

THE INFLUENCE OF MUSIC

There has been a strong musical tradition at Farm Street Church since it was founded more than a hundred and fifty years ago. Then the choir consisted of men and boys drawn from Roman Catholic schools across London. Organists in this early period included composer Frederic Archer and Jacques-Nicolas Lemmens, the Belgian teacher of Charles-Marie Widor and Alexandre Guilmant. In 1883, the church appointed the 18-year-old John Francis Brewer as organist who served until 1916.

Before the Motu Proprio (1903) on Church Music, Farm Street Church was renowned for its elaborate orchestral masses on great feasts, however this came to an abrupt end. The period between the two World Wars saw the music reach a high point, when the choir was under the direction of Fr John Driscoll SJ. Driscoll had trained an exceptionally good choir of men and boys at the church of the Sacred Heart in Wimbledon, and from 1928 undertook the direction of the choir at Farm Street as well. He was an expert in voice-production and both the Farm Street and Wimbledon choirs received frequent praise in the press. The music critic Ernest Newman wrote of “the perfect singing of the Farm Street choir” which “must be one of the finest choirs in the country”. Fr Driscoll’s greatest difficulty was in keeping a regular team of boy choristers, and as there were no local Catholic schools, he had to recruit from across London. With the choristers having to travel from various parts of the city for rehearsals there was great difficulty in keeping a consistent group, yet the quality of the singing was such that one of the Farm Street Choristers sang in a production of Tosca at Covent Garden in 1938. After the Second World War, under the direction of the Belgian born Fernand Laloux (1901 – 1970), it was decided to introduce a fully professional mixed voice choir, with the aim regaining the reputation the music had at Farm Street before the war. (From 1943 – 45 a quintet of male voices had been responsible for all the singing.) A period of change followed in 1964 when the professional choir was disbanded, partly as an overreaction to the Second Vatican Council, and also with the aim of encouraging more congregational singing.

In 1917 Guy Weitz (1883 – 1970) was appointed organist. A Belgian, who had been a pupil of Widor, Guilmant and d’Indy, Weitz was one of the finest organists, and organ composers of his generation. The organ was used as an instrument for improvisation, playing repertoire, accompanying the choir and congregation and continues to play a very prominent role in the Liturgies at Farm Street. Weitz’s most famous student, Nicholas Danby (1935 – 1997) succeeded him as organist in 1967. Danby’s main achievement at Farm Street was re-establishing the professional choir in the early 1970s, and restoring music of the highest quality.

From the 1920s until the early 1960s the repertoire consisted of sixteenth century polyphony, as well as a wide variety of modern and contemporary music, much of this collected, edited and even arranged by Fr Driscoll. He was particularly skilful in setting religious texts to already existing music. Some of this unique repertoire is still heard at the liturgies in Farm Street.

Today, in the twenty-first century, the repertoire is still very varied and ranges from sixteenth-century Polyphony, the Viennese Classical composers, nineteenth century Romantics as well as a wide variety of twentieth-century and contemporary music. Gregorian Chant also plays an important role in the worship.

Following Nicholas Danby's death in 1997, Martyn Parry (1946 – 2004) and David Graham were appointed Joint Directors of Music. Martyn Parry had been Nicholas Danby's assistant at Farm Street from 1971- 1981 and was formerly Director of Music at the Sacred Heart Church in Wimbledon. Both he and David Graham had been organ pupils of Nicholas Danby, and so continued the rich musical heritage that had been established since the 1920s. In December 2004, following the death of Martyn Parry earlier that year, the music was reorganised and Duncan Aspden was appointed Associate Director of Music, to assist David Graham in directing the professional choir and playing the organ.

During the 1990s a number of recordings were made which reflect the variety and styles of the music at Farm Street. A CD of organ music, recorded by David Graham, which celebrates the music of Guy Weitz and his influences was recorded on the organ at Farm Street in 2000.

Farm Street Parish is keen to support contemporary composers and a number of works have been recently commissioned. These include a setting of *Tota pulchra es Maria* (Antiphon for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception) which was given its first performance in December 2012, and a setting of *I say that we are wound with mercy from The Blessed Virgin* compared to *The Air we Breathe* by Gerald Manly Hopkins SJ, to commemorate the 200th Anniversary of the Restoration of the Jesuits in Britain. This was given its first performance in Westminster Cathedral on 1 March 2014 directed by David Graham. Both of these motets were composed by Gabriel Jackson. A commissioned setting of the new English Mass translation from Christopher Willcock SJ was premiered in 2012.

In 2015 the choir made a recording which reflects the musical traditions at Farm Street. Some of Fr Driscoll's arrangements have been included as well as some of the 'modern' motets which were sung when the choir consisted of men and boys. Fernand Laloux's exquisite setting of the *Tantum ergo* has been recorded as well as the two recently commissioned motets by Gabriel Jackson.

THE ORGAN

When it opened in 1849, the church installed an organ built by William Hill, the most significant English organ builder of his generation. Organists in this early period, before the appointment of Brewer (organist 1883 – 1916) included composer Frederic Archer and Jacques-Nicolas Lemmens, the Belgian teacher of Charles-Marie Widor and Alexandre Guilmant.

In 1889, organ consultants decided it was necessary to replace the existing Hill organ. The original instrument, had been modified and added to so often, that it became necessary to replace it by a completely new one. A brand new organ was built by the Belgian firm Anneessens and opened on 6th December 1889. By 1914 this new organ was rebuilt by Bishop & Son (who still maintain the instrument) and incorporated 20 stops from the 1889 instrument. This organ was inaugurated at the Requiem service for the Archduke Ferdinand. The organ was enlarged and rebuilt by Henry Willis & Sons in 1926 in consultation with the then organist, Guy Weitz, with a number of stops re-voiced and some ‘modern’ additions to the tonal design. Following war damage to the church, the organ was completely rebuilt and overhauled in 1951 by Henry Willis & Sons with further modifications.

By 1979, care of the organ was returned to Bishop & Son, and in 1980 a scheme for restoration was drawn up in collaboration with Nicholas Danby. This refurbishment maintained the character of the 1926 designs, with some necessary tonal amendments. The handsome Willis console was retained and moved to its current position under the ‘West End’ window.

Although the action was renewed in 1980, further work on the stop actions was carried out in 1997 with a modernisation of the adjustable pistons, and by 2010 the 1926 keyboards were restored as they were showing major signs of wear and tear, and had become increasingly unreliable and troublesome. A Solid State transmission action was also fitted.

In 2015, in time for the 50th Anniversary of the founding of the Parish, the organ has undergone a complete cleaning and overhaul, including the leatherwork of the 100-year old bellows. The pedal reed stop, dating from 1914, had been re-voiced by Willis in 1926 and again in 1951 and the recent overhaul has restored this stop to its 1914 style. In addition there has been restoration to some of the flue stops, and other reeds, to recapture the spirit of the 1914 organ, without sacrificing the colourful characteristics of the 1926 rebuild.