



The Park Chapel, Crouch End, where EHT was organist and choirmaster for thirty years from the 1920s

The Eric Thiman Collection

Newsletter No 8

This is the eighth Newsletter detailing the progress of the Eric Thiman Collection. If you know anyone else who would like to be included in emailing/ mailing list please send their details to Guy Turner (contact details at the end of the newsletter). Thank you.

THE ERIC THIMAN COLLECTION

Patrons

The Very Revd. Nicola Sullivan, Dean of Southwell
Professor Jonathan Freeman-Attwood, CBE, Principal, The Royal Academy of Music
The Revd. Ian Howarth, Chair of the Methodist Church, Birmingham District
The Very Revd. Dr John Moses, Dean Emeritus of St Paul's Cathedral

Frances Thimann, Eric Thiman's Niece
Paul Hale, Rector Chori Emeritus, Southwell Minster
Guy Turner, Archivist

It is not long (two months) since the last Newsletter, but as there is quite a lot to report, there seemed no point in waiting.....

PROGRESS WITH THE COLLECTION

We continue acquiring missing items for the Thiman archive, and the current total in the collection is 1268 different pieces.

'AF' AND 'GTB'

In the last newsletter, we quoted a slightly less than complimentary review of a Thiman Recital at Alexandra Palace, which was credited to 'AF'. Paul Hale, Rector Chori Emeritus

of Southwell Minster, and one of the prime movers of the Thiman Collection and an expert on all thing organ-related, was able to shed some light. He writes:

"A.F." was almost certainly the Revd Andrew Freeman (1876-1947), a noted organ authority and writer. A man of discernment, so if he says Eric's playing was a bit lacking, then it probably was!

The huge Willis in the Ally Pally was modernised by Willis III in 1929 with a complex console. For a player not used to bang-up-to-date console equipment it would have been a real challenge to jump on to this famous monster and deliver a good show with complex registrations. My guess is that ET 'played it safe', didn't change stops much, and rather bored an audience used to the more colourful playing of G D Cunningham and the brilliant young George Thalben-Ball - a player skilled enough to have given the UK premiere of Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto in 1915, aged only 19, when at the RCM!

Paul's mention of George Thalben-Ball links with a story that is found in various forms on the internet, concerning a trick played at the City Temple. Here is one version:

'The story goes that Sir George Thalben-Ball was invited to play for wedding at The City Temple,' (less than a mile from GTB's own church The Temple Church) but Eric Thiman, as incumbent organist, insisted on accompanying the choir and playing the wedding marches and hymns. Sir George was therefore relegated to the role of assistant organist; playing just the voluntaries.

With a malicious grin, Sir George Thalben-Ball hatched a plot, and when the signal came that the bride had duly arrived, Eric Thiman hurriedly slipped onto the organ-bench and blindly stabbed at the thumb-pistons as he looked towards the entrance-door. The bride entered, less than impressively, to an opening fanfare played on the 8ft Great Flute with Swell Celestes coupled.

Sir George had reversed all the thumb-pistons!

You can also find this story told in a version where it was EHT tricking GTB. As well as knowing Thiman in my teens, I also slightly knew Thalben-Ball, who was still organist at the Temple Church when I was at City of London School (which is where the Temple Choristers went to school) and was a forbidding presence whenever he was in school. It seems to me that it is much more likely that GTB was the perpetrator – and Frances Thiman agrees that such a trick would have been uncharacteristic of her Uncle.

WEBSITE

You are reminded that our website can be found at
<https://www.southwellminster.org/eric-thiman-collection/>

THE 'NEW' PIANO SONATA

Newsletter 7 announced the discovery of a recently discovered single movement Piano Sonata, which has now been edited and type-set by John Mitchell. This has sparked some interest from performers, and we now have at least one performance planned for 2022, the centenary of the piece's composition, when Zibo Li, a doctoral student at the Frost School of Music in Miami aims to perform it. This came about through long-time Thiman supporter, Nick Landauer, and his contact with Professor Kevin Kenner of Frost. More details when a date is known. You can see examples of Zibo Li's remarkable playing on his Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/Zibopianist/>

Meanwhile, Michael Jones has also expressed an interest in programming the Sonata. Michael is a pianist and enthusiast/expert in 20th century English Music, and is secretary of the Edgar Bainton Society – Bainton is another rather neglected composer *well* worth investigating. (<http://www.musicweb-international.com/bainton/>) Michael suspects that the manuscript we have might be a first draft and that a further score might come to light. Even if this is the case, the Sonata is complete, and it will be exciting to hear what is probably the world premiere of the piece next year.

