

STEPHEN CLEOBURY

Biography

Stephen Cleobury is associated with two of Britain's most famous choirs. Renowned equally as a conductor and organist, he has, since 1982, been Organist and Director of Music at King's College, Cambridge. At the end of 2006 became Conductor Laureate of the BBC Singers, Britain's only full-time professional choir, whose Chief Conductor he was for 11 years before that. He is also Conductor of the Cambridge University Music Society, one of the oldest such organisations in the world and works with leading symphony orchestras and period instrument ensembles. He ranges across a broad repertoire, from Gregorian chant to newly composed works. He has particularly championed contemporary music and at King's has commissioned a carol annually for *A Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols*, thereby refreshing this great tradition of Christmas music with compositions from the foremost composers of our own day, including the Minnesotan composer, Stephen Paulus.

Of late, performances as an organ recitalist have taken him to venues as diverse as Houston, Texas, Leeds Town Hall, the Performing Arts Centre in Hong Kong, Haderslev Cathedral in Denmark, and Salt Lake City's huge LDS Conference Center, where he played to an audience of several thousand people. Other engagements have seen him directing the Mormon Tabernacle Choir in Salt Lake City, recording with the BBC Singers a CD of Tippett's choral music to mark the composer's centenary, and conducting the Israel Camerata in a series of concerts in Tel-Aviv and Jerusalem; giving a series of conducting master-classes in Mexico; conducting the National Chamber Choir of Ireland and touring with the CUMS in Switzerland. In the midst of a tour of the BBC Singers in Japan, he gave a lecture on the music of Benjamin Britten at the International Choral Symposium in Kyoto, and recently he travelled to Vienna to take part in an international symposium on voice training under the auspices of the Vienna Boys' Choir.

As a conductor he has worked with many ensembles, including the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, the BBC Concert Orchestra, the Philharmonia, the London Philharmonic,

Southbank Sinfonia, the Academy of Ancient Music, the Irish Chamber Orchestra, the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir, Endymion and His Majesty's Sagbutts and Cornetts.

He has directed the orchestra and chorus of the Cambridge University Music Society in the major works for chorus and orchestra as well as in symphonic repertoire, and has also premièred new works, among them pieces by Alexander Goehr, Robin Holloway and Robert Saxton. Recent performances with this ensemble have included Mahler *Resurrection Symphony* in Boston, Berlioz *Requiem* in Ely Cathedral, Dvořák *Stabat Mater* in King's Chapel, Vaughan Williams *A Sea Symphony* in the Sheldonian Theatre in Oxford, and Tippett *A Child of Our Time* and Verdi *Requiem*, also in King's Chapel. 2007 saw a number of Elgar performances to mark the composer's 150th anniversary year.

In March 2004, he instigated the first annual Easter Festival at King's, at which he conducts concerts with the Chapel Choir and the Academy of Ancient Music, many of which are broadcast by the BBC. He has frequently premièred works with the BBC Singers, notably Francis Grier *Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ* at the Easter Festival in 2006, Giles Swayne *Havoc* and Harrison Birtwistle *Ring Dance of the Nazarene* at the Royal Albert Hall at the Proms, and Edward Cowie *Gaia*, all with the leading chamber ensemble, Endymion. More recently he premièred Errollyn Wallen *Our English Heart* in Portsmouth with the BBC Concert Orchestra and Singers as part of the Nelson celebrations.

His CD output is prolific. King's College has an exclusive contract with EMI and the latest release is *I heard A Voice* featuring music by Gibbons, Tomkins and Weelkes with the viol consort Fretwork. The Choir can also be seen and heard on DVD. Cleobury has also recorded with the BBC Singers, and there are solo organ recordings, too; Priory Records has recently re-released his much acclaimed account of the Elgar Sonatas.

Stephen thrives on this varied professional life.

