous islands, and a range of impenetrable mountains amongst which hide Svartisen, Norway's second-largest glacier. On the banks of Aldersund lies the hamlet of Brattland, with its little white chapel standing out against the steep mountainside. Playing here was a wonderful experience – such hospitable people and spectacular scenery – but also fairly unnerving. A strong wind was blowing which made the chapel sway and creak like a ship at sea. The outer walls of the chapel were reinforced by diagonal poles rather in the manner of guy ropes for a tent. The organist – an energetic lady who had long since retired as the local schoolteacher but who still rowed her little boat across the sea from Aldra to get to church – explained that the original builders of the chapel had not wanted to go to the expense of engaging an architect and had “borrowed” the plans for another church further south in Norway, not taking into account the strength of the winds that constantly whistle up the sound. Adding to this strange sensation was the heavy church bell mounted in the squat little spire just above the organ. With each toll the whole structure shook as though the bell and spire alike would come crashing down any second.

The vast grandeur of the seascape and the different shapes of the mountain islands has made this part of Norway rich in history and in legend. During the Second World War the remote island mountains and caves became hiding places for members of the Norwegian resistance against the German occupiers. For instance John Kristoffersen, a young man from Lurøy, hid for months in a little den in Lurøy Mountain, radioing vital information about the movements of passing German shipping to the Allies, before his location was discovered and he made a most daring and brilliant escape from the clutches of many soldiers to continue his resistance work elsewhere. Centuries earlier, the tales were of a different nature. Local chieftains Vågakallen and Suliskongen had disobedient children: the former a son, Hestmannen (“the horseman”) and the latter eight daughters who he tried to keep under close control. One evening the daughters sneaked out to dance and bathe in the moonlit sea. Hestmannen saw them and fell in love with the eldest daughter, Lekamøya. He came to take her but the girls fled southwards, with Hestmannen riding in pursuit, his cape flapping behind him. The seven younger daughters, exhausted, leaped out of the way at Alstahaug whilst Lekamøya continued down the coast to Brønnøysund. Realising he could not catch up, Hestmannen shot an arrow at her. A nearby troll king (Skarsfjellgubben) saw what was happening and threw his hat in the way of the arrow. The arrow went right through the hat and landed nearby. At that point the sun came up and (as generally happens in such cases) all the characters were turned to stone, where they remain to this day: the island of Lekamøya, Torghatten (a hat-shaped island with a hole through it, near Brønnøysund), the seven sisters (a mountain range near Sandnessjøen), Hestmannen (an island resembling a horseman with trailing cape, near Lurøy) and the two chieftains, Suliskongen and Vågakallen, furthest north in Salten and Lofoten respectively.

## Conversation

I was struggling. Playing a concert was no problem, but chatting to people afterwards was hard work. The worst thing about learning a new language is the dawning realisation that despite all the vocabulary and grammar that you've learned, despite all the things you've successfully said or written, when it comes to it you still can't say the things you really want. Understanding other people is no better, especially when they speak a strong dialect, but I found at an early stage that if I admitted to not understanding something it made the other person nervous, which in turn made them talk in an artificial way that was even more difficult to understand. So it was that when the old lady thanked me for the concert and said that tomorrow she was going to a something-or-other I didn't confess to not knowing what the thing was. Instead I decided to fish around a little in the hope that all would become clear. "Do you go there often?", I asked. "Well, not very". Not much help there. "Are you expecting good weather for it?" "They're forecasting rain, I'm afraid". "And will it be cancelled if the weather is bad?" "I shouldn't think so". Although I stretched out the questions as long as possible, the object of the lady's excursion remained elusive. "Oh well, I hope you have a great time and really enjoy yourself there". The lady thanked me and I raced off to my well-worn dictionary. "Gravferd", I read, "Funeral, funeral procession, wake". I suppose in English "funeral" is an anagram of "real fun", but it doesn't work in Norwegian. Leaving the church by the back door, just in case the lady was busy rounding up people to have me taken away, I found that the forecasted rain had already started and I faced a longish walk home. Happily I spotted a teenaged girl who lived near my house, sitting in her car with the engine running and chatting through the car window to some other girls. Guessing she was on her way home I searched through my dictionary to find the word for a "lift". I managed to avoid "heis" (the kind of lift that takes you up to the next floor), found the correct word (skyss, pronounced s-shiss) and proceeded to ask her for one. She turned a little pink and looked at her friends. Evidently a bit shy. The remainder of the story need not be told, except to say that for an inept linguist it's very easy to miss out the initial "s" and to ask for a kyss (pronounced shiss) – a kiss.

It was a few years later and a long time since I'd really made a fool of myself, at least in terms of language. I met a neighbour on the lane. He lived in a long, traditional farmhouse, one end of which formed a flat for his aged mother. She was a lovely lady, but very elderly and sometimes a little vague. "Tim", said my neighbour, "my old mother wandered off in the night". "I'm so sorry to hear that", I said, "should I help you look for her?" There's a certain kind of stunned silence that is the inevitable reward for a really, really stupid remark. I recognised the type of silence immediately. But I was still slow enough on the uptake to need the explanation: that the Norwegian phrase "wandered off" means "has left us", "passed away", "become deceased", "dead" ...

## Getting around

One wheel of the taxi flirted for a while with the edge of the ditch before re-engaging with the road in a shower of gravel. Together with my fellow-passenger (the parish priest) I was flung against the car door as we careered on up the hill. It wasn't a long ride but it was definitely the most traumatic part of the journey, even counting the three quarters of an hour on choppy seas in a little fishing boat.

Travelling between the various churches in the Lurøy district was a daily challenge. In a district consisting of a couple of thousand small islands and rocky outcrops spread over a substantial area of open sea, much of the travelling involved boats and all the inhabitants of the district were expected to be thoroughly familiar with their routines. Soon after moving to Lurøy I stood one day at the quayside waiting for the passenger boat, which, most unusually, was late. I was very aware that there was no-one else waiting (which again was unusual) and it was a relief when someone came walking down to join me. "You know that 'Tuva' is being serviced today?" "That's all right, I'm waiting for 'Helgeland'". "Yes, of course you are", (a trace of irritation at my ignorance), "but if 'Tuva' isn't running then someone has to go and collect the milk from Indre Kvarøy, don't they? Everyone realises that. Come up to this house for some coffee while you're waiting for them to get here". It wasn't my new acquaintance's house, but the people who lived closest to the ferry quay were so used to people dropping in whilst waiting for the boat that even when they were out they always left the kitchen door open and the coffee machine ready for action.

Storms at sea were a constant hazard, or rather, discomfort. Arriving green and quivering on far-flung beaches rapidly became a part of life. One such morning, after an hour and a half on a small fishing boat in a particularly stormy sea, I became vaguely aware of an elderly lady rushing across the pebbles towards me. "Ah, you poor dear", she said. "Come on up to my house. I've been watching you on the sea for half an hour. It's terrible. I've fried you up some burgers, and I've got some cream cake out for you". She meant it, too.

One or two of the locals ran taxi boats for those who (like myself) often had to get to remote islands at obscure times (like Sunday mornings). One of these in particular loved his job. The worse the weather, the more Lars smiled. When a storm was whipping the waves into a frenzy he would break into a broad grin, balance his coffee cup safely in one hand and with the other push the twin throttles of his boat fully forwards. As the boat leaped and crashed from wave to wave told seafaring stories and occasionally wiped the windows with one of his inexhaustible supplies of toilet rolls. Long after I moved away from the islands I heard that one day the local council had hired Lars to take senior councillors and some important government official or other to one of the islands. As he swung away from the island on full throttle the boat hit a rock and sank immediately, leaving pilot and guests alike to swim and scramble ashore. No lives were lost but Lars lost both boat and business, which was a great pity.

