



Christopher Gordon-Wells

The son of a west country Vicar, Christopher Gordon-Wells was educated at St Michael's College, Tenbury. He was immensely proud of this. The School was founded by Rev Sir Frederick Arthur Gore Ousley with the specific objective of encouraging high standards in the music of the church. Christopher's life was spent in pursuit of that aim.

On one of our May Trips, the Society visited St Michael's Tenbury. Barbara Callender, then President, asked Jonathan Gregory to play some Vièrne. It was exactly 60 years to the day from a Recital by Vièrne himself in the College Chapel. He played the Vièrne piece dedicated "to my friend, the organ builder, Henry Willis". Christopher was touched by the tribute.

After National Service with the RAF in the early 1950s and a period of study at King's College London trying out his vocation to the Priesthood, Christopher became an organ builder and was on the staff of the firm of Alfred E Davies & Son, Northampton. They stood for high standards of workmanship and for technical ingenuity such as the device to make an essentially 4-manual organ playable on three manuals as in their instrument in Carlisle Memorial Methodist Church, Belfast.

Christopher came to Northern Ireland initially as tuner and representative for Davies. Besides his professional work he involved himself in church and cultural affairs in Ireland. As a parishioner in Lisburn Cathedral he sought to encourage young people to take an interest in the church and in the Christian religion. There are members of the Society now in their 50s who remember with gratitude the influence which he had upon them in their teenage years. He became an enthusiastic member of the Ulster Architectural Heritage Society and was always a supporter of the Ulster Orchestra.

A revolution occurred in British organ building in the wake of the Royal Festival Hall organ of the 1950s. There was a reawakening of interest in the North German Baroque organ, the advantages of good tracker action and balanced manual choruses. Christopher became a devotee and champion of this new movement. He also saw that copying German practice was not necessarily the best plan for our often non-resonant acoustics.

ULSTER SOCIETY OF ORGANISTS AND CHOIRMASTERS

President: James Little

He was interested in the early English diapason tone and its much greater harmonic development. His thesis for the Fellowship of the Incorporated Society of Organ Builders was on this theme.

To give expression to his ideas about the organ Christopher realised that he must set up his own firm and start building small tracker organs of classical design. He and his partner Mr Philip [later Brother Philip] Kennedy established the firm with the characteristically modest name of “Wells-Kennedy Partnership”. Philip left organ building for the monastic calling and Christopher’s new partner was David McElderry.

This has been a pioneering firm. Christopher set about learning about the construction of slider soundboards and tracker action and the voicing of flue stops on low wind pressure. This was all new and not part of his professional training.

The tonal and structural ideas of the Wells-Kennedy Partnership were supported by the late Lord Dunleath, organ enthusiast, patron and impressario. This was a fruitful association for the organ heritage of N Ireland. Lord Dunleath was painstaking and effective in handling church committees and directing them towards the “new” ideas in organ building [though not always resulting in contracts for Wells-Kennedy!].

A major early collaboration was in the rebuilding of the Snetzler organ in Hillsborough Parish Church along lines more akin to the 18th century concepts of Snetzler than the ideas of the mid 20th century. This instrument, and its smaller partner the England chamber organ, were the focus for a series of recitals “Music in May” which introduced to a wide audience the ideas of the “new” classical sound of the organ.

Along with ideas of the mechanics and sound of the organ, Christopher was concerned about its visual impact. It is amazing to reflect that for most of the 20th century, many organs in the British Isles had nothing more than a row of pipes in front of them. Christopher studied organ case design of the 18th century and earlier. He created his own contemporary expressions of the earlier concept, often surrounding the pipes of one division of the organ in its own “tone cabinet” which then defined the front of the organ case with its case pipes and decoration.

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The firm of Wells-Kennedy has many new instruments in Ireland and Scotland that remain as a permanent record of innovation and craftsmanship. In the 1998 New Year's Honours Christopher received the MBE for his contribution to music in Northern Ireland, being one of very few organ builders to receive a public honour.

Christopher's happy marriage to Susan, was cut tragically short by her sudden death 30 years ago. Susan shared Christopher's interest in music and performed regularly as a solo oboist and in her own chamber group. Her last public performance was at a concert in Donegall Square Methodist Church on 4 January 1977 with organist Martin Ennis - then a young member of the Society and Organ Scholar at Christ's College and now a Fellow of Girton College, Cambridge.

Christopher was a faithful member of the Committee of the Society and served as our President. His contributions to the committee were characterised by careful thought and planning in advance. He seemed to know not only the best organs to visit but exactly how to get there and where precisely the best local restaurants could be found! He was always concerned about how best to draw young musicians towards the organ and organ playing, and was especially keen on establishing a sound financial basis for the Arthur Beggs Student Fund.

Christopher bore the incapacitating effects of a chronic illness with remarkable fortitude. He was distressed that even his work at the drawing board was affected by his illness. However, Christopher did not seem to have come across the concept of retirement and he continued to take an active interest in the firm and its projects, regularly visiting the workshop until he moved to Kent at Christmas 2006 to live nearer to his daughter Fiona Fieldwick and family.

Christopher died on 14th April 2007 following his prolonged illness. Members of the Society attended his funeral at St Peter's Church, Tempsford, Bedfordshire, the Parish of which his father the late Rev. F James Wells had been Rector 1951-67.