THE COMPLETE ORGAN WORKS

Another friend of the Collection is Bramwell Bourne, who is Director of Music at St Elwyn's Church, Hayle, Cornwall. He has set about recording the complete Thiman organ works and has already committed 75 (about half) of them to CD. You can hear a number of performances, and see details of how to purchase the CDs on Bramwell's Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/The-Organ-Music-of-Eric-Thiman-101812721686630/> Bramwell attended the City Temple as a young man, and found Thiman's playing an inspiration. It was Bramwell who kindly supplied the picture of the Park Chapel at the top of this Newsletter.....

THE PARK CHAPEL

Thiman was organist of the Park Chapel for over 30 years until he went to the City Temple in 1958. Since that time the church has been split in two, with one half becoming rather a famous recording studio, owned at different stages by Eurythmics and David Gray – Bob Dylan, Radiohead and Elvis Costello have all recorded there. Meanwhile the other part of the Chapel is still a church – Mount Zion Church, of the Eternal Sacred Order of Cherubim and Seraphim. Here is a link about the Studio:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-19330032>

and here is one about Mount Zion Church

<https://harringayonline.com/forum/topics/park-chapel-crouch-hill-isn-t-just-a-recording-stdio-made-famous->

From the latter you can see virtually the same view of the building as in the picture at the head of this letter – but 70 or 80 years on!

ERIC ROUTLEY AND A POSSIBLE CONNECTION WITH KENNETH HORNE?!

Another of the Collection's supporters, Ian Murphy, has kindly supplied an interesting Obituary of Thiman, written by Eric Routley for the Bulletin of the Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland. Routley (1917-1982) was a Congregational Minister and composer. He was particularly known as a writer and arranger of hymns – it is his harmonies to the tune 'Slane' (Lord of all Hopefulness) that are generally used, for instance. He worked with Thiman on the 1951 Hymn Book, Congregational Praise, and we know from surviving correspondence that they were friends.

In a detailed Obituary (over 1300 words) he praised Thiman's musical craftsmanship and his professionalism as a composer, editor and teacher. But he also comes up with a curious suggestion linking Thiman to radio personality Kenneth Horne. He writes:

It is not, I hope, improper to recall here the strange matter of (Thiman's) tune STOKESAY CASTLE to Sylvester Horne's text 'for the might of thine arm'. Round about 1947 a very popular radio show called 'Much Binding in the Marsh' was being presented by Kenneth Horne, Sylvester's son, and its signature tune became popular, and had an opening so congruent with STOKESAY CASTLE, that I recall wondering whether Eric Thiman's tune had become so well known when hearing it whistled in the street. Kenneth Horne, when asked about the coincidence, could not recall knowing the Thiman tune: but he must have done, because at one stage – back in the twenties – Thiman had wanted to publish the tune as an anthem setting of the familiar hymn. The Horne family, however, would not allow him to use that text, and in the end the tune appeared with 'Stand up, stand up for Jesus.' A case, one supposes of the memory playing tricks.

Whether there really was a connection, or whether this was just Routley's flight of fancy, you can judge by comparing the hymn

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WopQbq_w8PE

with the theme tune

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mv1TBajnpvs>

More seriously: concerning the criticism of Thiman which is often suggested, that he was a little unoriginal, Ian Murphy writes:

Routley, who clearly had much respect for Dr T, nonetheless once lamented at the 'obstinate lack of surprises'. Well, I know what he meant. But let us give thanks for a fine, conscientious, musician, loyal to his Protestant heritage, enriching both the church, especially the Free churches, and the secular works with tuneful, attractive, accessible music. For this, it is surely fitting that his memory should be perpetuated.