Current as of December 2007

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Press Notices

SALT LAKE CITY “ORGANIST SHOWS COMMAND AT CONFERENCE CENTER” “If an organ recital is held in Salt Lake City’s huge LDS Conference Center, will it look like anyone showed up? The answer was yes, as a few thousand people braved Friday’s stormy night, gathering in the auditorium’s plaza level to hear King’s College, Cambridge, organist and music director, Stephen Cleobury. Cleobury, performing the organ’s first formal concert since the instrument’s gala inauguration in June 2003, exhibited tasteful interpretation, musical intellect and the somewhat contradictory ability to highlight the giant instrument’s subtleties. ... Each phrase was molded with care in this elegant performance. ... The organist’s skillful dynamic contrast and controlled presentation mitigated the building’s acoustic challenges. With articulate commentary, he described this instrument’s virtues as “versatile” with its own accents, languages, integrity and character. This was demonstrated through works such as Edward Elgar’s *Sonata No. 2 in B-flat*. Continual volume adjustments and stop changes revealed seemingly limitless musical colors and textures. ... Louis Vierne’s *Claire de Lune* was most memorable. The lighting around the organ pipes was muted to a soft blue and tiny star-like lights twinkled above. A lyric melody floated softly over wandering accompaniment implying shimmering moonlight. The success of this recital, sponsored by the Salt Lake Chapter of the American Guild of Organists and the Temple Square Performance Series, makes additional concerts from this venue likely.”

Robert Coleman, The Tribune

SEATTLE “... Cleobury’s playing was distinguished throughout by an attention to clarity. At the same time, the music felt astonishingly alive ... Human emotions came enhanced through this aliveness ... one needed no title to hear sadness, even grieving in the music, and thoughtfulness and helpfulness as well, through Cleobury’s interpretation. Bach’s *Prelude and Fugue in C* ... was an essay in heartfelt joy and overflowing happiness. Majesty, smoothness, sonorousness and depth made their appearance, too – qualities one expects from a great organ – but Cleobury often achieved them without resorting to the loudest stops on the instrument. He did, though, use the softest, and it was amazing to hear this huge organ sounding so gently, floating the tone. The sound of one of the lowest stops on the organ opening Rheinberger’s *Introduction and Passacaglia* ... could have been a bear stirring from sleep. The soft, furry, deep notes of the phrase continued, then repeated themselves in endless permutations as the harmonies built up in a fabulous structure overhead, all made clear for the listener to follow and understand. This is at least part of Cleobury’s art. He elucidated the music for us.”

Philippa Kiraly, Seattle Post, March 29, 1999

EDINBURGH (St. Giles’ Cathedral) “As the series of celebrity organ recitals gets underway – this latest by Stephen Cleobury ... – more and more facets of this fine instrument are revealed. ... from the very first notes, the all-enveloping directness and power of the new organ was immediately apparent. ... Kenneth Leighton’s *Prelude Scherzo and Passacaglia* ... felt just right. ... Jongen’s *Sonata Eroïca* [was] a real virtuoso showstopper whose ever-present theme is subjected to increasingly extravagant variations. Just when you think that the organ simply can’t get louder, it does, producing sounds that go straight to the backbone and make the hairs on the back of your neck stand up on end.”

The Scotsman, June 25, 1992

BELFAST (Belfast Cathedral) “The present season of organ recitals reached a splendid climax last night when Stephen Cleobury, Director of Music at King’s College, Cambridge, gave a memorable recital in St Anne’s Cathedral. It is to Mr Cleobury’s credit that he overcame all problems of organ placement and echo with surprising ease, while his handling of the resources was exemplary. Indeed, not since the splendid recital on this organ in its old position many moons ago by Jeanne Demessieux, has any recitalist been so successful in this respect. ... The evening reached a superb climax in the Liszt *Prelude and Fugue*, a spectacular performance by any standards. Technically, this was masterly and the rising excitement and thrust of this virtuoso account of a masterpiece rightly aroused the audience to a high degree of enthusiasm.”

