

Reformed character

It is the same age as the organ in the Royal Festival Hall, but couldn't be more different. **David Ponsford** argues that the newly restored instrument in London's Dutch Church deserves more recognition. PHOTOS BY DAVID PONSFORD



The 1954 Van Leeuwen/Flentrop organ in the Dutch Reformed 'Mother Church', founded in London in 1550

The City of London's Dutch Church in Austin Friars is famous outside its immediate surrounds. Edward VI founded it in 1550 as the 'Mother Church' of all the Dutch Reformed churches in the Netherlands, its original purpose being to allow Protestant refugees from the Low Countries to worship. The present building dates from 1950 and replaces the gothic church of the Augustinian Friars (known as the 'Westminster Abbey of the City', because of the large number of beautiful statues and tombs) that was completely destroyed in 1940. The two-manual and pedal organ was built in 1954 by Willem van Leeuwen of Leiderdorp to the specification of Dr M.A. Vente, and has 26 speaking stops. It was extensively restored by Flentrop of Zaandam in 1994-95 and again this year, following a refurbishment of the church.

Perched high on the north wall, the organ now speaks effortlessly into the body of the church, which has had all carpets and pews removed, revealing an uninterrupted space of tiled floor, stone walls and slightly domed ceiling, and giving a reverberation time of about three seconds. Unfettered by the perceived needs of the Anglican choral tradition, the Dutch Church's musical needs are primarily improvisations, metrical psalms, hymns and voluntaries. This is a fine example of a small organ whose 26 stops can be combined in innumerable combinations, and the range of tonal colours is vast. Heard from the church, each rank of pipes has a full and clear quality; there are no shrinking violets or overtly bombastic effects. I was amazed that the brilliant-sounding plenum consists of just three stops: the Hoofdwerk Prestant 8, Octaaf 4 and the IV-VI rank Mixtur, now underpinned by a Pedal 8 Trompet (in addition to the Pedal plenum) that replaced the previous Roerschalmey 4. The HW Prestant and Octaaf have a robust but singing character, and the flutes gently

fill the space with clarity. With the added HW Trompet 8, the organ is as full and dramatic as the repertoire requires.

Some of the stop combinations are both unexpected and beautiful. The RP Dulciana with quintadenas and flutes in various combinations create beautiful solo melodies in, for example, Heinrich Scheidemann and Sweelinck. J.G. Walther's *Concerto del Sigr. Meck* sounds effective, with only the HW Principals 8 and 4 against the RP flutes; and the sesquialtera is beautifully voiced for projecting the cantus firmus melodies in chorale preludes. Barely audible from the console, the tremulant is wonderfully subtle, enhancing the tone quality of the relevant stops without drawing attention to itself as a mechanical device. Other combinations worthy of note are HW Prestant 8 + RP Quintadena 8, HW Prestant 8 and Spitzgamba 8 (which combine almost as a double ranked 'Principal'), RP Holpijp 8, Roerfluit 4, Nasard $1\frac{1}{3}$, HW Kromhoorn 16, Roerfluit 8 (played as a solo one octave higher), and the RP Principal 4 (played as 8ft one octave lower) – one of the most beautiful sounds on the organ.

The mechanical action is precise, yet quite deep, encouraging the player to empathise with the depth of sound. Touch sensitivity and a gentle note release create the opportunity for a wide variety of phrasing and articulation. The recent restoration saw the replacement of the



From its position, the organ speaks effortlessly into the church, now that the carpet and pews have been removed

A note from the builder

When we were asked in 1994 to restore the organ that was built in 1954 by Willem van Leeuwen, we approached the organ as a modern monument. We were convinced that the original concept deserved to be respected. The layout of the organ was sound, but the execution was poor on various points: valves made of fibre, a primitive electro-pneumatic stop-action, a bad spring-slider system and an unreliable key-action. The scaling of the pipes was investigated and judged to be surprisingly good for an organ built in the 1950s, and much more consistent with historic traditions than most other organs built at the time.