This seems to me to sum up Thiman's legacy, and the need for our collection, extremely well.

CDs

There are still some copies of the Anthems and Part Songs CD recorded in 2016 remaining. They cost £12.50 each, plus £1.50 post and packing. Email your order to Guy Turner at guyscottturner@gmail.com and pay as indicated at the end of the letter.

Barry Williams has recently reviewed the CD for 'Under the Clock', the church magazine for Caterham where Thiman used to play. He is part of Barry's review:

The Tudor Singers give an excellent account of the religious music, with sensitive phrasing and generally secure intonation. The enunciation is good and the musical detail is well brought out. A particular favourite is 'Who would true valour see', rendered here with conviction. The accompaniments are played by John Wright who also gives two organ solos: Scherzetto for Flutes - very 'Thimanesque', and the popular March for a Pageant. The Scherzetto captures too much clatter from the organ and this is the only (very slight) blemish on this otherwise fine CD.

Some hymn-anthems are especially attractive. 'Let thy merciful ears' is as beautiful a setting as one could wish for and the Tudor Singers fully do it justice. The recapitulation is quite magical and exceptional for an amateur choir.

The Te Deum in D flat is a powerful piece of writing, with Thiman's characteristic concision and some of his well-known harmonic devices. The interplay between upper and lower voices here is superb.

The only criticism to be made of the recording is that, perhaps a more generous acoustic for the religious items would have been slightly more gratifying.

The latter part of the CD is given over to The Eric Thiman Singers of Caterham School - especially nice as Dr Thiman was himself a pupil at that school. The bright, fresh, unforced sound of these young voices is shaped well by Annie Ingrassia's most musical conducting, supported by the sensitive accompaniment of the school's Director of Music, Adam Assen.

It is in such simple but really quite remarkable upper-voice pieces that we hear Eric Thiman in his best-known genre, writing for amateurs. 'Evening in the Birchpath' is outstanding, though all the items are first-rate.

This CD celebrates the enormous contribution to British Music by an often under-rated composer.

One cannot but feel that Dr. Thiman would have been very pleased with this CD. It is, I think, unique in being the only modern recording solely of his music.

There are other and significant pieces by Eric Thiman that merit recording. Let us hope that the Eric Thiman Collection may be able to give us more in the future.

In relation to Barry's final comment, there will indeed be more Thiman on CD to look forward to. Newsletter 6 mentioned the planned CD of songs by Thiman, coupled with those of Michael Head, which is to be recorded by Emily Gray, Mezzo-Soprano (<https://www.emilyjanegray.com/>). This of course has been held up by the pandemic, but we hope she will be in the recording studio soon. There is also hope that we may be able to reissue on CD, the LPs that Thiman made himself – The Last Supper, the choral anthology 'Here Beauty Dwells', and the organ CD from the City Temple. We are trying to get permission for the rights for these, and hopefully there will be more news about these in the next Newsletter.

FUNDS

The continued work of the Collection is of course reliant on funding from our supporters. Obtaining the missing pieces often involves copying fees from libraries, or just straightforward publisher charges (often more expensive if a one-off print of an out of print work). Some pieces turn up in the US or Canada (where Thiman was and is very popular), so there can be postage costs. In addition we are keen to support performances of Thiman's music where possible by providing access to copies etc (though not by substantial sponsorship, unfortunately). All this costs money – though we are VERY economical! If you are able to make a donation please see the details of how to pay at the end of the Newsletter. Many thanks for your continued support.

PAYMENTS

For payment of donations, or for CDs:

Either by bank transfer to Southwell Minster Choirs Association
60-20-15 68034652
Reference: Thiman Collection (and either 'donation' or 'CD')

Or post a cheque made out to 'Southwell Minster Choir Association', with 'Eric Thiman Collection' written on the back, to Guy Turner.

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