Field Mice in the Bellows: Reflections of a Rural Musician

MAY MORDAUNT, now director of music at St Kessog's Episcopal Church, Auchterarder, reflects on her baptism of fire as a church organist.

"All you need is a good pair of legs", the lady said during an informal chat in Comrie High Street – as she tried to coax me into playing for a summer Sunday afternoon service in the beautiful little church situated at the top of Glen Artney, above Comrie – the heart of rural Perthshire.

Finger dexterity, reading of music and actual playing of hymns did not seem to feature on the list of questions asked by the 'interview panel': CV was definitely not required!

The one prerequisite was that my legs were strong enough to work the two pedals which kept the bellows filled with air – essential for the organ to operate. During the following week, with more than a little trepidation, I set out on the single track road up Glen Artney and was immediately transfixed by the sheer beauty of God's creation all around. Spectacular scenery, accompanied by absolute tranquillity which seemed to enter my soul. I shall never forget that very first journey 'up the Glen'.

After reading a little poem – inscribed on a seat near the river and car park, written by the school minibus driver who drove the children from the Glen each day into the village, I set off on the short climb up to the church itself. Its simplicity is its charm. What did not hold such charm for me, however, was the instrument perched on the front of the church – in full view of the anticipated congregation – the organ itself. At this stage I had never played an organ before, far less lead a service in praise. In hindsight, perhaps my innocence was a blessing! The good news was that my legs were indeed strong enough to maintain the air pressure required. The bad news was that my fingers all became thumbs and the task ahead the following Sunday was certainly daunting.

However, Sunday came along and I set off in what I thought to be good time for a thorough practice session before the congregation arrived. What I did not anticipate was that the congregation came mainly from Comrie and surrounds and was also making its way up the Glen and I was caught up in the convoy of traffic with no hope of arriving ahead of it. The service itself passed in a blur but I did enjoy the relief at the end of it and also my return journey down the Glen.

When I met that same lady in the village the following year, she too had good and bad news for me. The field mice had eaten the bellows over the winter and the organ was being superseded by an electric keyboard. However, this keyboard was to be stored in a neighbouring farmer's house between services but they had kindly agreed to transport it by Land Rover for the required Sunday. So as the sheep dog jumped out of the back of the vehicle, the keyboard was lifted in and we set off for the church. Although the sound was different, the congregation still sang their hearts out.

Sadly, we moved from Comrie, but only to Auchterarder, and it didn't seem long until I appeared on the rota for services in the neighbouring village of Aberuthven. Here, they didn't care about my legs. They'd just be grateful if I could keep the melody line going.

Rather surprisingly, more rotas seemed to have vacancies around the area and soon it resulted in every Sunday being filled up for me – only each on in a different church. I loved them all – Aberuthven the nearest to me, and St Fillans the furthest. The other little churches very dear to my heart were Trinity Gask, Dunning and Forteviot. This, for me, presented a fresh challenge, a mental one this time, remembering the times of all these different services and also the times when they changed in the summer months.

We all know there is a dearth of church organists these days and a number of organisations are recognising this need and successfully addressing the problem. A couple of the Perth organists decided to put their own house in order. They introduced a training scheme whereby they offer a one-year scholarship to five trainees. Thirty lessons are offered over the year in St John's Kirk, Perth. Perth Presbytery pay for three adults on the scheme and the Gannochy Trust finance two youngsters until they leave school. To date, approximately twenty people have gone through the scheme and many are now playing in the area, either on rotas or in full-time posts. The youngest lad is 16 and has recently achieved his Grade VII Associated Board exam with distinction and now enjoys playing two Sundays in the month in one of the Perth city churches. Next session, they have eight applicants for two places on the scheme. (Thermals are certainly required for lessons and practice sessions!)

Although my one-year stint on the course came to an end a number of years ago, I still continue to have weekly lessons. Without this discipline, I am convinced my practise sessions would dwindle and my playing would regress. Shortly, I hope to embark on the week-long summer school at St Andrews University – once again under extremely fine leadership.

The Scottish Churches Organist Training Scheme (SCOTS) is another excellent way of helping would-be organists on their journey. Three training stages are offered, so that you can be slotted into the stage most appropriate to your needs. Workshops take place 3 or 4 times a year in different parts of Scotland and you are fixed up with an Adviser who will pay a visit to your own particular church. This is invaluable help and I have been greatly inspired by their dedication and leadership. Although I completed the course, I still find that I always gather some bit of knowledge a their training days.

Church organists are solitary in their job and it is invaluable meeting up with like-minded people, hearing that you are not alone with your experiences, good or bad.

Going back to my spell in little rural churches, they all have their very own unique personality. Not only is the early Sunday morning drive uplifting, the actual service is always rewarding and it is good to be updated in their various lives and activities from month to month and season to season. Their organs also have their own personalities – some of the notes speak, some don't! They range from a keyboard, kindly donated from someone's front room, to a lovely little chamber organ in Forteviot church. It found its way there from Craig House for which it was built around 1870 by D & T Hamilton of Edinburgh. It later served in Balerno Parish Church from whence it was removed to Forteviot in 1992. Renovated by Sandy Edmonstone of Forteviot, it was installed in 1997 and dedicated in February 1998.

We are blessed by having Sandy Edmonstone on our doorstep. He does his very best to keep organs maintained within the confines of church budgets and church temperatures.

My present post is of a more permanent nature, still rural but within Auchterarder, in St Kessog's Episcopal Church, where there is a very fine 2-manual pipe organ. It is a delight to play and the acoustics within the church are magnificent. I have a choir, whose enthusiasm never ceases to amaze me, and we have as many as ten people willing to be cantors for the responsorial psalms.

However, I have not lost touch with the rota brigade as my husband has on occasion been cajoled into playing at Trinity Gask. He certainly echoes my sentiments as to the sincerity and welcome offered by these congregations. Also, weddings and funerals crop up within the Stewartry of Strathearn churches, for which they sometimes contact me.

Finally, I must conclude with a very rural musical story: Easter morning 2008.

'I'm dreaming of a White Christmas' is normal, but 'I'm dreaming of a White Easter' is not so common. Mr Snowman was standing to attention at my house gate – a rather unexpected 'page turner'. It is the norm for all churches in Auchterarder to be invited to an early morning walk up to one of the country houses which lies above the town. There, an outdoor service takes place. A keyboard, seats, urn, hot cross buns are all transported from the town. That year, the scene was quite spectacular after an early morning snowfall. Looking down on Auchterarder from this wonderful snowscape was indeed a gift from God. As I sat playing the hymns, clad in fleece, hat, wrist warmers, etc., I was able to marvel at the sheer beauty all around – the hearty singing, the sounds of Spring: the lambs, the birds, the tranquillity. And, just like that first trip up Glen Artney, another very special Sunday morning, never to be forgotten.