Rathcol, Belfast Telegraph, June 26, 1993

“Never one to miss an opportunity to hear two of my favourite artists, Stephen Cleobury, organist of King’s College, Cambridge, and the Jaques Loussier Plays Bach Trio, even if performed simultaneously, the problem was solved by first hearing the former on the Ulster Hall’s Mulholland Organ and then migrating to the Opera House in time to take in the second part of the Loussier programme. Cleobury’s excellent programme embraced both popular and lesser played works, with a common denominator with Loussier in the presence of a major work by Bach, in this case the *Prelude and Fugue in G*, a performance that displayed both music and player to best possible advantage. Gigout’s *Toccatà in B minor* demands brilliant treatment and this was a stirring performance. There was a suitably relaxed contrast in Jongen’s charming *Chant de Mai*, while the dissonance of Messiaen’s *La banquet céleste* brought us cleverly into this century with a subtle use of tone colours. An old friend, Mendelssohn’s sixth sonata, displayed the organ’s resources in a very happy light in a fine performance, while the recitalist’s splendid technique, and rock-like stability of rhythm, allied to the organ’s brilliant resources ... all made Mulet’s *Carillon-Sortie* a tour de force.”

Belfast Telegraph, March 29, 1995

“The first Ulster organ recital of the New Year brought a visit from Stephen Cleobury ... The evening got off to a brilliant start with the ever-popular Liszt *Prelude and Fugue on B.A.C.H.*, a performance that immediately raised the spirits ... Some of the finest playing of the recital came ... with Franck’s well known third Choral, followed by a really atmospheric and splendidly played account of Messiaen’s *Dieu parmi nous*. Here the full gamut of the instrument’s possibilities was fully explored.

Rathcol, *Belfast Times*, January 12, 1988

COLUMBUS, GA “...played with a blazing technique which confirmed what the listener knew from the beginning of the programme: Stephen Cleobury is a first-class artist.”

Columbus Enquirer

OXFORD (Christ Church Cathedral) “On Sunday evening, his [SC’s] finely-balanced programme was the more vivid for the exceptional clarity of every feature. The wholesome vigour of a *Prelude and Fugue in G minor* by Buxtehude was followed by the subtle energies of the Kyrie from the “*Messe pour les Paroisses*” by Couperin. Hindemith’s *Sonata no. 1* was an exhilarating contrast in purpose and style. Liszt’s *Variations on ‘Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen’* drew wide expressiveness from Mr Cleobury. ..Bach’s *Fantasia and Fugue in G minor* [was] lucid and magnificently delivered.

The Oxford Times

Reviews of Recordings

“Stephen Cleobury plays a recital at King’s College Chapel, Cambridge. The restored Harrison and Harrison instrument is magnificently recorded ... and an award of five stars to Stephen Cleobury for brilliant playing on an unashamedly popular and delightful programme.”

Church Music Quarterly on “*The Splendour of King’s*”

“Stephen Cleobury’s playing of Elgar’s two organ sonatas ... brings out the majesty of the music and conjures most beautiful effects from the organ which sound entirely appropriate.”

The Gramophone (Critic’s Choice)

“An irresistible golden opulence pervades this recording, the centrally placed organ pouring forth *nobilimente* for all it’s worth. [In] the second movement of the *G major Sonata*...Stephen Cleobury dips his fingers into the orchestral magic. ... Elgar certainly sounds good at King’s and Cleobury leans into the broad phrasing, coaxing rather than driving. ... There are lot of melting moments too. Listen to the solo flutes spilling liquid joy in the cadenza ... The almost unbearable nostalgia of the *Imperial March* ... depends as much on the ebb of swift fades as it does on vivid crescendos. These are done so well that one might think Elgar wrote the work for organ. And Harris and Cleobury between them manage to make the organ weep in *Nimrod* with manlier tears than any orchestra would permit. ... An indispensable indulgence for those whose throats tighten when Elgar speaks at his most direct – and for those who can’t get enough of the sound of this instrument in its heavenly environment.”

