

A Tribute to Nicolas Kynaston (1941–2025)

By Michael Barone and Stephen Schnurr

Nicolas Kynaston, 83, died March 26, 2025, in London, UK. Born in Devon, UK, December 10, 1941, he was the son of a painter and a violinist, and his father was an Anglican priest who converted to Catholicism. Kynaston was a boy chorister at Westminster Cathedral Choir School, London, where he began organ studies with George Malcolm, continuing at Downside School in Somerset. At the age of fifteen, he became a student of Fernando Germani on scholarship at the Accademia Musicale Chigiana and then at the Rome Conservatorio in Italy. He later studied with Ralph Downes at the Royal College of Music, where he also played French horn.

At the age of 19 Kynaston succeeded Malcolm at Westminster Cathedral, remaining until 1971. During this time he instigated a summer series of concerts and recitals. In 1966 he performed the first of many times at Royal Festival Hall and released his first solo recording in 1968, featuring works of Joseph Jongen, Louis Vierne, and César Franck.

Upon leaving the cathedral, Kynaston developed a career as a concert artist, eschewing a church music career (except for a few special occasions), performing frequently across Britain, Europe, and the United States, where he completed six coast-to-coast tours. The breadth of his travels to perform was demonstrated with destinations such as Barbados, Nassau, Ankara, Istanbul, Tokyo, Hong Kong, Bangkok, Korea, and the Philippines. Concert hall and festival appearances included Athens Festival; Doelen Hall, Rotterdam; Marienbad Festival, Czechia; Gürzenich Hall, Cologne; Festival Internazionale di Organo, Rome; Reger Centenary Festival, Bonn; Three Choirs Festival; Semana Internacional de Organo, Mallorca; English Bach Festival; Semaine Internationale d'Orgue at Saint-Eustache, Paris; the Proms, Brussels, Geneva, Vienna, and Berlin. In 2000 he was a featured recitalist at the national convention of the American Guild of Organists in Seattle, Washington.

Kynaston served on the juries of various organ competitions, including those in Southport, Saint Albans, and London, and was the first English organist to be invited to sit on the jury of the Grand Prix de Chartres. Kynaston taught at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge and presented numerous masterclasses in various nations.

Kynaston was a popular broadcaster and recording artist. For his 1970 LP disc, *Great Organ Works*, recorded in Royal Albert Hall for the Classics for Pleasure label, he received an award from EMI for selling 100,000 copies in six months. Multiple discs received

Critics' Choice awards. For his Clifton Cathedral recording, he was presented the Best Solo Instrumental Record of the Year award from the Music Trades Association, and the Deutscher Schallplattenpreis for his recording in Germany of Vierne's *Sixth Symphony*. His recordings were featured on several pop releases and in films, including *Tales from the Crypt* (1972).

Kynaston was a consultant for many church organ refurbishment and restoration projects, including those for the cathedrals of Bristol and Birmingham, the abbeys at Bath and Tewkesbury, and the city of Halle in Germany. Additional projects included new organs at Caius College, Cambridge; University College School, Hampstead; All Saints Parish Church, Northampton; Breck School, Minneapolis; Saint Agnes Church, Nassau, Bahamas; and the Kreuzkirche, Bonn.

In 1995 Kynaston was appointed organist of the new Athens Concert Hall, the Megaron, with its large Klais organ, and through 2010 he performed with the Athens State Orchestra and other ensembles. There he also started an organ school.

Kynaston was one of four organists who in 2004 celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the Royal Festival Hall organ. He was an Honorary Fellow of the Royal College of Organists and a past president of the Incorporated Association of Organists. In 2019 Kynaston was awarded the medal of the Royal College of Organists.

In 1961 Nicolas Kynaston married Judith Heron, and they had two sons and two daughters. They divorced, and in 1989 he married Susan Styles, who preceded Nicolas in death in 2020. Kynaston resided in a nursing home near London for the final phase of his life.

§

Michael Barone, host of American Public Media's *Pipedreams* program, recorded a wide-ranging interview with Nicolas Kynaston on October 19, 2003, the day before a recital he was to perform at the University of Saint Thomas in Saint Paul, Minnesota. The conversation covered a variety of topics, including his background, the repertoire that he would be performing, and instruments featured on several of his recordings.

Percy Whitlock was a practicing generalist with activity as a church musician and, well, for lack of a better term, a popular . . .

Well, he started his church career, I think it was at Rochester Cathedral and then he was organist at Saint Stephen's Church, Bournemouth, down on the



Nicolas Kynaston at the four-manual Orgelbau Klais organ in the cathedral of Altenberg, Germany, 1980. Kynaston played a program as part of the organ's dedication series and made a recording of orchestral transcriptions.

south coast, and he became the borough organist, which means he played in the local hall on a large Compton organ.

Is that position still functional?

I don't believe so, no. We still have a few like Birmingham City organist and one or two others, but there are not many of those positions left, unfortunately.

What made Bournemouth unusual? The instrument there was not a Father Willis organ.

No. Bournemouth in the beginning of the twentieth century was a wealthy place, because a lot of people used to retire there. They had money, and they had leisure. It was by the sea, so it was a comfortable place. There was a lot of music in common with other similar places, and they appointed organists to play transcriptions and so on.

This is what Whitlock did. He also composed a lot, music for orchestra and even a big symphony for organ and orchestra, which has now just been rediscovered a few years ago. It is going to be performed at long last, and quite a few other smaller pieces for organ and orchestra as well.

