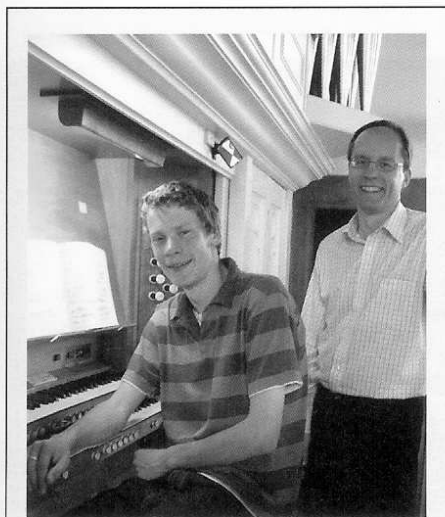


Keyboard specialist Terence Charlston and his organ student Alexander Rolton discuss their working relationship. Interviews by Rhian Morgan



Terence Charlston (above, right) is a harpsichordist, organist and chamber musician. In 20 years in the profession, he has worked in music education, publishing, church music and conducting. He studied piano and organ as a child and was an organ scholar at Oxford and at Westminster Cathedral. He lives in Harpenden with his wife, a research scientist, and their two children. He teaches piano, harpsichord and organ, privately and at the Royal Academy of Music.

17-year-old **Alexander Rolton** lives in Hemel Hempstead and attends the Rudolf Steiner School in Kings Langley, Hertfordshire. He learns the organ with Terence Charlston and attends the Junior Department of the Royal Academy of Music, where he studies cello with Robert Max. He also enjoys mountain biking and football, and has built himself a motor boat. He plans a career in music and enjoys improvising, composing, jazz piano, playing cello in the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain, and 'trying to break all rules and limitations in music making'.

ALEXANDER'S VIEW

Why did you choose the organ?

As a child I was overwhelmed by the power and volume of the organ. To be in control of it was a dream and because I'd been playing the piano all my life, I thought, correctly, I wouldn't have to start from scratch. I now spend many a happy hour improvising or playing pieces when I should be doing homework.

What is your biggest challenge in learning the instrument?

Without doubt it is playing organs built for little people... I'm about 6 ft 4.

What are the best aspects of lessons with Terry?

Terry's my second teacher and I've been with him for five years. He does what anyone teaching me has to do... slow me down. I normally become very irritable when people try this but Terry actually succeeds. Learning with him is truly inspiring.

What's the most important thing Terry has said about your performance?

After an organ recital I did, Terry said I'd 'listened well to the building'. Thinking about this I realised that I do subconsciously differentiate between practising at home and playing in a church. There is always a moment of suspense as I play the first note of a piece and then decide when to play the next. This can call for some very quick thinking!

Is there anything he's particularly good at explaining or demonstrating to you?

Terry has such a deep knowledge of how a piece is built, he has a lot of insight into the music. It sometimes seems like an overwhelming amount of information but when he demonstrates it, it always makes sense and is very inspiring.

Do you perceive any particular difficulties associated with doing so well at a relatively young age?

Apart from the social difference – which I don't take any notice of anyway – of not being that interested in mainstream pop music and devoting my musical life to mainly classical music, I don't perceive any difficulties at all. Many classical musicians these days who start young will have to go through a stage between that of 'My mum forces me to have violin lessons' and 'I am now a serious musician' in which they will have to put up with some taunting from their peers. I was lucky enough never to have had the former stage and one quickly develops techniques of avoiding this taunting.

TERENCE'S VIEW

What are Alexander's strengths?

Alexander is an enthusiastic musician and a natural performer. He has a love of the organ, and its sound world fires his imagination. Apart from learning pieces, he enjoys improvisation and has the improviser's gift of being able to express his musical ideas spontaneously. As a cellist and composer too, his understanding is broadened and this informs his interpretation at the organ.

What does he find most challenging?

The same issues challenge Alexander as any other player. Aside from the music, there is a lot of technology to control: playing with your

feet, choosing appropriate sounds from rows of stops and dealing with an acoustic. Incredible as it may seem, not all churches are as welcoming towards serious youngsters as you might imagine and finding enough hours at a good organ can be a real problem for a young player.

How have you worked to surmount the technical challenges Alexander faces?

We work a lot at pedalling and co-ordination. Practising on the organ involves teaching your hands and feet an elaborate dance – I think of it as slow motion 'choreography' – and one must patiently learn how to move fluently and accurately between notes and positions. Without fluency of movement the player cannot convey the true pulse of the music or breathe at the ends of phrases. Sadly, the organ has something of a bad press with non-organists. Although this is largely undeserved, unmusical organ playing is desperately dull to listen to and perpetuates the idea that organists are stuck in the loft playing only to themselves. By encouraging a good touch and rhythmic vitality, I hope my pupils will not fall into this trap.

What do you look for in repertoire?

The core repertoire is J S Bach. I think we work on at least one passage from a prelude and fugue or chorale of Bach in every lesson. With Bach, everything is there in the music, you just have to be able play it! I like my pupils to develop strong tastes in music and to know what they like. With Alexander this has included more recent organ music. The French organists of the 19th and 20th centuries have proved a rich vein to tap. Their music is always well written with a wonderful palette of sound-colours and is often exciting to play.

I think there is a danger for keyboard players to be daunted by the sheer quantity and quality of their repertoire and hide in the comparative safety of the pieces they play. A broad knowledge can only be a good thing, so my advice is to play everything, then choose the music that speaks to you. As a child, I was blessed with good sight-reading and I had an acquaintance with most of the major repertoire from an early age. On the concert platform, however, I am very selective and try to play only the music that I feel completely at home in. I am still on the look-out for new pieces and I try to encourage inquisitiveness in others.

TEACHING TIPS

Listen carefully to your playing, especially when practising. It seems an obvious remark but, in practice, it is surprisingly difficult to do.

www.charlston.freeserve.co.uk