



The Snetzler Organ of St Anne's Church, Belfast

Note: At the end of this little article there's a post-script which details Captain C J Brennan's life and adds further information about St Anne's first organ and J T May's choir in the 1850s.

The new organ for St Anne's, one of the last to be built by John Snetzler (1710-1785), was situated on the church's West Gallery and dedicated in a service on Sunday 24 June 1781 in the presence of the town's Sovereign and Burgesses. The first organist was William Ware (from 1781 to 1825) who was a product of the musical establishment of Armagh Cathedral, raising the likelihood that he would surely have known the Bunting family, prior to Edward's apprenticeship.

Organists at St Anne's after Ware were John Willis (1825-1848), James Thompson May (1848-1862) and Henry A. Wood (1863-1873).

Details of the organ's specification rely on an account by the next organist, Isaac Waugh Nicholl (organist from 1873 to 1904 when the parish church was demolished and the new cathedral, built around the old church, opened).



RH illustration from *Belfast Telegraph*,
Wednesday, 14 October 1908, page 6.

'The following is a description of the old Snetzler organ as I found it in 1873', wrote Nicholl in *The Organ*, No.55, p. 164 (and here quoted from Alan Barnes's 1982 University of Leicester Ph.D thesis, *Johann Schnetzler (John Snetzler): An eighteenth century organ builder.*):

Two keyboards: top keyboard 'great', lower keyboard 'swell'.
Large keys black, small keys very dirty yellowish white.
Square drawstop rods; names altogether obliterated off the knobs.
Stops acted only on half the keyboard, so that when you drew a stop on the right-hand side you had to draw a corresponding stop on the left-hand side.

It was a G organ: lowest note on the manuals and pedals, G; next note, instead of being G sharp, was A; next note C.

GREAT	SWELL	PEDAL ORGAN
Open Diapason Small Open Diapason to tenor C Stopped Diapason Clarabella to middle c* Principal Twelfth Fifteenth Sesquialtera 3 ranks	Open Diapason Stopped Diapason Flute Principal Oboe	1 [stop] 16'

The Great organ was much as Snetzler left it – of exquisite beauty, fullness and richness of tone.

I am not sure the Swell was Snetzler's work. I have a suspicion that it was an afterthought, but I cannot tell. The wind pressure was 2½ in. – metal [pipes] very heavy and soft; wood pipes most exquisitely made.

* Of course there would have been some alterations over the organ's first 92 years, and this Clarabella stop was almost certainly a mid-century addition, or from c.1825 onwards.

Page 2 of the *Belfast Commercial Chronicle* for Saturday, 20 September 1806, just two weeks after the inauguration of Belfast's second organ (in the Second Presbyterian Church, Rosemary Lane), carried this advertisement about St Anne's:

NOTICE

TO THE PARISHIONERS OF BELFAST.

On Account of some necessary Repairs on the Organ, and in the Church of Belfast,
DIVINE SERVICE will not be celebrated there on Sunday the 21st – nor on Sunday the
28th instant.

Belfast, Sept. 18.

It's surely most likely that these 1806 'Repairs' were by Stephen White. Perhaps if the Swell was an addition, this was the builder responsible. The specification would seem to fit White's normal plan.

As Nicholls stated, his account of the organ was a remembrance from 1873. Two years later, 1875, the instrument underwent major work by William Hill & Son, including many additions to the Swell. However, the gentleman who funded that rebuild stipulated that the original Snetzler case should remain intact.

After the demolition of the old parish church, its Snetzler organ briefly found a home on a gallery in the new cathedral's north aisle. When the cathedral's new Harrison & Harrison organ arrived in 1907, the Snetzler instrument was bought for £250 by Rev. Joseph Stewart for the Clarence Place YMCA Hall, just off Donegall Square.

Sad to relate, in the 1950s the Snetzler organ was sold for scrap to Messrs. Evans & Barr.

In 1908/09, 'Rathcol' (W.B. Reynolds), music critic of the *Belfast Telegraph*, wrote a two-part series about the Snetzler instrument. The first article, 'Rathcol', *St. Anne's Organ, A Historic Instrument, Belfast Telegraph*, Wednesday, 14 October 1908, page 6, contained two line-drawing illustrations (the organ, as above, and its first organist, William Ware), though the piece itself was just an amusing and imaginative portrait of Ware – more witty word-spinning than real fact.

Much of the second article was taken up with the life of Edward Bunting, mainly culled from Petrie's 1847 article, but with some additional facts about the musical life of the 19th century parish church.

This is that article with most of the central Bunting part omitted:

Belfast Telegraph, Monday 18 January 1909, page 6

OLD ST. ANNE'S ORGAN

A RETROSPECT.

(By Rathcol.) [W.B. Reynolds]

(Concluding Article.)

In 1784 occurred the event that makes the old Snetzler organ an instrument of absolutely unique interest to the music-lover. In that year William Ware went to London on business and a lad of ten or eleven years named Edward Bunting, who was afterwards fated to be the means of collecting and recording a number of beautiful Irish melodies, took Ware's place at the organ in St. Anne's Church in his absence. Bunting was born of an English father and an Irish mother in Armagh in 1773. The mother was a descendant of a chief of the Hy Niall race, lords in Tyrone.