It was our next visit to the island with Norway's worst taxi driver. "Just take the luggage", we said, "we could do with a walk today".

## A concert in Bodø Cathedral

I suppose this story begins in Hampshire, at a concert of 18th-century English organ concertos I was giving in Pamber Priory. The architecture of this lovely 12th-century church, its location out in the fields and the excellent combination of a historic chamber organ by Richard Seede and a small string ensemble made the concert an evocative experience. That, at least, is my excuse for leaving my briefcase full of music there when I left. I realised the loss somewhere in the North Midlands: much too far, at any rate, to drive back and collect it and still make it to Manchester in time for a flight to Norway very early the following morning - where I was to need it again for another concert at Bodø Cathedral. Luckily, a friend had picked up the bag, and he somehow managed to persuade a train driver to bring it up to Manchester overnight, where I collected it from the station and still made it for the flight.

Tracy and I were joined on this flight by an old friend from Wales, Margaret. It was Margaret's first visit to us on our little Arctic island; her first visit, indeed, to Norway, though there were to be many more. I must introduce her. Life would have been so much poorer for Tracy and I if we had never met Margaret. Gracious in the best sense of the word, she is a lady of entirely indeterminate age who is perpetually calm, considerate and warm-hearted. If life were a film in which the few survivors of a tropical plane crash had dodged the sharks and swum ashore only to be surrounded by hungry cannibals, Margaret is the lady with the unruffled hair-do who would arrange a table under a parasol and invite the cannibals to a cup of Earl Grey while they told her their troubles.

Our early-morning flight took us via Copenhagen to Trondheim, where we had left our car in a lock-up compound at a petrol station in Hell, close to the airport. (That Trondheim's airport is in the village of Hell is rarely advertised: after all, who would buy a one-way ticket there?). On landing we received the bad news that none of our checked-in luggage had arrived with us. It was, however, soon traced and the ever-helpful Braathens agreed to fly it up to Bodø airport for collection later. Thankfully, I had as usual brought the case of organ music as hand luggage. Reaching the petrol station, we were told that the man with the key to the padlock had gone off on some indeterminate errand, but if we cared to sit down with a cup of coffee he'd probably be back sooner or later. Life in Norway just won't be rushed.

Our 8-hour drive homewards took us north up the E6 (a road which in those days was of such dire quality that it was often referred to as NATO's last line of defence against a Russian invasion), through the broad fields and elegant farms of North Trøndelag, the forests and salmon rivers of Namskogen and the steadily more dramatic hills and moors of Nordland; then from Mosjøen past the little island of Sundøy that always seemed so inviting and out to the sea to catch our ferry. Tracy was to stay at home whilst Margaret and I carried on to Bodø for the concert, but as we all wanted to wind down after the first stage of the journey we all took the ferry to our island.

Of all the time we lived on our island I never remember it being more perfect than that day. As we walked in the hot sunshine from the little harbour to our house, the flowers by the roadside seemed to be competing to impress, Lurøy's mountain rose into a cloudless sky and the sea was the brilliant blue that can only be found within

the Arctic Circle. Even we were speechless at the beauty of it all; Margaret simply said: “Now I understand why you live here. I never imagined it could be like this”. A cup of tea later, Margaret and I took the ferry back to the mainland for the next leg of our journey: the six-hour drive up the coast road to Bodø. Being without luggage until we reached Bodø, Margaret had borrowed some old clothes from Tracy. The old road that winds along the mountainous Helgeland coast is one of the unsung glories of Norway, but after an hour or two we were hungry enough to stop off at a roadside café where we ordered a large pizza each. Large, we discovered, meant huge; hungry as we were we could only eat one between us and had to smuggle the other one out to the car for later. Margaret was amused to find that the road tunnels under the mountains here were sufficiently long to contain junctions and signposts.

We arrived in Bodø in the early hours of the morning, some 20 hours after leaving Manchester airport. Calling at Bodø airport to collect the baggage which had failed to arrive in Trondheim, we found the place deserted apart from a cleaner who spent some time poking around in evident confusion before eventually locating the bags in a quiet corner. The short drive to our hotel – the impressive SAS hotel in the city centre – was a struggle to stay awake.

Checking in at the hotel, Margaret – having arrived from abroad – was confronted with a long form to fill in. The questions (which were all in Norwegian, of course) I translated into Welsh, but even so we were so tired that it was hard to answer the questions. “Where was I born?” asked Margaret. The hotel rooms contained a built-in alarm clock, so before settling down for what little remained of the night I set the alarm clock in Margaret’s room as well as the one in my room, just to make sure that we were up for breakfast.

It only seemed a minute or two later that there was a banging on my door. Margaret was concerned that her alarm clock was ringing and she didn’t know how to turn it off. It was very loud and she was worried that it would disturb other people. It took a moment to realise that the ringing was actually the hotel’s fire alarm and it was still only 5am. After a brief trip to the assembly point in the hotel car park, we were able to return for the rest of the night.

The morning brought with it a new problem. Although Margaret now had her suitcase of respectable clothes, it was secured by a large padlock, the key to which was in her own clothes now at our house on Lurøy. The hotel had a small collection of padlock keys but nothing that would fit, so the receptionist recommended a nearby blacksmith who was apparently used to cutting padlocks off errant suitcases. The concert was not until mid-day, which left sufficient time to get the case open. Breakfast was laid out in the hotel’s sumptuous dining room, with its chandeliers and lavishly-mirrored walls. Although Margaret has the ability to look fully in control whatever the circumstances, she did confess to feeling a little uncomfortable in such visibly-opulent surroundings, dressed in hastily-borrowed and heavily-travelled clothes. The local blacksmith kept a huge pair of clippers under the counter for just such occasions and in one snip removed the padlock, allowing Margaret to get hastily changed so that we could get to the cathedral and practice for the concert.

Stepping through the door of Bodø Cathedral we were confronted by an elderly lady who was dressed from head to toe in black. We were even more startled when she

greeted us with “Bore da!” (“good morning” in Welsh). She proceeded to tell us her life story. During the Second World War she had been evacuated to a convent in Wales (I never did quite understand how a Norwegian girl came to be evacuated to Wales, but no matter). The nuns, she told us, regarded her first name as unpronounceable (Åshild) and her surname as unseemly (Bugger), “so they just called me Dorothy”.

It’s often the case that a concert given under almost impossible circumstances brings out the best in a performer, tapping perhaps into some hidden reserve of energy and creativity. At any rate, this concert was very successful and enjoyed by an appreciative audience. Åshild/Dorothy was very kind in her comments and insisted on taking Margaret and I round a nearby exhibition of picture frames. We were actually a little short of time because we had to drive through the afternoon to Nesna to catch the last ferry home to Lurøy, where I was playing the following morning, but our host was so delightful that it was impossible to offend her.