But his style might be what we here in the United States would term "British light-music style."

There's lots of influences, like I suppose one would say [Frederick] Delius. He dedicated one of his pieces to Delius, a piece that is full of those sort of harmonies. I always thought of Whitlock as a miniaturist because as a student the pieces we tended to look at and know were the small pieces. But in recent

years, of course, people got much more interested in the larger-scale works.

And this *Fantasy Choral in D-flat* is definitely one of those.

Yes, I would rate that. It is not a long piece, about ten minutes, but it's on a grand scale. I think it's successful. I have only learned it this year, and I did so to celebrate his centenary. I figured I ought to do something for Whitlock rather than just the small pieces, I thought, "Well, in his centenary year I'll do one of the bigger pieces." And I found this, and I thought, "Well, it's really worthwhile, and I've enjoyed it." So far, thankfully, the people that I've played it to have enjoyed it as well.

How would you describe the work? I see the term "chorale," and I think of the three *Chorals* by Franck.

I wonder if the Franck *Chorals* were an influence on Whitlock. I can't place the chorale. I think it is entirely original in his own work. It starts off with a chorale, and then it is developed in variations, sometimes extremely cleverly and in rather a complicated way. It is a continuous work, and one variation just goes into the next. They're all joined together. And then the piece ends with a reiteration of the chorale and a sort of celestial echo of it. And it closes absolutely *pianissimo*—very atmospheric.

If there are any difficulties for the player in the piece, it is only because Whitlock was actually born with two thumbs, so he had six digits on either hand. I've only got to learn this recently. One of the thumbs was removed, but he had this huge hand. So, a great span.

And for someone like me with rather small hands, it does present difficulties sometimes, but not insurmountable.

Well, the connection to Franck then is fairly appropriate, too, because he writes for a huge span from fifth finger to thumb.

Absolutely. Another attraction for this piece in particular is that it is dedicated to Philip Door, who was someone I knew quite well. He was organist at the Abbey at Ampleforth, and I knew him in the 1960s. He's dead now. Later on, I taught his son, so when I saw this was dedicated to Philip Door, I thought "Right. That is another reason for learning it."

André Fleury is one of a generation of fantastic French organists that comes to be in the later part of the nineteenth or first decade or so of the twentieth century, and yet somehow, though he lived long and wrote a considerable amount of music, we don't know much about him. Why is that?

I met Fleury at Saint-Eustache in Paris, when I was playing there, and he was deputy organist to Jean Guillou for the latter part of his life. He held other positions, but I think the thing that strikes me most about him was what an absolutely charming person he was, and also very reticent and modest. It could have been that which perhaps made his music less well known because he didn't actually push himself to the front of the queue.

Did he not have a body of students?

Yes. His music has been played, but you're right. It's not as well known as it should be, and I think this piece [*Prélude, Andante et Toccata*] is absolutely charming.



Nicolas Kynaston

This is not reticent music though, is it?

No, it is not reticent music at all. And it's quite complex music. But it's dreamy, and perhaps that makes it for some people less attractive. The first two movements are decidedly dreamy. In fact, Fleury himself described the first movement as a clear sky but with clouds beginning to blow over. All very pictorial, but perhaps not exactly the description that's going to make some students rush out and buy it. I think it's a wonderful description once you know the music. But you can imagine the young student reading that and thinking, "Oh Lord. I don't think I want to get involved with that."

Well, it makes me think of Debussy.

Yes, absolutely. It is lovely music. And what has interested me is this double centenary. The centenary of Fleury and the centenary of Whitlock, because you just couldn't have two people who are more different in so many ways. This is why I like to program these two pieces together.

Tell me about your reflections on the Westminster Cathedral organ.

When I was extremely small, I was a choirboy there when George Malcolm was the choirmaster. And then having studied in Italy and so on, I went back. The post of organist became vacant, and I was lucky enough to get the position

of organist when I was still very young. How young is young? I was nineteen.

So I did that job for ten years, a demanding job because there were sung services with choir every day, and I used to do six days a week. And on weekends sometimes, and of course the major feasts, I would be playing for—I don't know—I can remember one weekend where I did eighteen services.

Good heavens. Well, you certainly have to learn a lot of repertoire quickly in a situation like that.

It was extremely good for me, and I loved the organ. It's one of the best organs for French music because Marcel Dupré was very much involved in the

Restore Renew

Photo by
Clifford Norton Studio,
Cleveland, Ohio, 1925

Votteler-Holtkamp-Sparling Job #1454 was built in 1926 for St. John Cantius Church, Cleveland, OH, a neo-Gothic Catholic parish of Polish heritage in Cleveland's Tremont neighborhood. It was designed by Heinrich "Henry" Holtkamp, and its construction was overseen by Alan Gordon Sparling. The restoration of this fine instrument was completed by The Holtkamp Organ Company in 2023.

The
HOLT KAMP
ORGAN COMPANY
Six Generations. 169 years. One mission.



2909 Meyer Avenue
Cleveland, Ohio 44109
t [216] 741-5180 f [216] 741-0678
chris@holtkamporgan.com
www.holtkamporgan.com

Interview

design of that organ when it was built between the 1920s and 1930s.¹ It was built over a long period as money became available, and Dupré had a big influence on the specification. And of course, he gave both the opening recitals. He gave the first opening recital in 1922, when it was only half built, and then he gave the second in 1932.

