

St John the Evangelist RC Church

Duncan Terrace, Islington, London N1

Specification of the 1963 J W Walker organ

Swell

Open Diapason	8
Chimney Flute	8
Viola da Gamba	8
Celeste	8
Principal	4
Wald Flute	4
Nazard	2 2/3
Octave	2
Mixture 22-26-29-33	IV
Bassoon	16
Trumpet	8
Vox Humana	8
Oboe (via thumb piston)	8
Zink	4
Tremulant	

Great

Quintaton	16
Principal	8
Nachthorn	8
Spitzflute	8
Octave	4
Nason Flute	4
Twelfth	2 2/3
Fifteenth	2
Tertian 19-24	II
Furniture 19-22-26-29	IV
Trumpet	8
Great Sub Octave	
Swell to Great	
Positive to Great	
Gt & Ped. combinations coupled	

Ruckpositiv

Stopped Diapason	8
Principal	4
Koppel Flute	4
Quint	2 2/3
Block Flute	2
Tierce	1 3/5
Scharf 29-33-36	III
Crumhorn	8
Tremulant	
Swell to Positive	
Zimbelstern (via thumb & toe piston)	

Pedal

Open Wood	16
Subbass	16
Quintaton (Gt)	16
Octave	8
Bass Flute	8
Fifteenth	4
Nachthorn (Gt)	4
Mixture 22-26-29	III
Oliphant	32
Bombarde	16
Bassoon (Sw)	16
Posaune	8
Schalmei	4
Swell to Pedal	
Great to Pedal	
Positive to Pedal	

Wind pressure 3" to 3 1/2" wg. Electro-pneumatic action.

61 manual notes & 32 pedals. Classically voiced flues voiced by Dennis Thurlow and with reeds containing French shallots voiced by Arthur Jones.

The organ dates from 1963, and received a BIOS certificate of historic importance in January 2007, as an outstanding instrument of its period. The Organ was built in consultation with Shaun McCarthy who was organist at the time. Douglas Mews, then organist of Southwark RC Cathedral, gave the opening recital in February 1963.

It was conceived in what was deemed at that time to be the style of instruments found in Northern Europe. It has one of the first few Rückpostiven – Positive divisions (i.e., a secondary division in its own case, at the front of the gallery). Traditionally, in England, this was the place for the ‘chair’ or choir organ intended to accompany the choir. Here it is used to solo out lines of music of the north-European repertoire. The rest of the organ was conceived with balanced mixture choruses voiced by Dennis Thurlow who voiced other large instruments of the period including Liverpool RC Cathedral, Blackburn Cathedral, The London Oratory and many more. When coupled, Thurlow’s mixture voicing produces a magnificent bright, translucent, and breathy sound quality. The reeds are French in style. Others involved were Michael Broom, Michael Butler, Keith Bance and Arthur Jones. To some extent, this sound reflected what could be heard abroad, in northern Europe, yet formed a characteristic 1960s sound world. The unforced sound inspired new organ music, by composers such as William Matthias, Malcolm Williamson and Kenneth Leighton, to name just three. Matthias, a lover of the Liverpool Metropolitan Walker organ, was so inspired by it that he wrote many of his organ compositions with the sound of that organ in mind.

St John’s church has had a long and glorious musical tradition beginning in 1850, in the days of Canon Oakley (translator of the famous hymn ‘O come all ye faithful’), when monthly choral and orchestral concerts were given, featuring famous artists such as Vincent and Clara Novello. At this time a small Hill organ was installed in one of the side chapels and this eventually found itself as part of the larger organ now found in Arundel Cathedral, West Sussex. The next instrument here was by Bishop, Starr and Richardson placed at the front of the building to the right of the altar.

The choir was disbanded at the outbreak of the Second World War, but was revived in 1955 by Edward de Rivera, who would boast that a different Mass setting could be heard each week over a three-year cycle. This was when many new works received their first performance, by composers such as John McCabe and Malcolm Williamson. The late Malcolm Williamson, Master of the Queen’s Music, was organist at St John’s in the early 1980’s.

Vatican II saw the disbanding of the choir once more, but thanks to the generosity of the Parish Priest, there has been a professional choir that sings for the Holy Week Triduum and Christmas Midnight Mass when music plays such an important role in the liturgy of the church. I myself was appointed as organist in 1986 and have overseen the gradual restoration of the unique and famous 1963 Walker organ, and the revival and continuation of the organ concert series, which began in the early 1960’s, and now continues from April to September.

The contribution of J. W. Walker & Sons Ltd to the ‘organ reform movement’ can be said to have begun in 1954, when Ralph Downes had a new organ built at the London Oratory.

Walker’s produced a plethora of instruments in the 1960s which reflected the firm’s new ethos and took on board new ideas brought about by the organ reform movement (which had arrived in Britain some thirty years later than in other countries). New materials were

available and used in the building process. Although not all of these proved long-lasting, the drive and vision of the Ruislip firm was laudable. Major instruments from this firm, such as those at Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral, Blackburn Cathedral, Ampleforth College, and St Peter's Clerkenwell. St John the Evangelist was regularly used by the BBC for recordings in the 1960s and 70's. Recordings and broadcasts have been made here by; Simon Preston, Nicolas Kynaston, Flor Peeters, Jane Parker Smith, Dame Gillian Weir, Sir Nicolas Jackson, Jeremy Filsell, The Vasari Singers, The London Oratory Choir, John McGreal, Adrian Gunning, Joanna Paul, Martin Stacey, Jennifer Bate, Tom Winpenny and more recently Thomas Trotter, William Fox.

Adrian Gunning