Having delayed our departure there was no time to stop for a meal on our way south, but in the car was the remaining pizza, still only 18 hours old. We hastily bought a carton of mixed salad and a bottle of pop from a supermarket and set off. Tea time found us on a layby beside the E6 somewhere south of Fauske. Margaret, still dressed in her finery, sat at a picnic table drinking pop from a bottle and eating a bean salad with her fingers. She reflected that concert tours were never dull but that being appropriately dressed for meals seems to be a particular challenge.

## **Os in Østerdalen**

Østerdalen – the “Eastern Valley” – is the eastern quarter or so of Southern Norway, leading up to the Swedish border. It’s an area of rolling hills and endless forest: the road northwards from Hamar leads through 6 hours or so of pine trees. After four or five hours you begin to make vaguely hysterical remarks to fellow passengers: “oh look over there: there’s a tree!”.

Os itself is a village at the far northern end of Østerdalen, just before the county boundary at which the countryside opens up into the moorland of Trøndelag. The interior of the church was lavishly decorated in a marble pattern of bright colours, whilst on the balcony stood not one but two organs: a very serviceable modern 2-manual organ and a smaller, historic instrument that was not in use. I asked about its history.

In about 1860 a Swedish organ builder called Malmqvist was invited to build an organ for the church at Tolga, the next village down the valley from Os. In order not to disrupt services in the church he built the instrument in an adjacent farm – Storbekken, where incidentally in our time my friend Egil Storbekken made flutes and recorded folk music right up until his death in 2002. Unfortunately, just after the instrument was completed there was a party at the farm and someone rashly used the organ to play dance music on. Obviously, having been used for such a purpose the instrument was tainted and could not possibly be taken into a church, at least in Tolga. Up the road in Os people were not quite so fussy so the organ was taken up there.

While I was in Os, a group of very respectable teachers from the local school invited me to spend a day with them at their cabin in the hills. Most Norwegians have, or have access to, a cabin in the hills. The ideal cabin has neither electricity, running water nor road access (and should involve at least an hour's walk to get there) but is the perfect base from which to walk, relax, ski, fish, hunt or simply to enjoy the quiet. This cabin offered all these possibilities but first we settled in to enjoy a barbeque. The delicious meat was accompanied by a powerful alcoholic drink which the teachers showed a remarkable reluctance to discuss. Before I left they suggested that I didn't talk too much about it down in the village, and in fact it might be better if I didn't say too much about the meat either. Something about shooting permits and the wrong season, or something. But that was the way of things in the remote border region. I later drove over the border into Sweden, just to see what it was like. It was raining. On the way back I stopped to admire the customs post at the Norwegian border. A large sign read "If you have anything to declare, please pass this customs post between the hours of 9am and 4pm".

## Visiting Ireland

"I've been working this year looking after some children in Galway – it's a nice place, is Galway, the people are really lovely there – but it rains a lot so I'll be glad to get home now to Limerick and see my mum; mind, you it rains all the time in Limerick as well, if it comes to that ..."

I'd been told that the Irish were friendly and talked a lot. The girl sitting next to me on the plane on my first visit there was testimony to both facts. As we came in to land at Shannon International Airport her sentence (which had started somewhere over Dublin) was still circling and showed no signs of landing. It was an impressive and heart-warming performance. "and my Auntie Mary – she's a lovely lady, you know, despite the ear; my friend Colin says he's never met anyone who could talk more interestingly – says that the rain never does you any harm anyway ..."

As we left the small airport I wondered vaguely at the designation "international airport". There was no sign of international activity; no queues of foreign-speaking visitors examining duty-free offers. I temporarily abandoned my new-found friend's sentence somewhere on its landing approach and asked a passing official. "Why, bless you Sir, every Thursday afternoon there's a flight to Stockholm with Aeroflot".

Outside the airport my friend's sentence headed off up the road whilst I lingered in the sunshine to catch a bus into Limerick, where I was speaking at a conference. After a minute or two a bus pulled up and the driver immediately leaped out. Lighting a cigarette he came over to me. "Tell me", he said, "how high do you think that flagpole over there is?"

The Norwegians tell jokes about the Swedes, the French about the Belgians, but the Irish seem to be the only nation to tell jokes about themselves. It's one of the traits that makes being there so enjoyable. The front page of that day's *Irish Times* carried a black-and-white picture of what seemed to be an unidentifiable grey smudge. The caption identified it as the winning moment of a bog snorkelling competition and I realised that Ireland has far better entertainments than organ concerts or lectures.

When I asked my host about the report, and about the popularity of the sport, he replied with a twinkle in his eye that the Irish also followed more conventional sports, such as football. In fact, a recent edition of the *Irish Times* had been forced to issue an apology because in the previous edition of its weekly “spot the ball” competition (in which the ball is edited out of a photograph of a football match and people have to guess from the context where the ball should be) the newspaper had forgotten to erase the ball from the picture. “But it didn’t matter”, said my host, “only two people got it right anyway”.

## **Ringebu**

The vast 13th-century stave church at Ringebu is on the sunny side of the valley. It’s an important distinction: in the Gudbrandsdal Valley the poorer farms are all west of the river, where the shadow of the mountains means that there is little sunshine, whilst all the “best people” (and, of course, the church) bask in the warmth of the eastern slopes. Ringebu was the site of both a concert and a broadcast on the church’s spectacular new Swedish organ. The organ sounds wonderful, even in the completely dead acoustic of this special building.

The idea of a stave church is that it is a frame, built around vertical posts and clad in vertical panelling. In the oldest stave churches the wooden posts stood straight into the ground, but as these had a tendency to rot, later builders supported their posts on a stone foundation. At Ringebu, holes can still be seen in the ground from the posts of a yet older church, and some holes from a structure earlier than 200AD (long before Norway was a Christian country). The wooden panelling on the outer walls of the present church is protected against the weather by regular repainting with a type of tar. Over the course of a few hundred years, layer upon layer of this tar gives the outer panelling a curious texture. Seeing two American tourists standing with their hands pressed against the outer walls I couldn’t resist moving a little closer to hear what they were saying. I just caught the one saying to the other: “you know, I’m not sure it *is* plastic ...”.

## **French music**

Couperin’s organ masses are hardly known these days by anyone other than organists. In fact, there’s a lot of music that is hardly known by anyone other than organists, and most of it with good reason. If organists like it, it must be pretty bad. But Couperin’s music deserves to be better known. The whole idea of a French Baroque organ mass seems a little odd to us: it was effectively a form of church service in which the priest would say the first line of the relevant bit of liturgy (just to remind people where they were in the service) and the organist would play some appropriate music that did service for the rest, so to speak. This was more entertaining than listening to the priest mumbling a service that everyone knew off by heart. The congregation could compare notes (so to speak) afterwards on the organist’s performance: “formidable”, “zut” or whatever. Be that as it may, the music itself is enchanting, given the right instrument. It is built around the distinctive sounds of the French organ (a German, English or Italian-style organ simply won’t do) but also around the extraordinary subtleties of French Baroque music. All sorts of rules, such as the convention that successive

adjacent notes, other than very fast or very slow ones, should be given a jazz-like lilt, bring the music to life in a way that one would never expect from a modern, literalist reading of the notes.