Dupré did give one of the first performances of the written version of his *Passion Symphony* in Westminster Cathedral, which a lot of people seem to have forgotten. They all seem to say it was here [in the United States] on the Wanamaker Organ. But that's incorrect because that was the improvised version, and the written version was first performed at Westminster Cathedral.

The *Second Symphony* is—I don't want to say is one of his most sardonic—but maybe that is the proper term to use.

I think that is a good word, yes.

That was, I think, first performed in this country. In fact, I'm almost sure it was because my other teacher, Ralph Downes, was in this country at that time, and he remembers Dupré coming and just playing a bit of the first movement for him to hear. And Ralph Downes always remembers how struck he was by it, and how incredible he thought it was. It created a great stir.

It's very modern. In its time it was almost unheard of in standard organ circles to be writing with this sort of advancement both in technique and harmony.

I think the first movement of the second symphony is one of Dupré's very, very best works. It is so inventive; there's so much in it, and the development is so amazing. He does things he didn't do in other pieces; it is fascinating. Unfortunately, I feel that the other two movements perhaps are not up to the same level of invention. I mean, they're great music, but that first movement stands alone. It is amazing.

***Évocation* was a piece that he wrote for the re-inauguration of the Cavaillé-Coll. Did he write it or just play it at, for the re-inauguration of the Cavaillé-Coll at Rouen after the war?**

It was written during the war, I think. I can't remember the exact date. And there's certainly a feeling of war in the whole of the *Évocation*, I think it's dedicated to the memory of his father who died during the war, and if I remember correctly because of the war situation Dupré was unable to get to his father's

funeral and was obviously very upset about that. This is another one of my favorite pieces of Dupré. It is, particularly in the slow movement, very, very melancholic. And I suppose one could say the last movement has the feeling of war about it, and to some extent triumphant. It's a hard won triumph. Yes. Indeed, it is. But a great piece.

Tell me about Megaron.

Megaron. I'm sure lots of people have heard incorrectly, but "mega" is Greek for "big" and "ron" is "building." So it means "big building" that the complete title is "Megaron Musiki," which means "the big musical building." Well, we'll call it the Athens Concert Hall that was completed twelve years ago now. This large Klais organ in the big hall,² because we have two halls, was donated, and it's a very fine instrument. But of course, there's no tradition of organ playing in Greece despite the fact that they invented the instrument a very long time ago. One day about ten years ago, I received a letter from Greece asking if I would be interested in being the organist of the Megaron. So, I went out to see them, and when I saw this wonderful hall and its incredible facilities and the wonderful instrument, I said, "Yes, I would be most interested." And I've now been there for nine years.

What are your responsibilities? Are you kind of the piper for the organ scene in Athens?

I think the first thing I was asked to do was to sponsor "The Art of the Organ" in Greece. And I've certainly done that very seriously, and I play regularly. Also, I started up a course for some young organists, and it's very gratifying that that's been successful. There's been enormous interest in the organ, and three of those early students continued their studies in England after they had started in Athens. They've got good qualifications, master's degrees, and are doing well. There's yet another one, another student who's going to come to London, hopefully, to start studying next year. There are others who have become interested and who are going on to study in Germany—so a whole new interest.

When I started there nine years ago, the concerts were absolutely packed out because it was a novelty. No one had heard organ music on that scale and on such an instrument in Greece, so there was no problem getting audiences at all. After a couple of years, those fell off, but it's now gratifying that after nine years, they've built up again, and we get regularly large audiences of over 1,000 for organ concerts. I do a lot of concerto work as well. I recently played with the



Nicolas Kynaston

wonderful chamber orchestra we have called the Camerata, conducted by Neville Marriner. So, I'm not the only Englishman who's working in Athens.

Kind of a local hero, though.

Oh, I don't know about that, but I certainly enjoy it, and I like the Greek people very much. The Greek students are fantastic workers.

Have you picked up the Greek language at all?

Regrettably no, because everybody speaks English so well in the concert hall. Being a rather lazy person, I haven't learned Greek beyond just a few basic words. It is a very complex language. I did start on one of those tape courses, and then I would go to Germany to do concerts for two or three weeks. I'd come back, and I'd think, "I got to lesson number six." I'd try that, and I'd think, "Oh, I've got to go back to lesson one again." And after about four or five attempts at it, I gave up, I'm afraid.

I can't think of you as a lazy person, because the music you play is never easy. Do you pick up music quickly? Are you a sight-reader? Are you one who must learn the score from the inside out without a keyboard? How do you learn new repertoire?

If it's a composer whose idiom I know quite well, then I learn much quicker. I recently had to learn a contemporary work by a composer whose music I'd never played before, and I found that extremely hard work because it was quite a complex piece. I'd learned five pages, and then put it away for a couple of days. Then I would go back, and I think, "Oh, I'd learned those five pages, no problem." But I found that I'd forgotten them. But with a composer whose idiom I know well, I can learn reasonably quickly. I have to say not as quickly as I used to be able to because as you get older, you don't learn so quickly.

Tell me about teaching and being taught. You studied with Fernando Germani.

And later on with Ralph Downes. I did two and a half years with Germani. First of all in Siena at the Accademia Chigiana in Siena, and I was fifteen then. That was a very lucky chance to go there.

How did that happen?

