

PRACTICE ROOM

THE INSTRUMENTS YOU PLAY AT HOME

13. James Lancelot, Durham

No one knows exactly when James Lancelot's house in the cathedral close was built, writes *Graeme Kay*. Certainly medieval in origin, the large, mid-terrace stone property, which once housed not only the cathedral organist but several lay clerks, now exudes the formal elegance and classic proportions of a Georgian makeover. By the window in the corner of James's sitting-room is a house organ which did not have far to travel from the builder's workshop.

'The cathedral is not the ideal place in which to give organ lessons, or to practise,' says James. 'And it was through examining for the RCO with Peter Hurford and talking to him that I became convinced that my playing would not develop unless I had regular access to a good mechanical-action instrument.'

James decided to take the plunge, and approached Mark Venning of local firm Harrison & Harrison to ask what might be possible. Venning's enthusiastic response betokened the firm's desire to engage in building small practice organs. With two stops prepared for, it became possible within budget to agree a specification of two manuals and pedals with five independent stops and the usual three couplers (there are no pedal stops).

'The instrument (initially without the Flute and Fifteenth) was the penultimate to be built in H&H's old workshops in Durham City, arriving just before Christmas in 1995, just as I was about to start a term's sabbatical leave which included many recitals for which it would

have been unhelpful for me to have monopolised the cathedral organ. A hectic day's work saw the organ installed in our beautiful sitting-room, with strict orders to me not to touch it under any circumstances. That evening I rang Mark to thank him and to confirm that it really was out of the question to play even a single note. The answer was a stern no, and what seemed like about ten seconds later the doorbell rang with Mark on the doorstep, hotfoot from his house 200 yards away, intent on ensuring that I was not disobedient...

'As a practice instrument and as a teaching instrument, the organ has more than fulfilled my hopes. Each stop is beautiful in itself, and the richness of variety is remarkable in such a small instrument. One does not notice the absence of 16ft tone after the first five minutes; obviously there is no swell box, but the lack is irrelevant in much of the repertoire. Only the most minor repairs have been necessary over 15 years.

'Sensitive and revealing, but not dangerously light, the action is the ideal antidote to bad habits. The plenum is sufficiently big in the player's ears to make large-scale repertoire satisfying to practise: preparing the complete organ works of Hubert Parry for my Priory recording, I did not allow myself to go into the cathedral and register pieces until I had succeeded in making them sound expressive and musical on the limited resources at home.'

The organ is a beautiful piece of furniture in its own right: the wood is American walnut, the pipe-shades incorporating carvings of foliage and flames. 'At all stages,' James concludes, 'the love and the pride which Harrison's staff put into the instrument was clear. I have no regrets, but if I could have one more stop, it would be a tremulant; if two, the second would be an 8ft flute in the pedal. A third would be a quint at 1½ ft. It's a joy and a privilege to own this instrument, and I believe that it will continue to inspire and please long after my lifetime.' ■



▲ The American walnut case with its carved pipe-shades

James Lancelot's house organ, Durham Harrison & Harrison (1995/97)

Manual I

Stopped Diapason (wood)	8
Principal (metal; basses in prospect)	4

Manual II

Gedackt (wood and metal; partly ex-stock)	8
Flute (chimney; metal)	4
Fifteenth (metal)	2

II-I, II-Ped, I-Ped

Compass: Manuals, C – a ³ , 58 notes
Pedal, C – f ¹ , 30 notes

► NEXT ISSUE

Joseph Cullen's c.1850 Glasgow chamber organ



James Lancelot with his 'inspiring' Harrison