French music, of course, is unlike anything else in creation. Whilst the rest of Europe was busy creating what we ironically call a *lingua franca*, a universal, Handelian style of music, the French, naturally, were going their own way. One of the founders of this style was none less than the great French composer Jean-Baptiste Lully, who was an Italian (unlike Handel, who was a German, educated in Italy, who became English). Lully – a musician and composer of undeniable talent – saw at an early age the possibilities of patronage by the French court and became French. Elbowing his rivals out of the way by any means available (including, in all fairness, by being better than them) he gained enough of a reputation to survive his fondness for seducing pageboys and other practices which make it rather gratifying that he became the only musician ever to die through accidentally stabbing himself whilst conducting. Couperin, at least lived to the age of 65; a good and wise man by all accounts, and admired by his contemporaries including even Bach. This is perhaps not music that shakes and stirs us like that of a Beethoven, but it can certainly move us.

## Arriving

Last time I had played at Voll Church it was as a visitor; this time, things were very different. It was now my local church and I knew village life well enough to realise that every good and bad feature of the concert would be a topic of eager discussion amongst the neighbours.

We had arrived in the village some seven weeks earlier and my first experience there reminded me just what village life was like. The very first morning after we arrived I was to attend a meeting in the small town nearby. As I left in the car I passed our village shop, behind which was a tiny business making fishing hooks. I didn't want to be late for the meeting but I thought that (as I hadn't met anyone in the village yet) I could call in anonymously and buy a couple of hooks without being drawn into a long conversation. The owner of the business greeted me warmly. "Didn't you bring hooks with you when you moved?", he asked. My "cover" was obviously blown before I'd said a word. "The bus driver was telling me that you had an English fishing rod". I confirmed that the bus driver had a good eye for equipment and apologised that I was in a hurry. As I was leaving the shopkeeper called me back. "Do you want to buy a boat?", he asked. "No thanks", I said, "I've already got one. Why, are you trying to sell one?". "Oh no, not at all", reassured the man hastily. "It's just that they were saying in the petrol station that you bought a boat magazine yesterday and I thought you might need help finding something suitable".

On the way I reflected that it was a good thing it was a boat magazine I'd bought and that my reading habits don't extend to the picture magazines on the top shelf. It's always said that in a village you can't sneeze without everyone you meet for the next week enquiring after your health. People brought up in the anonymity of cities wonder at such a visible lifestyle, but years later when tragedy struck our family with such a heavy hand, the closeness of the support we would receive from these same neighbours was the most valuable thing in the world.

The whole village turned out to hear the concert and to chat. A few days later I met a couple of tough, rebellious teenagers, out for an evening's fun with a motorbike. "That Bach piece was really good", said one. It was better than any 5-star review.

## **The Scots in Isfjorden**

At the far end of the fjord, surrounded on three sides by high mountains, lies the village of Hen in Isfjorden. It has a stone-built church (unusual in this land of wooden churches) with an onion-shaped spire (also unusual outside of Russia) and a fairly hopeless organ on which I was trying to play Bach and Handel. But it also earned a place in history as the starting point of one of the most harebrained military operations ever to originate in Britain.

At the very beginning of the 17th century, the political situation in Scandinavia was tense. Norway was technically a part of Denmark. The Danes would have liked also to include Sweden in its empire, while the Swedes' ambition for their own empire included Northern Norway. Armies and weapons were assembled. In 1612 some Scottish army officers undertook on their own account an operation to enlist a mercenary army to fight for the Swedes. They visited prisons and offered prisoners instant freedom if they joined the army, and they press-ganged unfortunate passers-by. It's a little puzzling that these officers were assembling an army for the "wrong" side: King James I (whose brother was the King of Denmark) was rather cross when he found out, and the whole motley crew had to skip the country in rather a hurry. Of course, there were two major weaknesses with the plan. Firstly, to get from Scotland to Sweden you have to go through Norway, and there is a certain awkwardness about the idea of walking through Norway with a band of recruits for the Swedish army which was coming to fight the Norwegians. Secondly, when a few officers have recruited three shiploads of murderers and assorted prisoners whose only interest was getting out of prison, and passers-by who had probably just been enjoying a merry evening with a bottle of whisky before waking up in the middle of the North Sea with a hangover and an army number, it would be asking for trouble to give them all firearms. So the entire army (none of whom had any military experience anyway) was to walk unarmed through enemy country.

The ships aimed for the port of Åndalsnes (still a popular destination for British tourist ships). As they entered the Romsdalfjord, they met a fisherman and asked for directions. "We have these boatloads of soldiers who've come to fight you. Could you show us where to tie up, please?" The fisherman, called Peder Klungnes, somehow persuaded the Scots that they couldn't land at Åndalsnes but he invited them to land at his farm (Klungnes) and then walk round the bottom of the fjord (Isfjorden) to Åndalsnes, thus delaying the Scots by at least half a day. It's thought that having recognised the visitors as Scottish he told them that the landing fees in Åndalsnes were a rip-off and he could do them a better deal.

In any event, as soon as the army had left, Peder Klungnes sent his dairy maid in his fastest rowing boat over to Åndalsnes to warn the men of the town to take up arms to repel the invaders. Being a fairly laid-back town, however, the inhabitants decided simply to offer the visitors coffee and point out the road towards Sweden. They did,

however, send a messenger up to the next town, Dombås, asking them to deal with the approaching army. The men of Dombås were also a fairly relaxed bunch who got coffee and waffles ready. "For Sweden, you take the E6 southbound and turn left at Ringebu". Some of the Dombås men, however, got on their horses and rode down the Gudbrandsdalen Valley, collecting others from the villages along the way. At a place called Kringen, the old road southwards squeezes itself for a couple of miles into a narrow gap between the steep mountainside and a fast-flowing river. A group of people travelling along the road would have to walk single file. The villagers hid themselves amongst the trees on the mountainside, posting a girl called Guri with a horn up the mountain, from where she could see the approaching army. Once the Scots had all spread out along the narrow track, Guri sounded her horn and the locals came out and shot them all. The whole troop was wiped out or captured, although one or two of the Scots must have quietly slipped away during the march south because for years afterwards there were stories of wild men living in the forests around Dombås, playing strange wailing music on dead octopuses and popping into the local Spar to ask whether they stocked haggis.

What is really interesting about this story, however, is that whenever the Scots met with the locals (with Peder the fisherman, with his dairymaid and with an old lady they met along the road) they had conversations. In other words, ordinary people from 17th century Scotland spoke more or less the same language as ordinary people from Western Norway.

Having played "The arrival of the Queen of Sheba" at Hen church I couldn't help reflecting on the rather less welcomed arrival of the Scots and of their walk right past that very spot.

## **Hardanger Fjord**

It was cherry season in Hardanger and it seemed that every few yards along the road there was a new stall selling ripe morellos. They were wonderful, and whenever we finished one basket we stopped and bought another.

We checked into a hotel. It was a traditional establishment, immaculate even if some of the floors, walls and doorframes were at rather odd angles. The proprietress did not seem overjoyed to see us. Perhaps she feared the effects of all the cherries we had brought with us. "You are to be in by 10 o'clock, when I will lock the door". So much for a night on the town. "If you wish to watch the television" (slight hint of disapproval at the idea) "there is one in the lounge". I had a distinct feeling that she was about to ask to see our marriage certificate but for some reason she thought better of it. There was a film on that evening so we rather guiltily joined another couple in the lounge for what felt like an illicit pleasure. At 10 o'clock, with half an hour of film still to run, the lounge door opened to reveal the proprietress in the doorway, a bunch of keys in her hand. She stood and jangled them pointedly for a while, clearly indicating that 10 o'clock was also time to turn off the television and get off to bed. The four of us gazed steadfastly at the television. It developed into a quiet war of attrition, in which neither the jangling keys nor the watchers were willing to give way and accept defeat. Victory in the end was ours, but breakfast the next morning was a little strained. When one of the previous evening's miscreants put a coffee cup down

on their table the landlady was at their side in an instant, picking up the cup and reuniting it with its allotted saucer with a splendid crash. They don't seem to make landladies like that any more.