Somebody who worked at the Accademia Chigiana sent the particulars of the organ course to my mother, who showed them to me. I said, "Gosh, you know, Fernando Germani. I would love to go and study there." So, we applied, and the condition was that one traveled to Italy and did an audition, and if the audition wasn't successful, you'd have to travel back to England again. So, I

arrived in Italy with a big pile of music under my arm, and I played something for Germani. He looked at the big pile of music and said, "What's all that for?" I said, "Well, it's all music I brought to play for you." And he said, "Well, I'm accepting you in my course, but you're not going to need any of that music because we are going to concentrate on technique for two months." Which is precisely what we did.

I had a lesson with him every day, Monday to Friday, early in the morning. He liked teaching really early in the morning.

Are you a morning person?

Yes, well, I can be when it's necessary, and I had to be with him. Then he would pass me over to his assistant for supervised practice.

That's to guarantee that you were not off playing something else.

That's right. And his assistant was none other than Helmuth Rilling, now extremely famous in his own right. So, 8:00 in the morning with Germani; 11:00 in the morning with Helmuth Rilling.

That two years served you very well.

It was a revelation to me, and I really enjoyed it. I went there for two summers, the summer course at the Chigiana, and then I went to Rome full-time for two years. So, two summers and two years. And then having done that, I went back to London to go to the Royal College of Music to study with Ralph Downes. I studied with him for three years. So, quite a long training.

Now these are two formidable personalities in the post-war organ scene. Germani, in the pre-war, also was the person for whom Sowerby wrote *Pageant*, and [Raffaele] Maneri wrote his *Salve Regina*, these fearsome virtuoso show pieces. After the war, he got into the historic music and instruments of his native Italy, which is something you would think as being natural these days, but was kind of unusual for the time.

Yes. Quite extraordinary because people tend to be a little bit superior about Germani and say, "Well, of course, he played Bach in the old style." And I say, "This is a man who produced one of the first modern editions of Frescobaldi, and he did it in the 1930s." It is quite extraordinary for that time. Alright, in one or two places of his edition, he marks crescendos in brackets and so on, which Frescobaldi couldn't possibly have done, but for that period it is extraordinarily pure editing. And it is still perfectly usable today, unlike, for example, some other editions that I could mention.

Germani said once that he had played everything that was worth playing, and I think that was probably true because he had an absolutely gigantic repertoire and, of course, he had started so young. As an eleven-year-old he was taught composition by Respighi and went on from there. He started the organ at the suggestion of Respighi. Respighi was very fond of the organ and said to this young Germani, "I think to study the organ would help you in your composition studies. So why don't you do it?" So Germani said, "Yes, alright." And he went to study the organ and never came back—never came back. But it was an extraordinary history. Really extraordinary and one of the first people to play the complete Reger. A wonderful César Franck player, one of the very best.

I think perhaps Germani and Jeanne Demessieux are my two favorite performers of César Franck. And of course, he did the complete Bach endless



times and earned lots of honors for his performances.

Interesting that your two teachers, your two chief mentors, Ralph Downes and Fernando Germani, sort of come together in a recording that Germani made on the instrument that Ralph Downes designed at Royal Festival Hall.

Yes. They had enormous respect for each other. When I left Rome, Germani was very happy that I was going to Ralph Downes, and Ralph Downes always spoke very highly of and with enormous warmth about Germani because, of course, they had been together in this country in the 1930s. They were both working here.

In the United States.

Yes.

That's right. Downes was at Princeton. And where was Germani?

Germani was at the Peabody. In fact, Ralph Downes told me a wonderful story that when they were both here Germani contacted him and said, "Ah, I've got myself into a bit of a fix because I've put down on the program the Reger F-sharp-minor variations, and I don't have a copy of it. I've never learned it, and I can't find a copy of it anywhere. Do you have one?" Ralph Downes said, "Yes, I've got one. I'll happily lend it to you, but when's the recital?" And Germani said, "Well, it's in about three weeks' time." And Ralph said, "Well, I'm not sure you're going to be able to learn it in time. It's a very difficult work." Germani said, "Well please, you know, lend it to me instantly."

Ralph did, and within a week, he received it back. So he phoned Germani and said, "But you haven't played it yet,

and I thought you wanted to learn it for your recital." And Germani replied, "Oh yes. I've memorized it." It was Ralph Downes who told me that story. Germani memorized it in five days.

Did you have a sense of that capability of him when you were the fifteen-year-old first studying with him?

Absolutely. I thought he was a god. I mean, I really did. I was absolutely in awe of him. At that age you are most impressed by technique, and, of course, his technique was unbelievable. It was formidable. Any time he was sitting at a table his fingers were never still, and I've seen him crack a plate with his fourth finger. He had that sort of strength of technique. It was amazing.

What sort of a character was he? I get the sense of a man filled with enthusiasm for music. Was he similarly enthusiastic about life in general?

Very much so. He was a very warm person. He expected total dedication from his students. If he fell out with a student it was because he felt that perhaps that they weren't as dedicated to him as they should be. He was very paternalistic in that way, which I suppose you could understand. It didn't work for everybody. There were one or two heated moments over those years, but providing you gave him your full attention, he couldn't do enough for you. He was really helpful.

It's unfortunate. I mean he was organist at the Vatican, and yet still as marvelous and important as that room is, I don't want to say it's devoid of organ music but it certainly is lacking in an instrument of real merit. Germani did have some

plans up his sleeve; he was working with Willis at one point.