His firm continues to flourish under the direction of David McElderry and it is fitting that soon after Christopher's death, and in commemoration of Elgar, the Society pays its first visit to the Wells-Kennedy magnum opus in Derry Cathedral.

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If our Society were asked to give some indication of the stature of Christopher Gordon-Wells as a man and his impact on others what would we suggest? We could do no better than to draw attention to the selfless respect and unstinting kindness showered upon him by his business partner David McElderry, extending far beyond the duties of a colleague or the responsibilities of a son.

And if we were asked for a memorial? Perhaps we could do no better than to add a little to that well-known epitaph:

*Si monumentum requiris circumspice et audi.
If you seek a memorial, look around you and listen.*

MEC 04.06.07

**The Memorial Service for Christopher Gordon-Wells is at
3.30pm on Sunday 24th June 2007
at St George's Parish Church, Belfast.**

Members are encouraged to attend given that Christopher was a distinguished past President of USOC and a man of such influence in church music circles in Northern Ireland and beyond.

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USOC Visit to Londonderry Saturday 9th June 2007

In June, the Society will celebrate the **150th anniversary of the birth of Edward Elgar** with a special day trip to **Londonderry**. We will sample choral and organ music in three of the city's most famous buildings; the day will culminate with a free concert given by **David Briggs** (Organist Emeritus, Gloucester Cathedral) who will perform Elgar's Organ Sonata on the recent 4-manual Wells-Kennedy rebuild at St Columb's Cathedral.

The timetable for the day is as follows:

2.30-3:30pm: **'Open Console' in Christ Church, Infirmary Road.**
A chance to play the Wells-Kennedy tracker instrument built in 2000.

3.30-4.30pm: **Buxtehude recital in Christ Church, Infirmary Road.** An informal recital of organ works by Dietrich Buxtehude (who celebrates his 300th birthday this year) performed by local USOC members.

4.30-5.30pm: Visit to **Saint Eugene's RC Cathedral** (beside Christ Church) to sample some choral music in the Cathedral's wonderful acoustic.

Dinner in a city centre hotel

7:15pm: **Pre-concert talk** on Elgar's only visit to Ireland in October 1932 by Elgar Society member Wesley McCann (in the Chapter House, St Columb's Cathedral).

8.00pm: **Celebrity Organ Recital** in St Columb's Cathedral by David Briggs. Programme to include Elgar's Organ Sonata.

If you would like to share a lift from Belfast to Londonderry, please register your interest by contacting Ian Mills on 07751 859945, or by email organist@stcolumbscathedralchoir.com.

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St Peter's Cathedral and USOC Saturday Mass series continues ...

June 16 th	Renaissance – Vienne Messe Solonelle
September 8 th	Cadenza
October 13 th	Methodist College, Belfast
November 17 th	Cathedral Voices, Durufle Requiem (Requiem Mass)
December 8 th	tba

CARLO CURLEY'S ORGAN 'EXTRAVANZA' BALLYWILLAN PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH PORTRUSH CO. ANTRIM

Friday 10th August 2007 at 8.00 pm
Details from the Church Office 028 7082 2612

The 5th Annual Summer Concert

The Cathedral Choir reaches the milestone of the 5th Annual Summer Concert, and we would be delighted if you would join us for this concert and celebration, and help to raise money for the Belfast Cathedral Choir Association Choral Awards fund by purchasing your ticket on the door.

(£10 and £8 concessions, including refreshment)

**Wednesday 27th June at 8pm
St Anne's Cathedral, Belfast**

Including a performance of the 'Missa Brevis' by Kenneth Leighton

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Vacant Consoles

Stay up to date with local Organists posts at www.usoc.org.uk

Website

Don't forget to stay up to date on the web - www.usoc.org.uk

CDS

CREATION and other CDs by Belfast Cathedral Choir, Ecclesium and Philip Stopford continue to be available at the Welcome Desk in St Anne's Cathedral, which is open between 10am and 4pm Monday to Saturday. Alternatively you can purchase the Creation CD by sending a cheque for £12 (including P&P), made payable to ecclesium.co.uk, to; ECCLESIUM, 69 Connsbrook Avenue, Belfast, BT4 1JW. The website has also been recently updated with more new compositions available to order. Thank you.

Visiting Choirs

St Anne's Cathedral has a number of Sundays available in July and August for Visiting Choirs to come and sing for the Eucharist and Choral Evensong. Also the weeks immediately following Christmas and Easter are available, as are some half term weekends. Please do get in touch with Philip Stopford if your choir would be interested in performing. music@belfastcathedral.org

BBC Radio Ulster

On Sunday 10th June at 8pm, eight voice group Melisma can be heard on BBC Radio Ulster performing on the Sounds Classical Programme. The programme includes Stanford's The Bluebird and Whitacre's Sleep.

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USOC 2007 Programme

- 15th Sept Choir training event with Paul Spicer;
 Methodist College, Belfast.
 Non-members to be invited
- 27th Oct Members' Recital in St George's P C, Belfast
 including Charles Harrison, Nigel McClintock (organ) and the
 choir of St George's.
- 17th Nov Hollywood Music Festival.
 Inaugural organ classes organised by USOC

Any items of interest or news, or church posts you wish to advertise, should be sent to me at music@belfastcathedral.org or Director of Music, Belfast Cathedral, Donegall Street, Belfast, BT1 2HB. Thank you. Philip Stopford, Hon.Sec.