## **Buying a house**

We were lucky that the previous owners were very particular people. It was said in the village that during the 35 years they lived there, not a blade of grass dared to grow out of line on the lawn. Not only were the flower beds regularly weeded and the gravel drive hosed down, but one witness alleged that he had seen the lawn being vacuumed. The same level of care extended to the house, which was immaculate. Outside, the woodshed and woodworking room were left for us complete with their contents. One of the most interesting and exciting projects we undertook in the new house was sorting through the 35-year accumulation of things the previous owner couldn't bear to throw away — which meant more or less everything that had passed through his hands. There was a mass of fishing equipment, sawdust for the fish smoker in the garden, bits of plumbing, roof tiles, timber, wire, old agricultural tools, milk churns, corks, chairs, bits of metal, fruit-bush nets, a 1930s hand-operated air pump — and in a corner, wrapped up in black plastic and tied with string, a long, heavy metal bar. Our nearest neighbour, a kindly elderly man who popped in from time to time in case there was anything he could help with, was fascinated by the collection. “I've not seen one of these for years”, he said several times as he examined things enthusiastically. Only the metal bar in its black plastic wrapping passed without particular comment — “oh, that's just your bit of railway line” — and was pushed into a corner. I didn't like to show my ignorance by asking, but I still wonder sometimes about that piece of railway line and the neighbour's casual acceptance of it.

## **Going north**

For a tour of Norway's two northernmost counties — Troms and Finnmark — Tracy, I and the two children were joined by Margaret (heroine of the Bodø trip) and Helen (outward-bound instructor, organist and general nice person). The tour — a dozen concerts in as many days in an area the size of Italy and Switzerland combined — promised to be interesting.

We flew to Kirkenes to begin the tour. Kirkenes is a long way away. From Oslo, for instance, Kirkenes is as far away as Milan. According to an internet route planner, to drive through Norway from Kirkenes down to Egersund (in south-west Norway) should take 46 hours of solid non-stop driving (and given the low speed limits that is almost certainly a considerable underestimate). To put it another way, if you were somehow to put a large drawing pin into the bottom of Norway (though it would probably object) and swivel the country round by 180 degrees, the top of Norway would end up in Africa. And whilst we're gathering interesting facts, Norway's coastline, counting the fjords and other wiggly bits (remembering that to the East, Norway has a land border, so the coast only goes up one side of the country) is 57000 kilometres long, which is nearly one-and-a-half times the circumference of the earth. Airports in the far north of Norway vary considerably. The previous year I'd flown into nearby Vadsø airport. As the little 8-seater plane bounced to a stop on the grass, I watched a small lady with a purposeful handbag hurry out of a hut, padlock the door

and drive off in a car. She was the control-tower staff and now the plane had arrived she was going home for her tea. Another car (a battered old Nissan) drew up, hitched the aeroplane onto its tow hook and pulled it into the hanger. As I left the airport building the porter padlocked the door behind me and the place was closed for the night. This type of airport is the mainstay of transport, especially away from the coast which is serviced by the daily Hurtigruten steamer.

The airport at Kirkenes is in a different league. Large jets land there regularly, there's an airport café and if you ignore the reindeer grazing fitfully around the perimeter you could be at any town airport. There are occasional direct flights from London and one of the regular entertainments for the local population is to watch t-shirted visitors, having boarded a plane on a warm day at Heathrow, emerging incredulously into the snow and biting winds of Kirkenes.

The town itself is Norway's last outpost, bordering onto Russia. We walked up to the border fence on a Friday evening. Where it once was permanently watched from the Russian side by armed troops, it was now (in 1993) deserted. The huge gates were fastened, but only by an absurdly tiny padlock. Russia was closed for the weekend, but not very securely.

Vehicle regulations are very strict in Norway. Not only must cars be in a good technical condition, but they must strictly conform to certain specifications. Different rates of purchase tax are applied to different categories of vehicle: for a domestic car it's about 100% on top of the actual price, whilst for a commercial vehicle it's substantially cheaper. Minibuses (10 seats or more) attract no tax at all, which means that large MPVs by Chrysler, Mercedes and others may ironically be much cheaper to buy than an ordinary saloon – provided you have a minibus license to drive them with and are careful to maintain them appropriately. It was recently reported in the media that a family left their large dog in the back of their minibus and returned to find that the dog had eaten one of the seats. On the way home they were stopped by the police and presented with a tax bill of over £25000 for driving a minibus with less than 10 seats. To be a “commercial vehicle” there must be a solid dividing wall between the “goods” and the “passenger” sections of the car. The car that met us at the airport was another indication of how far we were from Oslo. It was a “commercial” vehicle of uncertain pedigree, advanced years and indefinable qualities. The “dividing wall” was missing and our suitcases were loaded into the back on a bed of hay from which sheep had recently been removed. The journey from the airport to the town gave us plenty of opportunity to study the road: it was clearly visible below our feet. The seat belts weren't attached to anything and the brakes weren't all they might have been, but the driver was a philosopher worth a 6-hour flight to visit.

After an uneventful concert in Kirkenes we collected a hire car and drove to Vardø. Vardø is the next town-but-one: a six-hour drive along a desolate coast, it's connected to the mainland by Northern Europe's oldest undersea road tunnel. Like so many of the places along this coast, it's a place of superlatives: the world's most northerly fortress, Norway's most easterly town, the oldest fishing village in Norwegian Lapland and so on. A raw wind whistles from the sea and into the quiet streets (this is the only town in Western Europe to be officially within the Arctic climate zone). The town centre was full of Russians in fur hats – Vardø has always been an important trading centre with Northern Russia. On the way back to Kirkenes after the concert

we called in at Finland and chatted to the customs staff at the border. Here, at Europe's furthest north-easterly corner, Sweden, Finland, Norway and Russia all meet, but business was slow at the customs station.

A flight to Tromsø heralded the next part of the tour. The Victorians visited Tromsø expecting to find only polar bears, but to their astonishment they found a centre of learning, culture and fashion so striking that they labelled it 'The Paris of the North'. The modern visitor, taking in all the obligatory superlatives (the world's most northerly cathedral, university, brewery, etc) whilst sitting at the busy quayside or strolling over the long bridges and watching the ships passing below, finds a city that is sunny both in weather (at least during the summer) and in mood. There is an incurable optimism in Tromsø, and we needed every drop of it when we checked into our hotel with its collapsing furniture and dysfunctional bathroom.

After a surprisingly well-attended concert on the historic and satisfying Claus Jensen organ at Tromsø Cathedral (Norway's only wooden cathedral) I went to give another concert at Hansnes church on nearby Ringvassøy Island. For Michael Palin, on the first leg of his epic journey "From Pole to Pole", the island of Fugløy in the Ringvassøy group was his first sight of land after leaving the North Pole, and standing on the quayside in Hansnes does give the impression of being on the very frontier of civilisation. The little café where I had dinner was empty apart from a morose fisherman and a space-invaders machine, but the man from the local culture office, who turned up after a while, was happy: "it's a lovely community here". The church was a modern concrete building with a leaky roof (I had to arrange the buckets) and an expensive new Danish organ. In the church cellar were the recording studios for the local radio station. Near the church were several new houses and the villagers seemed to share the optimism of nearby Tromsø. The man from the culture office drove me back along the long, deserted, bumpy road to Tromsø. He drove slowly, not out of consideration for the car: "the police are always out with radar controls".