He was indeed, and Willis drew up some very complex plans for a large instrument. But like the plans that had been drawn up by Cavaillé-Coll, in the end it all came to nothing for probably the same sort of reasons, political reasons. It's always been sort of complicated. I think Germani got very sad about that. But of course, he did design the huge—what is it?—150-stop organ in that concert hall in the Villa Concertazione. A really large organ that was owned by the Vatican. Unfortunately, in recent years they got rid of that. They said they didn't think it was necessary anymore, and they gave it away to somebody so that's stored up somewhere in the north of Italy. I don't think it's heard very much anymore. The new concert hall in Rome apparently is not going to have an organ at all, which is also very sad.

Going against the trends.

Yes. It's really sad.

How would you describe Germani's Bach playing? There were several important releases in the post-war era of recordings. There was Walcha, and surely some of us even grew up with Schweitzer as a strange example. What was Germani's Bach style?

I don't think you can judge Germani's Bach playing from the recordings, which he was making for HMV, because they actually happen too late. His best Bach recordings are the ones he made at Westminster Cathedral just straight after the war in the 1940s—1947, 1948. Some of those are now available again on CD. And his playing then was absolutely at its peak. When he started to do the complete Bach

for HMV, it was too late. Unfortunately, for convenience, HMV chose an organ in London that was totally unsuitable. It was an organ where the pipes were down on one end of the church and the console was at the other, hardly the ideal organ for recording the complete Bach. But, that's where they started.

As a student, I turned pages for one of Germani's complete Bach series in Rome given in the Ara Coeli Church. I remember speaking to somebody outside the church after one of the recitals, quite an elderly gentleman, and he said, "You can listen to many people playing Bach, but when Germani plays Bach, you hear only Bach." I thought that was one of the most subtle compliments that anyone could have ever made about Germani's playing. It was not in any sense flashy. It was very modest playing, but extremely beautiful. When he played Reger, for example, that was a completely different thing altogether, but his Bach playing was restrained.

Alright, talk about his Reger playing. I remember what was the English Abbey, Selby,³ where he had recorded *Hallelujah! Gott zu loben* [EMI CSD 1449/Angel 35687].

Once again a little late in his career, unfortunately. Germani's Reger playing at its best was absolutely amazing because this is where his technique came to the fore, and nothing in Reger's music presented him with any problems at all. I have quite a treasured possession at home that is a live recording performance of the Reger *Second Sonata*, which is really amazing playing and very inspiring to listen to. I just wish he had recorded more Reger, say in the 1940s or before the war.

RODGERS®

WHERE TRADITION MEETS INNOVATION

INFINITY
SERIES 489



The new four-manual Rodgers Infinity organ at St. Michael's Church in Murrells Inlet, South Carolina, is a stunning blend of American craftsmanship, timeless beauty, and glorious sound. As the parish continues to grow, the new Rodgers serves as a musical anchor, while the previous Rodgers instrument, which served faithfully for nearly thirty years, continues its ministry in a new location on the church campus. Built to serve. Built to last. For more than a generation, and as proven by churches like St. Michael's, Rodgers organs deliver incomparable sound and lasting service.

Learn more about the Infinity series by scanning here.



ASK YOUR DEALER FOR MORE INFO
RODGERSINSTRUMENTS.COM

Interview

Even the big LP set is not bad by any stretch [Fonit Cetra LAR 40—six LP discs].

No, No. Not at all. It's just not Germani at his absolute peak.

I'm curious about this because earlier we talked about how he learned the Reger F-sharp-minor variations and memorized them within five days, sent the music back, and then you said you turned pages for his Bach concert. I'm wondering why he hadn't memorized all of the Bach.

He did know the complete Bach by memory. There's no problem about it. But, it's quite true that he used to play everything by memory, but as he got older, he started more and more to use music. I think he played so much, such a huge repertoire, that it was obvious he wasn't reading the music, but it was useful for him, because he'd written down combination numbers—piston numbers and combination settings. I think an *aide-memoire* becomes more and more important, particularly for someone like him who has such a huge repertoire.

I know players who play everything by memory except their own music. That always puzzles me somewhat. You see them playing a recital, and it's all by memory. Then it comes to one of their own pieces, and they get out a score. It comes back to the organ being a complicated instrument. However well you know the music, it's useful to have that little piece of paper in front of you where you can write things as an *aide-memoire*.

You've been talking about your teachers. How much teaching have you done, and do you continue beyond the work in Athens?

I've taught for years privately. Particularly in Cambridge, I've taught for thirty years, I suppose. A lot of the organ scholars in Cambridge have been my pupils, many of whom are now well-known organists in their own right. I've now given that up because late in my career, I've taken on the job as professor of organ at the Royal Academy of Music, which I'm really enjoying.

What makes a good teacher?

I often ask myself that. One of my students once thanked me for communicating an enthusiasm for music, and perhaps that is one of the most important things. It's very easy to put people off music by taking a too rigorously technical approach, and in a way if you can infuse somebody with enthusiasm for every piece of music, you've already half won the battle. If they're enthusiastic, then they're going to work on it. If you manage to make it seem so difficult by being over analytical, you can actually put them off. Then they do things out of a sense of duty rather than a real, genuine enthusiasm.

Gustav Leonhardt, I think, said even here in our Minnesota Public Radio studios at some point that even though he has been a profoundly influential teacher through all of his life, you can't teach anyone anything. You can only encourage them to see and to hear.

Yes, yes, yes. Exactly.