He probably owed his appearance and eating capacity to the father, a Derbyshire engineer in charge of a Dungannon colliery, and his taste for liquor and music to his mother's side. The father died when Edward was but a child. The boy had sung in Armagh Cathedral (Protestant), then went for two years to study with an older brother, Anthony, an organist in Drogheda. He came to Belfast as temporary substitute for Mr. "Weir" as the Dictionary of National Biography, Vol. VII., and an article in the Dublin University Magazine, Vol. XXIX., call Ware. And he gave so much satisfaction to Ware and the Church people that he was articulated to the former for a period to depute at the organ, and teach Ware's pupils throughout the district. Being a mere small boy, some of the grown young lady pupils would occasionally rebel against his somewhat impatient tuition. And one day a certain Miss Stewart, of Welmot [Wilmont House, Dunmurry], in County Down, got up and well boxed his ears. Even this salutary experience does not seem to have improved his temper in later years, when he is described as "clever and handsome, a hard drinker and dissipator, wayward, hot-tempered, and idle."

It was only in 1792 that Bunting come into his kingdom. After that he was no longer "idle" at any rate. That year, saw the historic assemblage of Irish harpers in Belfast on the 11th, 12th and 13th July. Certain literarv and benevolent spirits had organised this festival ...

... In its day Mr. May's choir was famous in Belfast. It consisted in woman sopranos and contraltos in surplices, and the usual tenors and basses; at this period the boy trebles and altos were found impracticable, but the artistic results obtained from the mixed choir must have been of a very high order, the quality of the choir being quite fresh in the memories of some gentlemen of today.

Some of the names of members of that choir may prove interesting. Chief among the sopranos was Miss Baird (who afterwards became Mrs McQuitty). Mr. Brown was a counter tenor, Mr. Johnstone was a tenor, Mr. Jack Clarke was a bass, Mr. William S. Baird, afterwards J.P., and one of the

founders of the *Belfast Evening Telegraph*, and Mr. Wm. Lynass were also basses, the former an excellent deep bass. These names constituted at its prime the main membership of the famous May choir of St. Anne's Church. The Baird family appears to have been generally very musical, for we find that Messrs. George, Gideon, and Wm. Baird, along with Mr. Henry Gordon (a male alto) constituted a quartet which went regularly to the little church attached to the mansion of the Dufferins at Clandeboye.

At St. Anne's at this time, and even later, there was a Corporation pew. The Marquis of Donegall's pew was under the organ, and curtained off inside the entrance doors. Originally, the writer is informed, this pew was where the recent organ gallery stood, while the organ and choir were accommodated in a gallery or "loft" immediately above that, under the roof. Mr. May's choir, however, occupied the recent organ gallery, and the disposition of the voices was tenors and basses in the front to right and left (looking from the altar) respectively, sopranos and contraltos were in the recesses to right and left of the organ case, and behind the men. This disposition, it will be seen, is the reverse of the usual except, of course, where the double choir cathedral arrangement is adopted.

In Mr. Nicholl's time the writer remembers very distinctly the beautiful choir and the reverent and religious character of the whole musical service, which was one of the treats for a stranger to Belfast at that time, not so very long ago. Mr. Nicholl resigned in 1901 when the Cathedral was opened, and Mr. C. J. Brennan, Mus.Bac., F.R.C.O., &c., accepted the appointment, and in conjunction with the Rev. J. A. Carey, B.A., instituted a cathedral service with a choir of women, boys and men. Great things have already been done with this fine choir, and greater still are expected. Mr. Brennan is the Belfast municipal organist, and very popular in that position; he is also conductor to the City Amateur Operatic Society, one of the most thriving societies of its class anywhere.

As a final word about the old St. Anne's organ, the writer understands that it was due to a suggestion of Mr. John W. Storey, B.A., general secretary to the C.I.Y.M.S. that the old organ was reserved to the Church of Ireland, and transferred to the Clarence Place Hall. Sir Thomas Drew [architect of the new cathedral] and others were averse from its removal from the Cathedral, fearing it would be thus lost as an archaeologically interesting instrument, but Mr. Storey's suggestion so generously made practicable by the Rev. Canon Joseph A. Stewart's munificence happily did away with these misgivings, and now it remains housed on Church property [Alas, no longer. Sir Thomas Drew must be turning in his grave!].

The writer has gratefully to acknowledge the following for help and references:— Wm. Ware's Journal (Account Book 1780-1785) in the Linen Hall Library, a typewritten copy of the original now in Mr. Isaac Ward's possession. To Mr. James H. Neill, Mr. J.W. Storey, B.A., and especially to Mr. Isaac W. Nicholl, whose enthusiasm for the whole matter was most helpful ...