Building roads in a country of mountains and fjords is demanding and those of Norway are an astonishing technical achievement. The trains are also wonderful and the country is well served by local airports. But the real way to travel from town to town along the coast of Northern Norway is by Hurtigruten, the daily coastal steamer which delivers post, goods and people to the 34 ports from Bergen to Kirkenes. The service has been essential for everyday life in the coastal communities for over a hundred years and the present fleet is in the process of being replaced by larger more modern ships which offer more space and comfort for the increasing number of tourists using the service as a holiday cruise. Some of the north-coast fishermen and farmers who for generations have used the service to transport fish and animals to market are complaining, though, that the Hurtigruten operators are beginning to turn up their noses at smelly fish because the tourists don't like it: the service is becoming too "posh" for the very people it was originally intended for.

It was one of these newer ships that took us from Tromsø to Hammerfest for the next concert. A calm sea and a bright late-summer sun which set gradually in a blaze of red over the mountains before rising again half-an-hour later, kept most of the ship's passengers on deck all night. Not much talking, but video footage being shot by the mile. That meant not many takers for early-morning breakfast, either. Hammerfest – the world's most northerly town – comes to life for the short summer season and its

one street was crowded with tourists. The square in the town centre, with its fountains playing in the sunshine, was full of stalls in which Sami (Lapps) in full-colour traditional costume were offering hand-carved traditional items (Visa cards accepted). In the churchyard, the largest reindeer I've ever seen was pushing its nose under a hearse to nibble the grass between the wheels and small herd of reindeer was making its way up the road (they're probably employed to do so by the local tourist board).

Having arrived in Hammerfest by boat we opted to leave by bus for the long journey across the completely desolate Repparfjord Mountain to Alta. Alta is not only a long way North, it's a long way from anywhere. When you fly there you begin to realise this. You glance down from 30000 feet and see an endless plain, and a lone Lapp standing next to a reindeer. Then the cheerful hostess brings you a cup of coffee which occupies your attention for ten minutes or so. Looking out of the window again after the coffee you're startled to see an endless plain, and a lone Lapp standing next to a reindeer.

Alta is a puzzle – a town built in the heart of Lapland, where people have hunted reindeer since the Stone Age (and left cave drawings to prove it). But it has no 'frontier-town' feeling: anonymous concrete buildings, roads with unlikely roundabouts, a Chinese restaurant and rows of tiny suburban gardens. We asked an old lady who was out mowing the lawn for directions to the town centre, but she didn't know. We asked the same thing of a group of teenage boys, who looked incredulous at us for a moment before walking on without answering. I wondered briefly whether I was speaking the wrong language, but it gradually dawned on us that Alta simply doesn't have a centre – merely a sprawl punctuated by the occasional shop. The church at Alta was temporary home to refugees in so-called 'church asylum'. These were refugees not formally approved by the immigration department, who had taken advantage of ancient law and sought sanctuary in the church to prevent being arrested and deported. Many of Norway's churches housed such refugees during 1993 until the government worked out a more satisfactory solution.

Alta's originality, though, isn't so much a matter of location as of lifestyle. I began to suspect something when I read an advert in the newspaper for my concert. It gave the date, but the time was given as "after milking". When I asked just what time the concert was due to start I was told that it would start "when people got there". Time's a bit like that in Lapland. "Sometimes", the organist added, "people turn up the next day instead", which sounded disconcerting as I was due elsewhere by then. Distance, too, is measured not in miles or kilometres but in the number of coffee stops required. Alta is a 6-coffee-stop journey from almost anywhere. It is said (mostly by Norwegians elsewhere in the country, jealous of the free lifestyle of Lapland) that the most popular sport in Alta is shooting the local mosquitoes, a sport which requires a large-calibre rifle.

It was with mixed feelings that we boarded the plane to Evenes for the final part of the tour. We were leaving the unpredictable rough-and-ready cheerfulness of Lapland for what felt like the far south – Vesterålen, on the border of Troms and Nordland counties. Vesterålen is an area rich in islands, so, for the first time on a tour in which we seemed to have used every type of locomotion apart from camels, boats really came into their own. We stayed in the pleasant surroundings of a Methodist college where, for the first time in a fortnight, we could settle in, unpack and sleep in the

same rooms for several nights in succession. I was giving three concerts and a lecture/recital in the area, including a ‘midnight-sun’ concert on a remote island.

Vesterålen was not without its surprises, though, especially for our visitors Margaret and Helen. After the final concert of this series, where the peaceful and remote little church at Tjeldsund was packed out by an enthusiastic audience comprising virtually the entire population of the nearby village, we returned to the college by private boat from the beach by the church. Due to the gently-shelving beach it wasn’t possible to bring the boat right to the shore, which left the problem of transporting two respectable ladies out to a rowing boat bobbing around in a Norwegian fjord. Two teenage self-professed ‘Vikings’ demonstrated that Vesterålen has its own brand of rough-and-ready amiability by hoisting the two surprised ladies onto their respective shoulders and wading out with them to the boat.

## **Snow business**

It used to be said (though I’ve not heard it recently) that the main industry of the village of Finse was clearing the snow so that other people could get past: a delightfully altruistic *raison d’être*. Whilst I was working in Tromsø in the late 1990s this seaside city had snowfalls so heavy (up to 5 metres depth) that even pedestrians had to walk along whatever paths had been cleared of snow: it was impossible to climb over the banks of snow to get exactly where one wanted to go. Few snow-related situations take Norwegians by surprise, although I do recall one particularly disastrous project to build sheltered accommodation for old people in Tromsø. The architect decided that it would be pleasant to give the old people a sheltered Mediterranean-style enclosed central courtyard where they could sit and enjoy the long summer days out of the wind. Unfortunately, an enclosed central courtyard is not just a sun trap: winter entailed running through the flats with a constant succession of buckets of snow, emptying them through the front doors into the street before returning to collect more before the pressure of falling (and melting) snow destroyed the building.

A quarter of a mile of private lane led up the hill to our house, and keeping it passable in winter was a constant struggle. The must-have “status symbol” of that part of Norway was a snow blower – a hand-held or sit-on machine that lifts the snow and throws it into the ditch or over the fence. It was just such a machine that I set off to buy one winter’s day in 1994. The shop was a large warehouse-like building on the edge of the small town and the machine I was wanting to look at, typically, was on the very top shelf, 30 feet above the ground. This was just a few feet higher than the safe operating height of the fork-lift that the warehouseman had available. As he scooped the heavy snow clearer on to his extended fork lift, it swayed and wobbled alarmingly and I stepped sharply aside so as to be well clear if it fell. Somehow, though, the driver steadied the machine and brought his cargo safely to ground level. Had the snow clearer fallen it would have landed on a pile of boxes that were stacked on the floor, and I joked with the driver that their contents had been in danger of being dented. I looked closer to see what these contents were, and saw that all the boxes were labelled “DYNAMITE: HANDLE WITH CARE!” Had the snow clearer fallen Norway would presumably have had one fjord village less (and these memories would never have been written)!