What I tell my students is that they've got to decide how they want to play a piece of music in the end because it's only they who can decide that. If they do precisely what I say out of a sense of duty, they're only going to seem like a clone, which is not very interesting for them and certainly not in the least bit interesting to me. I don't want to produce clones. And

what I will say to them therefore is what I think about this piece of music—all I expect you to do is to listen to it, think about it, and even if you decide, "No, I don't agree with Kynaston at all about this. I think he's talking a load of rubbish. I really don't agree," I will be pleased with that result, because I would've been the person who made them come to their own conclusion about it. And that's how I really see teaching. Helping people to come to their own conclusions.

How about your role as a performer?

You play a wide range of repertoire. The organ has 500 years of active, available music, so that even talking about organ music is very confusing. Someone might be fascinated by Frescobaldi, and someone else might be repulsed by Reger. It's all organ music, and yet it's so many things. It is a challenge, isn't it?

It is such a huge challenge, and repertoire—well, there's a lot of bad organ music, and there's a lot of wonderful organ music.

There's a lot of wonderful music that maybe wasn't originally for the organ but which works beautifully on it. I think of your arrangements of Mendelssohn preludes and fugues for piano and of some of the Liszt tone poems.

I've been tempted a few times in this way to make transcriptions. The Mendelssohn, because I love those preludes and fugues, but you never hear them being played by pianists. I thought, "Well, this is a real shame." Mendelssohn is very underplayed these days. I thought, "I'm not a good enough pianist to play them on the piano, but I certainly can make transcriptions of them and play them on the organ." That's what I've done. And they are great, great pieces of music.

The Liszt, well, I was tempted there because I thought particularly of a piece like *Funérailles*, which is one of the greatest pieces of Liszt, because of the way it's written one can actually add another dramatic dimension to this on the organ. We know Liszt loved playing the organ wherever he went. He was always asking to play organs. There's a famous story where he improvised in such a demonic way on the *Dies irae* that the friends who were with him decided that they didn't want to stay with him in the cathedral any more and disappeared, leaving him to it. In a way, that was what inspired me to make my transcription of *Funérailles*, because it adds a huge dimension, perhaps overdramatizes it. I don't know if one can overdramatize Liszt, but it becomes a very dramatic piece.

Is there a story behind this?

Yes, it was a combination of two things. It was the death of Chopin; hence the quotations, the indirect quotations from Chopin and the Hungarian Revolution. Now, he never specifically said it was either of those things, but that's what people have worked out for themselves, and I think that's probably right.

And the emotional trajectory of the work, if you were to put it into words before we heard it.

Well, it is massive. I mean, it starts off with a death march, a very slow one. Building up to a huge climax on the trumpet calls on the third page. On the organ, that is very, very dramatic, more dramatic than it is on the piano. What I've done is transcribe it for the organ in a very orchestral way, orchestrated it on the organ, if you like.



Nicolas Kynaston at the Steinmeyer & Co./Johannes Klais Orgelbau instrument in the Abbey Church of Amorbach, Germany.

Well, Liszt was not averse to doing the same himself. He put so many of his pieces in so many different contexts.

Exactly. I had no issues about doing it at all because Liszt was always doing it to other people.

Alright, you've had a career that's been going since you were a teenager, you have seen great characters in the organ world come and go, you have watched yourself as a youth flower and blossom and mature, you have helped other fine organists find themselves, you have seen the organ transform from its explorations into Classicism, and then its re-embrace of it, and its rejection of Romanticism, and then its re-embrace of it. It's been an interesting life, hasn't it?

It's been a fascinating life. I don't regret it at all. The organ was not my first instrument. I first trained as a pianist, and then I actually studied the French horn for quite a long time. I didn't start to be an organist until I went to Germani, and then he inspired me, obviously. It is really a fascinating instrument. Organ performance is sometimes in danger of being subject too much to fashion. Over the years, I have watched the prophets of one day who have said that you must play a certain composer in this particular way because otherwise people are not going to take you seriously, and after ten years, it's very interesting that those same people have been superseded by a new prophet, and students are saying, "Oh, but of course, you wouldn't take any notice of what that other person used to say."

I think that's sad in a way that there should be fashions, particularly in Bach playing, because it has the effect with some students as saying, "Oh, I don't want to play any Bach because I'm not sure I will do it right," or according to the latest fashion. And I always say, "Look. Don't worry. Do what you want to do, then we'll talk about it. We will discuss performance practice." You have your whole life to study performance practice, but what you must do now is actually learn the music because unless you learn it, you won't be able to discuss it or think about it. It is becoming a danger in this, too much theorizing and not enough actual music, which I regret sometimes.

And with so much music to play, it would be best if we didn't think so much and actually just did and heard.

Oh, no. I think thinking is very important, but I don't think it should become

an end in itself, which is sometimes dangerous. When it starts to get to a situation where students put off learning music because they feel insecure that they wouldn't be able to do it correctly, then I really do regret it.

What do you most enjoy or celebrate about your life with the organ?

That's a huge question. I love music. I grew up in a musical house. My mother was a violinist. Music has just been my life from the very earliest age. I'm the youngest of seven, and all my brothers and sisters played. I just can't imagine living without music, and so I'm extremely grateful that I've always had it. I've been able to earn my living by doing what I enjoy most in life, which is a great privilege when I have so many friends who actually spend their lives doing something they don't like very much, like sitting in front of a computer screen all day. I'm forever grateful that I've been able to earn my living by doing what I love most. I would've never seen the world to the extent that I have if I had not been a musician, which has been a huge benefit, a joy going all over the world and making friends. It seems like a lot of plus points.