In 1995 the focus was on technical restoration and careful re-voicing. Recent work has brought the organ to a higher level still, by installing new valves, new sliders and a reliable action. The re-voicing was done with respect for the existing material; in the higher regions cut-ups were corrected and reed tongues were replaced, resonators were lengthened and the wind supply in the boots was considerably improved. In 2003 a new 8ft Pedal Trumpet was made

instead of the 4ft Schalmey, the new stop being scaled throughout after Van Leeuwen. In 2011 a new wooden Pedal 16ft Subbass replaced the very narrow-scaled conical Subbass that didn't work. Because of the changed acoustics in the church in 2013, the scaling of the principal stops from 2ft upwards had to be reconsidered. The very narrow scaling in the treble, previously acceptable, became very prominent and quite unacceptable. Experience with other Van Leeuwen organs had taught us that shifting the pipes up one place at various points in the treble gave a much better scaling. This would allow the mixtures to speak more naturally and create a much better blend in the total sound. This was completed in spring 2014, together with a total cleaning of the organ.

The present instrument proves that the approach of respecting the original concept, and the solving of technical problems, is worthy of exploration. Instead of throwing the organ away, which was seriously considered, the organ has been improved by retaining the initial concept and saving most of the valuable original material.

Frits Elshout, General Director, Flentrop Orgelbouw



The 26 stops offer a vast range of tonal colours

The Dutch Church, Austin Friars, City of London

WILLEM VAN LEEUWEN (1954);

REST. FLENTROP ORGELBOUW (1994, 2014)

HOOFDWERK

Prestant	8
Roerfluit	8
Spitsgamba	8
Octaaf	4
Baarpijp	4
Mixtur	IV-VI
Sesquialter	II
Kromhoorn	16
Trompet	8

RUGPOSITIEF

Quintadeen	8
Holpijp	8
Prestant	4
Roerfluit	4
Octaaf	2
Nasard	1 ¹ / ₃
Scherp	IV
Dulciaan	8
Tremulant	

PEDAAL

Subbass	16
Prestant	8
Bourdon	8
Octaaf	4
Vlakfluit	2
Ruispyp	V
Bazuin	16
Trumpet	8

Couplers

Rugpositief to Pedaal
Hoofdwerk to Pedaal
Rugpositief to Hoofdwerk

Compass: C-a3 and pedal C-f1

Wind pressure: 65mm

Temperament : Neidhardt (1724)

Accessories

Free composition pedal over Pedaal (duplicate)

Free composition piston under Rugpositief Tremulant pedal for RP.

◀ original (and noisy) electro-pneumatic stop action with direct electric (carried out for Flentrop by Gary Owens of GO organs); the original *Vrei Combination* system was retained, which incorporates the unusual double drawstop system.

The organ is now tuned in Neidhardt (1724) temperament. This spreads the impure fifths over eight intervals leaving four perfect fifths, so that while no key is unplayable, all keys have their own unique character. This system results in six sizes of major third: four purer than equal temperament in C, D, F and G major, two exactly equally tempered thirds in A and B flat major, and six very slightly greater than equal temperament on C sharp, E flat, E, F sharp, G sharp and B. Hence, modulation from keys with few accidentals to keys with more accidentals is heard as an emotional experience, suiting the baroque repertoire wonderfully. Such is the subtlety of Neidhardt that no key or repertoire need be excluded – works from the 17th to the 21st centuries all sound effective.

This beautiful organ dates from the same year as the Harrison & Harrison instrument in the Royal Festival Hall, and it is salutary to consider the contrasts between them: gross size, action, tonal aesthetics, tuning system, and acoustical ambience. Essentially, they come from two different traditions, and while the RFH organ is known throughout the UK and is rightly celebrated, the Dutch organ deserves significant notice too. Far from being an individual ‘period-piece’, it is part of an historic heritage that has its roots in the baroque, is extended right up to the present day and will evidently continue. The Dutch Church organ is a perfect example of an instrument of medium size with a multitude of tonal colours, whose speaking quality is served by excellent acoustics, and which serves both its liturgical and purely musical functions perfectly. ■
With thanks to the Dutch Church organist, David Titterington.

David Ponsford is an organist, harpsichordist and musicologist. Associate lecturer at Cardiff University, he is the author of French Organ Music in the Reign of Louis XIV (Cambridge University Press, 2011) and is recording a series of CDs on French historic organs for Nimbus.