The event that had prompted me to go and buy the snow clearer had happened at the start of the week. A particularly snowy weekend meant several hours' hard work clearing the lane in order to get the car out to drive to a concert. By the time I got home again, more snow had fallen but the temperature had become a little warmer, making the steep and winding lane up to our house impossibly slippery. The car valiantly struggled half way up the hill, but just after a sharp bend refused to make any further progress. Unfortunately I soon discovered that, although the car was happy to stay where it was whilst I had my foot on the brake, if I tried to take my foot off the brake and get out, the car slipped backwards towards a steep drop. The handbrake on its own just wasn't enough. The house was within sight and I tried sounding the horn and flashing the car lights to attract attention. This produced merry waves from the house window for a while, before Tracy eventually came out in the snow to tell me to stop fooling around and come home. She was despatched for a rope, which she tied round a tree and fastened the other end to the front of the car so that I eventually could get out and hobble home (my foot was stiff from pressing it hard against the brake pedal for so long).

The temperature continued to rise that evening and by morning all the snow was gone. A neighbour called by and sat in our kitchen drinking coffee. Several times he seemed to be wanting to make some remark but didn't quite know how to say it. Just before leaving he enquired cautiously: "do you always tether your car to a tree at night?"

## **Karasjok**

There was sawdust on the floor of the bar. As I walked in, all conversation stopped abruptly and every silent face looked my way. I could have sworn that was John Wayne behind a table. I had been teaching a course in Karasjok, the small town in East Finnmark that houses the Sami parliament, and purely out of curiosity drove further East, across the Finnish border 5 miles away and on over miles of bare moorland to Lake Inari. The lake is vast – nearly 500 square miles – and contains about 3000 islands. It's also frozen eight months of the year and even on my visit, at the end of June, it was still possible to walk a few yards out on the ice. Although it's an extraordinarily beautiful and wild place, the stunned reaction when I walked into the bar reminded me that it's far too remote to be a tourist attraction.

Even in southern Norway and Sweden, people don't know much about the Sami culture and places within their own country. The language is different, of course. Sami is as different from Norwegian or Swedish as Welsh is from English, and both languages were heavily oppressed by their national governments until fairly recently. Welsh and Sami children were beaten if they were heard speaking their own languages at school, for instance. And this difference creates a certain suspicion and hostility. At about the time of this trip, Sami road signs that had been put up in Kåfjord were repeatedly shot at by Norwegian-speaking locals. Even more than the language, the culture is radically different. Back in Norwegian Finnmark I went into the nursery school to talk to someone. A core skill for the children there was handling reindeer (it's not a coincidence that the high school in nearby Kautokeino is so far as I know the only high school in the world to specialise in reindeer herding) but when I was there the older nursery children had been given a sharp hunting knife each and sent off into the forest to carve things.

## Two funerals and a swim

One of my very first memories of working in Norway was of a conversation with the parish priest who had just received a letter instructing all parish priests to re-label the files in their filing cabinets in a particular way. He gave me a resigned glance and settled down to several days' re-labelling work. The art of bureaucracy is refined to unparalleled levels in Norway, where every possible event has to be covered by some rule or regulation.

An example of this is that church travel expenses are claimed on a complicated form, divided into various means of transport. There are different set rates for driving a car, for driving a car on unsurfaced roads, for driving a car in Tromsø; for driving a snowscooter, for driving a boat (small engine) or a boat (large engine), or for other means of transport on water. The last of these raises all manner of interesting images: high expectations, perhaps, of the abilities of church staff to make their way across water without a boat.

At least my journeys fitted comfortably into the system in that I regularly used my own boat (small engine) to travel to the church directly over the fjord from my house. It was possible to go by road, but this entailed an hour's drive around the end of the fjord; taking the boat was quicker and allowed a little fishing on the way home. One particular day, however, I was asked to play at two funerals in quick succession: the first on the other side of the fjord and the second on "my" side. This posed no great problem, of course: it was simply a matter of fifteen minutes' sailing from the one to the other. The early-Spring weather was good and the temperature above freezing. I left the boat loosely tied up at the shoreline on the deserted beach close to the first church whilst I went to the funeral. As I sat on the gallery and played quiet music before the service began, footsteps approached up the narrow (and always noisy) wooden stairs and a member of the bereaved's family popped her head round the corner. "At the end of the service, whilst we're all going out, could you possibly play ..." and she added the name of a folk song I'd never heard of, turned and clattered back down the steps. There are times to be obliging and times to ignore odd and inopportune requests; this was obviously a chance to try out the latest in technological gadgets - the new (and at that time far from widespread) mobile phone, which I had as a safety measure for on board the boat. After the first hymn, when there was a solid gap before I'd be needed again, I crept quietly out into the back room and rang a good friend who seems to know every local folk tune and traditional song. She ran a shop in the local town and was a little surprised to be asked to sing a song down the phone (her customers enjoyed it, apparently) but I wrote out the melody as she sang it, and duly played it at the end of the funeral - a use that Nokia had never envisaged for its phones.

As I hurried back to the beach the bells of the other church could be heard distantly from over the water. The boat had gone. Unthinkable that it could have been stolen (nothing was ever stolen though all cars, houses and boats were always left open), but what could have happened to it? Eventually I saw it, tied alongside a fishing boat that was anchored a hundred yards out in the bay. I found out afterwards that a kindly fisherman had worried that the changing wind might make my boat damage itself against the rocks and had pulled it out to his before going off to do something else. In

the meantime I was faced with the problem of reaching the next funeral with a missing boat and no alternative means of transport – a situation for which musical training had unaccountably failed to prepare me. There was only one thing for it: an improvised striptease on the beach, a very cold swim and even colder boat-ride back to the beach to get dressed again, followed by a hurried and rather damp-feeling journey to the next funeral.

But at least I had solved the riddle of the travel-expenses form and duly entered “swam 100 metres” in the “other means of transport on water” box – and in due course was paid it, too.

## **Flying**

"We regret to announce that the 1840 flight to Sørkjosen has been cancelled due to bad weather". Declining the airline's offer of a 6-hour taxi ride I rearranged my ticket for the following day and rang the organist to explain that for the second day in succession I wasn't going to make it.

The following day dawned bright and by the time I arrived at Tromsø airport for the evening flight the wind had dropped to a stiff breeze. The flight was called, I presented my ticket and joined the small group waiting at the gate. Sørkjosen is the airport for Nordreisa, a remote and beautiful place of rivers, forest and mountains stretching from the sea right across Northern Norway to the Finnish border. The stewardess began to collect in the tickets and allow us through the gate. Her radio crackled into life and she listened with a frown. "I'm sorry, we're having to cancel today's flight due to mechanical problems with the aircraft. Something has fallen off it." They don't put these things gently.