Well, that's good.

The air travel is not getting so good these days but. . .

Well, it beats walking.

For me it's gratitude. I'm extremely grateful as I've had a lot of pleasure out of it.

Any other stories of obstreperous moments or unusually gratifying discoveries?

I didn't speak much about Ralph Downes, who was also an absolutely wonderful teacher in a completely different way from Germani. By the time I had gone to Ralph Downes, I was slightly older, and I hope slightly more grown up, although Ralph did admit to me years later that he thought when I first went to be his student that I was a totally impossible person.

Now what does that mean?

I think he thought I was too temperamental, but I did quiet down quite a lot. One of my lessons with Ralph I always remember, and I've often quoted this story to my students. I was under enormous pressure because when I first got the job at Westminster Cathedral, which was a real, full-time job, I was still a

student at the Royal College and I managed to arrange it so that my one day off from Westminster Cathedral was the day when I crammed all my lessons at the Royal College. For two years, I worked seven days a week.

My Royal College day was hard work, and it was a Monday, I'll always remember. I'd had the weekend of services at Westminster Cathedral and an organ lesson with Ralph Downes on Monday. So a lot of late night practice to get the things prepared, and Ralph Downes always demanded two pieces a week.

There was one week where my duties at the cathedral had been particularly stressful, and frankly I hadn't done as much work as I should have. The pieces he'd asked me to prepare were the *Prière* of César Franck, which is hardly an easy work, and a Bach prelude and fugue—I can't remember which one now. So he said, "Oh, I'll hear the Franck first." I played the Franck, and at the end there was this long silence, which was typical of Ralph Downes, followed by "Mmmmm," also typical of Ralph Downes. He then said, "I think you'd better play the Bach because even if you're sight reading that, it won't sound quite so bad." It was one of my most stressful moments with Ralph Downes, but I always remember that. I felt very small.

But he probably said it in such a dead-pan way that it wasn't nearly as cutting as it might have been.

Completely dead-pan, the most expressive thing about it was the silence followed by, "Mmm." Yes.

There was another occasion with Ralph where he had given me one of the five-part fugues of Nicolas de Grigny. On that occasion I did almost lose my cool, as we never got beyond the first line because it's one of those pieces where every note is ornamented and sort of *dum-dedadededa-lum*. He was being particularly fussy that day, and every ornament I played was either too early or too late. So, after an hour and a half we were still working on the first line of this fugue, by which time I was going spare. But he taught me to be meticulous about that sort of thing. I certainly went away and thought about it a great deal, I can remember. On other occasions he could be most generous in his praise—most generous. And of course, that made you feel wonderful.

Talk about his design for the organ at Royal Festival Hall,⁴ which was a real ear opener for the British.

It was more than that for the British. It was so controversial that it caused more or less a political split in the musical world, with people like Vaughan Williams writing to the press saying that Ralph Downes should not have been made the consultant for the organ at Royal Festival Hall, and that he was introducing foreign influences into English music, and so on. It was quite an extraordinary time. It all seems extraordinary now to think back to that, but it was so controversial. It was controversial because England was still very much used to the sound of Henry Willis, Harrison & Harrison, William Hill, and what has become known as the English Cathedral sound with multiple 8' stops, great sonority, high-pressure reeds, and so on and so forth, what some of us call the Empire sound. The sort of sound that is designed to make people get on their knees.

Ralph wanted to build an organ in the Royal Festival Hall that would be a child of its time and went back to the old principles of low wind pressure, delicate voicing, where not one stop

would swamp another stop. It's a large organ of a hundred something stops, but each one is an individual voice, and that's what he wanted. He was very much influenced in this by his time before the war in the United States, because it was what Donald Harrison was doing in the United States. I think the American influence on Ralph Downes was enormous, particularly in the combination he did in the Royal Festival Hall of rather French-style reeds with Germanic flue choruses. That is a style of organbuilding that really started in this country.

And the instrument at Royal Festival Hall began the neo-Classical revival in Great Britain?

It was certainly the most important. In fact, before the war Ralph Downes had started designing an organ for a Benedictine abbey, Buckfast Abbey in Devonshire. That was actually in the 1930s. It wasn't completed until just after the war. That organ also had completely Germanic choruses with French-style reeds. So, he had already done it, incomplete, but he had already done it at Buckfast Abbey. And then, his own instrument at Brompton Oratory and the Royal Festival Hall, and then there were numerous other ones after that all in the same style. But it actually started in the 1930s.

And now Royal Festival Hall is seen as its own kind of historic instrument.

It is indeed, and is shortly going to be completely restored because they're going to reorder the hall inside. Next year is the fiftieth birthday of the Royal Festival Hall, and Dame Gillian Weir, John Scott, Thomas Trotter, and myself are all playing with orchestra. We're all playing music, either concertos or whatever, with orchestra. After that the hall will be closed for the complete refurbishment, and at long last the organ will be completely cleaned and re-leathered, all the things that are necessary because it is not completely reliable at the moment. It's showing its age. ■

Notes

1. See: <https://westminstercathedral.org.uk/the-grand-organ/>.
2. See: <https://www.megaron.gr/en/halls-and-meeting-spaces-of-megaron/the-organ-at-megaron/> and <https://klais.de/m.php?tx=153>.

