

## **Doorway to Heaven**

A small, two or three year old boy's hand lowers the needle onto a spinning disc; a 78 rpm record with a dog looking into a megaphone played on a wind up gramophone. The lead groove picks up and the sound of Reginald Forte, seated at a Theatre Organ, plays 'In a Monastery Garden'; on the other side is 'In a Persian Market'. Here a love of the organ is born and a lifetime's dedication begins.

Mother, in her infinite wisdom, removes the playing head, then the winding up handle followed by the needles but, with finger nail in groove and the other hand turning, nothing is going to stop the music. There is also a red, toy piano that a small finger would jab at trying to get it as loud as possible; the black notes were painted on the white keys so it was rather limited.

A move from Lancashire to Oxford brought new surroundings and then school. Mother took the boy to the gate on that first day in the Infants, but never went again; after that the boy was on his own - a sign of things to come. Winters then were very cold and small gloves did nothing much and an ice covered, uphill road had to be climbed on all fours - more signs of things to come. Arriving home frozen hands were put under a hot running tap to thaw them out.

It was during this period that reading was taught, along with 'riting and 'rithmatic; a whole class chanting time's tables concentrates the mind. With the ability to read now in the repertoire the Arthur Mee's Encyclopaedias were scanned and elementary music notation was explained with the use of sea shells on lines. F A C E and Every Good Boy Deserves Favour was rapidly assimilated, although the red piano had mysteriously disappeared.

How it came about that, at the age of ten, piano lessons started, with practice on a neighbour's piano, is uncertain. Mother had found somebody to teach the organ but he wanted the boy to be able to play, so, for four years, Miss Hartnell taught Scales and Arpeggios, Studies and Pieces. Two years later Mother bought a piano. Miss Hartnell did not believe in exams, but she was a slave driver with no letup during the three-quarter hour lesson – half a crown in the basket please. It was discovered that if the piece on the next page was worked on it would be useful in a while. I am not sure if she was unhappy about it as once she said 'You've been playing this already, haven't you?' I had to admit I had.

It was about this time that I joined the choir at Headington Quarry. The organist and choir master was Mr Abbot who, although quite old to a small boy, at 80 years or so, was determined that nobody should mess about and deducted their pay if they did. It was even necessary to take a singing test before you were allowed in. You were sent half way down the church and told to sing notes. I passed so was 'in'. My dad sang

with the 'Men'. It was not too long, being able to read music and not messing about, before I was head boy. Mr Abbot taught us to sing psalms and pitch notes during the 'run through' in the vestry before the service.

At fourteen I went to Heaven. Arrangements were made that I was not aware of and my lessons with Miss Hartnell came to an end. It was in St Mary the Virgin, High Street, Oxford that I met Mr John Webster and my organ lessons began. He took me through the small wooden door, up a stone spiral staircase to a platform where I met the love of my life; Heaven has nothing to compare with the three manual Walker organ on which I had my lessons. John had also designed the organ in the University Collage Chapel, so occasionally we went there to work. Sometimes Mr Webster would not arrive but, if the key was on top of the door I did not mind as I could get in and play the organ. He asked me not to make a lot of noise so I used the stops he selected for the pieces that were being worked on. I remember an occasion when a finger caught a button and a lot of stops popped out. The volume of the notes under my fingers was so intense that I froze; it was totally unexpected. Now I expect it!

Two years later Mr Webster found me an organ post in the village church of Holton. The organ had a single manual, a little smaller than the two manual Martin and Coate organ at Headington Quarry where I did my practice. Later on there was a move to Forest Hill and Stanton St John. Since then other churches have been and gone. The Abingdon Methodist, Conduit Road had a reasonable choir and Anthems were sung nearly every Sunday.

It was about that time when I become involved with the rebuild of the Compton Theatre Organ in the Abbey Hall, Abingdon. The organ had been taken out of a Gaumont Cinema behind Snow Hill Station in Birmingham. Many good friends were made and a lot of 'famous' organists were met who were booked to play concerts. Later on, having acquired the technique and music to play this instrument, so much despised by many organists, I played 'Rudolf' and 'I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas' for the Lord Mayor's Christmas Parties for the 'old folk' and have 'thank you' letters to prove it.

Looking back over the intervening years it has been a joy to spend so much of my life in 'heaven'; life outside has been hell at times, but nothing can touch a mind focussed on music with hands on a keyboard. It has been a 'Thread of Gold' running through my life.

Listening to 'In a Persian Market' on a CD of the Blackpool Wurlitzer brought a real 'buzz' and intense memories of a wind-up gramophone.

God bless you, 'Mum'; what did you do with the needles?