Although flying is an essential and everyday means of transport in Northern Norway it's not always predictable. One of the most enjoyable flying experiences anywhere is to travel with the smallest Norwegian operators where the pilot (the one I'm thinking of used to own the airline as well) leans back over the seat of his Cessna to chat as you're sitting down and the plane flies so low over the mountains that you can almost lean out and grab a handful of snow. Even the larger companies, though, provide an element of unpredictability. Travelling with a major airline one day from Oslo's new main airport, Gardemoen, to Evenes I gazed gloomily out of the airport's panorama windows at the driving snow. The flight departure was first delayed until long into the day, and finally the entire airport was closed for a period. When the airport re-opened a flight bound for a nearby airport offered, with unusual adaptability, to 'drop me off' at Evenes (not literally, I hoped). After boarding we had to wait a substantial period before the stewardess came with the apologetic announcement that the captain had been mislaid. It turned out that he was in another plane that had not yet managed to land and over an hour went by before he finally climbed the steps and boarded. After a while he announced that the flight was ready to depart, revved the engines and attempted to pull away through the deepening snow. After a short pause, a tractor was called to pull the plane to the runway but when the snow chains on the tractor wheels broke it too became stuck. By the time the plane was eventually moved, the de-icing machine could barely cope with the accumulation of snow and ice on the wings. That

we got there eventually (and the aircraft made its promised unscheduled landing at Evenes for my benefit) was a triumph of airline determination.

## **Longyearbyen**

We were in Longyearbyen, Matthew and I, in February. It was cold. The thermometer reckoned that it was only -15 or so, but windchill made it 30 degrees colder. In our hotel room we put on thermal clothing – lots of layers, with a snowsuit on the outside, hat, gloves and boots. We prepared ourselves for the shock of going outside and then stepped out into the street, walking towards the main street. We managed five yards before turning round and rushing back inside. The hot chocolate dispensing machine was our favourite feature of the hotel and it did good service that day.

Longyearbyen is in Svalbard, or Spitzbergen as it is sometimes known. The distance from Longyearbyen to the North Pole is about the same as the distance from the bottom to the top of mainland Britain – not very far, in other words.

Having got the business of organ playing out of the way we went to visit a friend who was teaching at Longyearbyen school that year. Most people who work in Longyearbyen do so for relatively short periods – in fact, it can hardly be said that there is a permanent population there at all. The elderly are discouraged – you're not allowed to retire there, and dying is disapproved of, if not actually punishable. This is because the ground is permanently frozen to a great depth, making funerals rather difficult. It makes many things rather difficult – houses are built off the ground (to protect them from the frost) and no pipes can be buried (so all mains service pipes are above ground level). And every house had a snow scooter in the driveway. Matthew and I (now even better parcelled up in borrowed furs) borrowed one and drove it over a nearby glacier.

In a country with almost no crime, the school was a puzzle. We asked our friend to explain why it was surrounded by a high chain fence. "To stop the children from being eaten by polar bears at playtime".

## **Night-time in Venice**

Thanks to a seriously-delayed flight, it was nearly midnight when we got off the airport bus by Venice railway station. It was my 9-year-old son's first visit to Italy and it wasn't going too smoothly.

We were to stay in a small hotel in a prime spot somewhere between St Mark's and the Grand Canal. Due to the lateness of the hour there was no vaporetto in sight, but it was a fine evening, we'd both been sitting down for far too long, we didn't have much luggage and Venice is not such a big place, so we set off walking, following the signs for St Mark's.

We soon settled in to the routine. Through an alleyway, diagonally across a paved square leading to another alleyway, a bridge over a canal leading into another alleyway and another square. Other than one romantic couple holding hands in the

moonlight, no-one was about. Venice was silent apart from our footsteps and completely still apart from our shadows which would sprint ahead of us as we left the occasional street lamp behind before sidling up to us again as we found a new light in yet another square.

Half an hour later we stood in a deserted St Mark's square, searching for street names and starting to worry a little that our hotel might have closed its doors for the night. We walked past other hotels – some of them several times – in the hope that their names would magically change into the one on our paper. We passed gondoliers crouching in the shadows in dimly-lit canals; tall, half-decaying buildings with washing hanging from balconies. Eventually we heard footsteps. It was a suitably aquatic-looking man, evidently local, and slightly tipsy. He examined the hotel name and address written on our paper, turned on his heel and beckoned us with a splendidly regal flourish to follow him. We passed the same hotels as previously before heading down some new alleyways, over a couple more canals and a couple more squares before arriving back at the same hotels yet again. We set off once more. Part way round the second lap, another man came into sight. Our guide and the new stranger stood together for a while, looking at the paper, waving their arms and exchanging gondola yarns. After a few minutes the newcomer smiled in our direction, gave the paper a last wave and beckoned our former guide, with us following behind, to accompany him to our hotel. He took us confidently in the other direction, down an alleyway, up over a canal bridge, through a square and back to the now-familiar hotels. Part way round the third lap, our new guide paused at the door of a pub, through which a subdued 1-in-the-morning bonhomie could be heard. He went in, whilst second guide stood in the doorway with Thomas and I peeping in and watching our paper being passed from hand to hand, discussed and disagreed over in a benevolent kind of way. Red wine seemed to be pointing down the alleyway we'd just emerged from, whilst pint-of-something-brown was miming crossing a canal bridge in the opposite direction. When some sort of agreement was eventually reached, the newly-appointed leader (tall glass of something powerful) headed for the door, the piece of paper in his hand, followed closely by every other person in the bar, each person carefully carrying his glass. Behind this company walked our second leader, followed by our first leader, and Thomas and I brought up the rear of the procession.

The night porter opened the hotel door and looked out into the narrow alleyway with its single-file row of assorted drinks with their handlers, two redundant guides, an organist and a small boy. He threw up his hands and looked as though he was about to shut and bolt the door, but we were thrust forward and inside. Five minutes later I sank into bed and closed my eyes. "Dad", came a small voice, "how do you change the combination on this safe?"

## **Indisposed**

There can be many reasons why a musician is "indisposed" and unable to play a concert. Being locked in a former prisoner-of-war camp is one of them.

After spending the morning practicing on a wonderful historic organ in the former East Germany there were a few hours to spare before returning to the church in the evening to play the concert. It was a perfect opportunity to take Thomas to see the

nearby Colditz Castle. We had both read and seen films of wartime escapes from the dreaded castle and the chance of visiting it in reality was too good to miss.

We ambled along beside the high perimeter wall, looking up at the bleak building beyond and trying to visualise wartime life within. Part-way round the wall, a wide gateway opened onto a path that led to the castle itself. The gates were fastened open and there were no signs to say “keep out” so we ventured in along the path right to the castle walls, where we stood on the infamous track leading up to the main door, along which so many prisoners had been marched.

Sadly, time was limited – we needed to be back in good time before the concert – so we headed back. Arriving at the gateway we were surprised and dismayed to find that the gates were now closed – and firmly bolted on the outside. There was, of course, no chance of climbing over the 20-foot wall or the equally-high gates (they had, after all, been designed to prevent this) and there was absolutely no-one to be found. Colditz was closed for the weekend, holding two new prisoners. I’m sure that no previous detainees had been anxious to escape from Colditz in order to get to a concert (and of course their plight had been infinitely more serious than ours), but that was of little comfort at the time.

Having searched for alternative methods of escape we returned to the gates. The two gates were secured with a large bolt that slid into large iron hasps on the outside, with the one gate additionally held by a bolt into the ground on the inside. There was no way to push anything between the gates to move the bolt. Pulling up the bolt on the inside did allow the gates to move a little, however, and we found that pushing and pulling at the gates was causing the outer bolt to move a little in its hasps. Eventually, persistence paid off and we managed to get the gates to move enough to enable us to squeeze out through the gap.

We walked away from the castle with the satisfaction of escapees and when we met two tall men with an Alsatian dog on a lead it almost felt as though we would be challenged and returned to the castle. “Just behave naturally!” whispered Thomas as we passed them.