3. See: <https://www.selbyabbey.org.uk/the-hill-organ/>.

4. See: <https://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/magazine/the-royal-festival-hall-organ-a-short-history/> and <https://www.harrisonorgans.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/ROYAL-FESTIVAL-HALL-Full-Spec.pdf>.

Michael Barone earned a degree in music history from Oberlin Conservatory, studying musicology with Richard Murphy, Mark Siebert, and Karen Pendle and organ with Haskell Thomson. Upon graduation in 1968, after three years' of involvement with the student-run campus ten-watt radio station WOBC, he was hired by KSJR-FM at Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota, and has continued with the outgrowth of that station, today's Minnesota Public Radio/American Public Media system, ever since. After twenty-five years as music director, Barone focused on national productions (Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra; Pipedreams; A Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols) and continues as by-far the longest tenured of MPR's staff.

Barone is a past president of the Organ Historical Society, received the 1996 President's Award from the American Guild of Organists, the 1997 OHS Distinguished Service Award, the 2001 Deems Taylor Broadcast Award from the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers, and recently the 2024 Distinguished Achievement Award from the Oberlin Alumni Association. In 2002 he was inducted into the Minnesota Music Hall of Fame. Barone was a consultant to the Walt Disney Concert Hall organ project in Los Angeles and for many years served as acting advisor on organ programming for the Kimmel Center in Philadelphia. He continues long-time involvement with the Twin Cities Chapter of the American Guild of Organists, at present as sub-dean and chair of the program committee.

Barone is recognized internationally for his outstanding contributions to the world of organ music. Pipedreams began as a limited fourteen-week series in 1982, but returned to the air in 1983 as a continuous weekly presence and remains the only nationally distributed weekly radio program that fully explores the art of the pipe organ. A comprehensive archive of all past and current Pipedreams

programs is accessible online. Barone currently is hoping to find someone to carry Pipedreams forward to the next level.

Pipedreams website: pipedreams.org

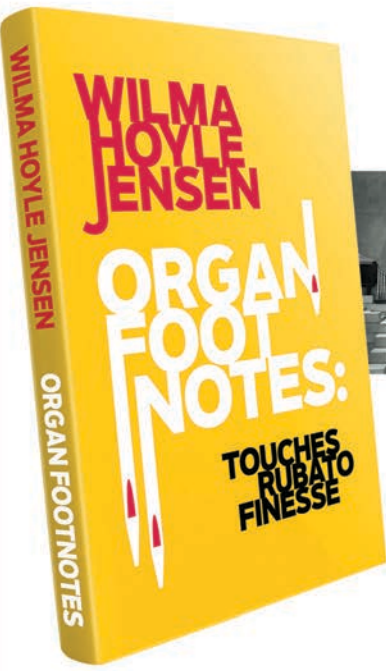
To hear some of Nicolas Kynaston's music, tune into Michael Barone's upcoming program on Pipedreams.

Pipedreams Program No. 2534
Distribution on/week of: August 25, 2025

Contemplating Kynaston . . . in the wake of his death this past March, we share archived performances and personal glimpses of the acclaimed British recitalist, recording artist, and teacher Nicolas Kynaston.

Hour 1, Max Reger: "Toccata and Fugue in A Minor," from *Zwölf Stücke*, opus 80, numbers 11–12; Percy Whitlock: "Fantasie Choral in D-flat," from *Two Fantasie Chorals*; Charles Villiers Stanford: *Fantasia and Toccata in D Minor*; André Fleury: *Prélude, Andante et Toccata* (1987 Kney/Saint Thomas Aquinas Chapel, University of Saint Thomas, Saint Paul, Minnesota), PD Archive CD (released October 20, 2003).

Hour 2, Johann Sebastian Bach: *Fugue in G, BWV 577* (1973 Rieger/Clifton Cathedral, Bristol, UK), Classics for Pleasure 4760; Robert Schumann: "Canon in B Minor," from *Sechs Studien in kanonischer Form*, opus 65, number 5; Henry Mulet: *Carillon-Sortie* (1954 Harrison/Royal Festival Hall, London), Classics for Pleasure 4760; César Franck: *Pastorale in E Major*, opus 19 (1922–1932 Willis/Westminster Cathedral, London), EMI Classics 85295; Max Reger: "Rhapsody in C-sharp Minor," from *Zwölf Stücke*, opus 65, number 1 (1993 Klais/Megaron Concert Hall, Athens, Greece), Priory 780; Franz Liszt: *Excelsior* (1977 Klais/Ingolstadt Cathedral, Germany), Carlton Classics 30366 00032; Bedrich Wiedermann: *Notturmo in C-sharp Minor* (1888 Hill-1986 Mander/Chichester Cathedral, England), Hyperion 66265; Bach (transcribed, Reger): *Fugue in D Minor, BWV 903* (1782 Stumm-1982 Steinmeyer & Klais/Amorbach Abbey, Germany), LCS HiRes 006.



“Courageous and thought-provoking”

— Janette Fishell



Dr. Wilma Hoyle Jensen's ORGAN FOOTNOTES and its free companion videos can help you...

- ▶ Unlock your own freedom of movement.
- ▶ Practice more efficiently.
- ▶ Learn new repertoire more quickly, accurately, and musically.
- ▶ Play with more artistry and expression!

Available at loisfyfemusic.com