Gordon Reynolds, *The Gramophone*, on Elgar disc (*Nimrod* arr. by Harris)

“...this [new recording] is certainly the finest to come in my direction not only musically, but also technically. ... it doesn't sound like a recording! There is a feeling of presence that captures the King's acoustic in a quite uncanny way ... It is the overall structure of the piece [the *G major Sonata*] that emerges most strongly in Cleobury's playing, enhanced by skilful changes of registration and imaginative phrasing. In many performances the central movements sound too similar with little distinction between their moods. Cleobury allows the 2nd movement to flow forward at a swiftish pace, much to its advantage, contrasting it with a serious view of the 3rd. The ~~##~~ *tranquillo* section is breathtaking, the whole a portent of slow movements to come. For me organ transcriptions of orchestral works remain expedients rather than preferred versions but I have to admit that Cleobury's account of Nimrod has a striking eloquence and makes a deep impression.”

Michael Woodward, Elgar Society Journal

“This is one of the outstanding organ records of the year.”

The Organist's Review

“His sensitive and intelligent reading of the Franck *Grande Pièce Symphonique* is a model of well-rounded phrasing while Duruflé's *Suite*'s inbuilt contrasts between introspection and almost savage brilliance give further scope for performance of a high order.”

Musical Opinion

“I'm so pleased that the “Great European Organs” series on the Priory label has King's College, Cambridge, for its No. 1. It has an aura all its own. Its rich warmth, haloed by golden mixtures, sails on a different ocean from the sterner vessels of the neo-classic line, and it rejoices to tremendous effect in such a colourful programme as this. And what a start Reger's *Dankpsalm* makes, its pedal line especially digging into incredible depths. Mendelssohn billows in, dressed overall with shining colours in his upperwork – and even his fugal divisions are individually spruced as for an Admiral's inspection. Mozart's *Fantasia* is reasonably scaled down in deference to its original mechanical destination (it too often sounds like an eighteenth century air raid ...) and the charm of its long fluted passages maintains enchantment throughout. Karg-Elert is treated with abundant majesty and Hindemith gains a great deal from colourful treatment and an edge-softening acoustic. It is, of course, Stephen Cleobury who is the weaver of all these spells (it's too often the organ and the building which gets all the credit here) and anyone requiring further proof of his abilities to thrill and enchant should play the Liszt *Variations* over and over again until further notice.”

Gordon Reynolds, The Gramophone

“A brief note now of the only organ record for inclusion in this quarter (and considering its very high standard, perhaps deservedly so). In the “Great European Organs” series, Priory have released on CD Stephen Cleobury's recital on the organ of King's College, Cambridge ... this is a performance to please addicts, and to make new converts. A marvellously engineered release, glowing with warm, delicious sounds.”

John Garmonsway, Church Music Quarterly

“Cleobury's vaguely dispassionate approach, letting the music speak for itself – not to mention his absolute faithfulness to the letter of the score and his adept handling of this lovely instrument – pays handsome dividends in remarkably compelling performances of what can so often sound like mere mood music. A first-rate start to Priory's projected series.”

Gramophone Review on Howells CD

“The Westminster Abbey organ is ideal for ceremonial music and Cleobury plays these stirring pieces with panache as well as an assured sense of style, making this a highly enjoyable record.”

Music and Musicians on album of Wedding Music

STEPHEN CLEOBURY
Discography of Organ CDs

The Organ of King's College, Cambridge – Gothic CD 185

- Music of Reger, Mendelssohn, Mozart, Karg-Elert, Hindemith, Liszt

Organ Music of Herbert Howells, Vol. 1 – Gothic CD 480

- Psalm Preludes Set 1, Opus 32, Nos. 1, 2 & 3

Rhapsody Nos. 1, 2, 3 & 4

Psalm Preludes Set 2, Nos. 1, 2 & 3

The King's Trumpeter – Gothic CD 189

Stephen Cleobury, organ; Crispian Steele Perkins, trumpet

- Music of Mathias, Mozart, Telemann, Steele