

Simon Clark interviewed by Juliette Adams

St Mary at Stoke Church Hall

Saturday 18 January 2025

A dozen members were present for this most interesting afternoon, the main purpose of which was to hear about Council member Simon Clark's experience of taking his FRCO during the recent Covid-19 pandemic – at the ripe old age of 47! We also enjoyed some delicious refreshments prepared and served by SOA Secretary and President-Elect Stephen Hogger. Many thanks to him and also to James Crowe, who booked the hall at Stoke Church for us.

After some preliminary remarks and words of introduction, Juliette (another Council member and former SOA president) began by asking Simon about his current work and other musical activities. We learned that he has a busy career as a piano teacher and composer (writing organ, piano and vocal/choral music for British and American publishers including Kevin Mayhew), is the organist and choirmaster at St Thomas's Church in Ipswich, and is studying with the Open University for an MA in 'Music and Digital Humanities'.

Juliette then invited Simon to outline his musical background. Like many of us, he started by picking out tunes on the nearest available keyboard instrument (in his case a Bontempi reed organ) before eventually proceeding to piano lessons with a couple of local teachers – the second of whom was decidedly better than the first, which took him up to Grade 5. Whilst a pupil at his Roman Catholic secondary school he began to play the organ for services at his local RC church, and by the age of 13 was covering most of them including weddings and funerals. At his first-ever funeral, he told us, he was unsure what to play as the coffin entered the church, and settled on the *Marche Funèbre* from Chopin's Piano Sonata No. 2 – much to the consternation of the mourners and congregation!

At school he started to compose, and sent numerous pieces unsolicited to Kevin Mayhew before finally being commissioned by him to contribute to a volume of organ music. After A-levels at Lewes College near Brighton, he studied composition for a year at the Royal Academy of Music and then Classics at St Mary's University College, Twickenham. During this time he took his ARCO, played the organ at Farm Street Church in Mayfair and did a lot of piano teaching.

Juliette then asked Simon why he decided to do the FRCO when he did – in early 2020, more than two decades after obtaining his Associateship of the Royal College of Music – and his answer could probably be summed up by the phrase 'it's now or never', with the specific impetus being an RCO Study Day in 2019 led by Stephen Farr (the College's Chief Examiner). He then went on to describe in some detail the structure of the FRCO exam, which comprises:

- a 35-minute recital of two pieces selected from three groups (each representing a different historical period), plus a piece from an all-J.S. Bach group;
- Four tests, namely sight-reading, transposition (of a short piece), score-reading (in five parts), and EITHER the realisation of a figuredbass OR a 3-minute improvisation on one of several given themes;
- A written paper in harmony and counterpoint, consisting of a fugal exposition, harmonic analysis of two musical extracts, and EITHER the realisation of a figured bass OR the arranging of an orchestral passage for organ;
- An essay paper on a set work (or works) and a set topic in the history of organ music, followed by a written test of aural perception using a recorded extract from a piece of music.

In other words, a longer and more difficult version of the ARCO exam!

For his recital Simon chose from the syllabus Bach's Prelude in B minor (BWV 544), Byrd's Fantasia in A minor and the Sonata in G minor by the Swedish composer Oskar Lindberg. Because of the pandemic, Simon was obliged to submit a video of his recital to the examiners, recorded in a single continuous 'take'. The four tests were emailed to him at 5pm one day and a similarly continuous recording of them had to be submitted no later than 5pm the following day; the written papers also had to be completed and submitted within a 24-hour timeframe. Although these arrangements gave Simon the freedom to make as many recordings as he wished and choose the best ones, with far more time to master the tests (and, for that matter, to hone his answers to the written papers) than would be possible in a live exam, the standard required was correspondingly higher. Indeed, he thought a live exam would probably have been less stressful given the ever-present risk of interruptions (the recordings were made at St Andrew's Church, Rushmere St Andrew) and technology issues, not to mention his own perfectionism.

Simon passed everything first time around, except the recital component. Before re-taking it, and at his partner's suggestion, he contacted all three of his recital examiners – Stephen Farr, Margaret Phillips and Daniel Moulton – for advice/feedback, with Daniel being by far the most helpful. Over the course of several lengthy lessons via Zoom, he gave Simon much valuable advice on the 'historically informed performance' style (HIP) required these days by the examiners, with the result that Simon passed at the second attempt and received his diploma a few weeks later at a ceremony in London.

Simon's main piece of advice to organists contemplating the FRCO (who of course would need to have obtained their ARCO first) was to press on with it as soon as possible after passing the latter exam in order to build on the skills and confidence gained thereby. (He used the analogy of climbing Everest: immediately post-ARCO, one is already halfway up the mountain, but a substantial delay before taking the FRCO puts one more or less back

at base camp.) He also mentioned that since the pandemic, the written papers have to be submitted online, while candidates can choose whether to do the recital and tests in person, or remotely via recordings. Finally – and in some ways most importantly – he emphasised that there was no substitute for careful preparation and many hours of diligent practice!

Alan Loader (with thanks to Nicholas Jardine)