David Byers, 11 March 2018, Belfast

POST-SCRIPT

Belfast News-Letter, Monday 15 March 1954, page 4

50 YEARS OF CHURCH MUSIC CAPTAIN BRENNAN LOOKS BACK CATHEDRAL CHOIR

Fifty years ago, when he was 27, Captain C. J. Brennan was appointed organist and choir-master at the Cathedral Church of St Anne, Belfast, and on Friday evening next he will be the guest at dinner in the Grand Central Hotel, Belfast, of the Cathedral Past Choristers' Association. Three bishops —

the Bishop of Meath, the Bishop of Connor and the Bishop of Down and Dromore — together with some of the city's leading public figures, headed by the Lord Mayor, will attend in his honour.

Capt. Brennan's appointment was in February, 1904. In the following June the nave of the new cathedral was consecrated and in the meantime he had prepared the musical portion of the special service held on that occasion and collected and trained a full orchestra and augmented choir, which he conducted at the ceremony. Before the nave became available for public worship he had led the music, on a harmonium, at the last services of the old St. Anne's congregation. These were held in the Clarence Place Hall.

In his 50 years Captain Brennan has only missed some half dozen services through illness, except for the period during the first world war when he was serving with the Royal Irish Fusiliers, and only about four other services when he went to other churches to open a new organ!

GALWAY FAMILY

Captain Brennan is from an old Galway family, which settled in the New World. An uncle, Mr. William Brennan, became manager of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and made frequent visits to Europe to engage such artists as Melba and Paderewski for concerts in the United States. Charles John Brennan was born at Gosport, England, in 1876, and at the age of 15 was appointed organist at Clifton Parish Church, Bedfordshire. At 18 he obtained the diploma of an Associate of the Royal College of Organists, and in 1897 was made a Fellow of the College.

Though he is best known as a church organist, his other activities in the world of music have been many and important. A few years after he became organist of St. Anne's Cathedral, he was appointed city organist in succession to the late Dr. W. G. Price, who left for a similar position in Melbourne, Australia.

Captain Brennan has also been conductor of many choirs in Belfast, including the Ulster Male Choir, the Queen's Island Operatic Society, and Belfast City Amateur Operatic Society. The City Operatic Society was in existence from 1907 to 1913 and during those years built up an excellent reputation which spread far beyond Ulster. On the strength of a performance of *La Boheme*, permission was granted it to perform *Madam Butterfly* and, although it closed down before it could produce this opera, it was the first amateur society in the world to be given such permission.

ORGAN RECITALS

For years Captain Brennan conducted the Professional Musicians' Orchestra, which was made up largely of players in the theatre orchestras. This orchestra was suspended by the first World War, and because of the development of the B.B.C. it was not revived afterwards. He was also official accompanist until 1912, and, later — until a few years ago — organist at Philharmonic concerts in the city. As city organist he used to give Saturday recitals in the Ulster Hall, which at the time were well attended, but with the coming of the cinema organ the public for serious organ music declined, and about 1938 the recitals were discontinued.

Captain Brennan is president of the Ulster Society of Organists and Choirmasters. He was elected a member of this society in 1918, at its foundation, and notified of his election while he was serving in France.

When he first took over his appointment as organist of Belfast Cathedral (from Mr. Isaac W. Nicholl) the choir was small, and the vicar choral, the Rev. J. A. Carey (later Canon Carey of Bangor) was training a dozen or so boys for incorporation into the choir. From that nucleus, however, he has built up one of the best church choirs in Ireland, with 20 boys and 32 adults, four of whom were boy choristers previously. At present he has about three dozen probationers, and has never had any trouble throughout the years in getting a full complement for the choir, either boys or adults.



For the first few years the organ in the new Cathedral was the old Snetzler from St. Anne's Church. This was replaced in 1907 by a three-manual instrument of 48 speaking stops, and was the first important addition to the equipment of the cathedral. When it is moved to its permanent position in the south transept a fourth manual will be added to it.

MEMORABLE SERVICES

Many special services on many different occasions have been held in the Cathedral, including services of thanksgiving, to mark coronations and victories, days of national prayer, consecrations of Bishops and of various additions to the Cathedral. Two services are outstanding in Capt. Brennan's mind.

One was the dedication of the Pillar of Music in November, 1927, when Dr. Sidney Nicholson, formerly organist of Westminster Abbey, and founder of the Royal Society of Church Music (and brother of an architect of the Cathedral [1924-48] — Sir Charles Nicholson) was organist and preacher, and Captain Brennan conducted the choir.

The other was the funeral in October, 1986, of Lord Carson, who was buried in the Cathedral by authority of a special Act of Parliament. Earth from each of the Six Counties was strewn on the coffin and the tomb in the south aisle is the only one in the Cathedral.

Captain Brennan took his degree of Mus.Bac. at Durham University, is the holder of an honorary M.A. from Queen's University, Belfast, and was honoured with an O.B.E. in 1949. Church choir singing in Belfast has vastly improved over the past 20 or 30 years and the present high standard is due in no small way to the work of Mr. Brennan. It is this service to the city as much as the completion of his fifty years as organist in the Cathedral which will be celebrated on Friday evening.