

ORGANIST COMPOSERS

Part One

Alan Gray, William Wolstenholme, Herbert Sumsion, W T Best, Percy Buck and Basil Harwood

David C F Wright DMus

Many people show their prejudice in saying that they hate organ music and religious choral music because it is church music and we live in a secular society becoming even more secular. But there is great organ music and liturgical music and to ignore it is to rob oneself of a rich heritage

ALAN GRAY

Alan Gray was born in York on 23 December 1855 and attended St Peter's School and Trinity College, Cambridge. From 1881 to 1893, he was Director of Music at Wellington College. In 1893, he became the organist and choral director at Trinity College, Cambridge for 37 years until 1930 succeeding Stanford who thought highly of him and dedicated three motets of 1905 to him and the Trinity Choir.



Gray may be best known for some descants to hymns.

It was in 1890 that Novello published Grays's Four Superior Sonatas for organ, a title which the composer did not forward. The second, in A flat, I have played. It opens with an impressive opening movement which contains a fugue, then a romanza which some have suggested is like Schumann or Rheinberger and a strong finale.

He composed liturgical music for morning and evening prayer and an Evening Service in F minor. There are organ works, works for violin and for voice and orchestra.

He died in Cambridge on 27 September 1935. He was 78.

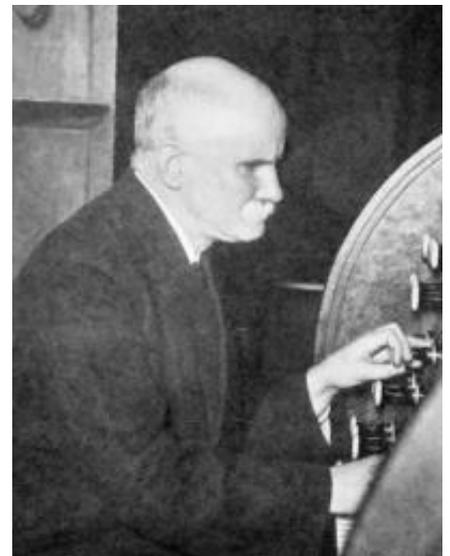
[PDF of Idyll no 4](#)

WILLIAM WOLSTENHOLME

William Wolstenholme was born in Blackburn on 24 February 1865 and was blind from birth. He had a very noticeable talent and was taken up by Henry Smart the organist at Blackburn Cathedral but Smart died before his ideas could be implemented.

William went to the Worcester College for the blind sons of gentlemen in 1874 having piano and organ lessons with the Cathedral organist, Dr Done. Elgar gave Wolstenholme some violin lessons although when acting as his amanuensis became controversial and difficult and Sir Frederick Ouseley stepped in to prevent further problems.

Graduated with his music degree, Wolstenholme returned to Blackburn becoming the organist at St Paul's Church and giving recitals which included improvisations. He stayed in the North West until 1902 when the distinguished viola player Lionel Tertis



befriended him and helped him secure the organist's post of the Kings Weigh House congregational church in Grosvenor Square.

He also had posts at All Saints church, Paddington and at All Saints, St Johns Wood. His reputation grew.

He toured the USA in 1908 giving twenty two concerts on the east coast. He also composed a string quartet as well as a plethora of organ music.

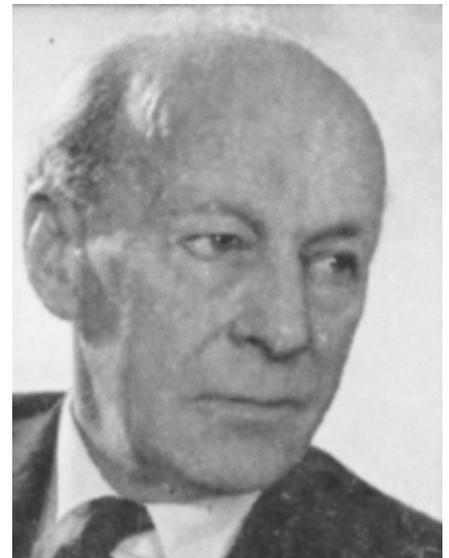
He never married although he was once engaged to Maud Baldwin. He had a sister, also called Maud, who acted as his amanuensis for most of his life.

He died in London on 23 July 1931

[*PDF of Pastoral in D and Romanza in A minor*](#)

HERBERT SUMSION

He was sometimes known as Jack but born Herbert Whitton on 14 January 1899 in Gloucester and was the organist of Gloucester cathedral from 1928 to 1967. He became a leader in The Three Choirs Festival with my great uncle Sir Ivor Atkins.



Sumsion was in the cathedral choir from 1908 then led by Herbert Brewer to whom he was articled in 1915 with three years study in organ, choral singing and musical theory. He passed the Royal College of Organists exams in 1917 and was awarded the Turpin Prize for his practical work.

Between 1917 and 1919 he was in the Army and saw action in the Flanders trenches at the end of which he became Brewer's assistant and he served as an accompanist for the Three Choirs Festival. He met Elgar after a rehearsal of *The Dream of Gerontius* which, like the majority of people, found this work to be painfully boring.

Sumsion received a degree from Durham University and, in 1922, went to London as the organist at Christchurch, Lancaster Gate. His other posts were as director at Bishop's Stortford College and Morley College. He studied conducting with Sir Adrian Boult at RCM where he met R O Morris who accepted a post at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia and Sumsion was asked to accompany Morris as his assistant.

On 7 June 1927 Sumsion married Alice Garlichs in Philadelphia.

Brewer died of a heart attack in 1928 and Sumsion had just accepted the organists post at Coventry Cathedral but went to Gloucester and was involved with the Three Choirs festival where he planned the concerts eleven times between 1928 and 1967. He had to deal with the arrogant Elgar but on Elgar's death in 1934 Herbert did arrange for three cathedral organists to each conduct an Elgar work.

Sumsion had excellent friends with Kodaly, Vaughan Williams, Finzi and Howells.

'Jack' wrote much organ music and preludes on hymn tunes were a speciality as well as works for oboe, orchestra and chamber ensembles. He composed two piano trios, an Overture In the Cotswolds, Idyll; At Valley Green and a Cello Sonata and a Violin Sonata as well as a String Quartet. His organ music and sacred music is very acceptable and fresh sounding. He adjudicated at music festivals and competitions. He recorded Elgar's Organ Sonata. He was a director of music at Cheltenham Ladies

College from 1935 to 1968. As a teacher, he had a very pleasant manner which made people want to do their best for him.

He received a Lambeth Doctorate in 1947 and a CBE in 1961. He retired from Gloucester Cathedral in 1967 and died at Frampton on Severn on 11 August 1995. He was 96.

[*\(See article on Sir Ivor Atkins\)*](#)

W T BEST

William Thomas Best often treated the organ as an orchestral instrument with titles of works associated with symphonic pieces.

He was born on 13 August 1826 in Carlisle the son of a solicitor. Young William became a pupil of the cathedral's organist and was devoted to the music of Bach. He became the organist of Pembroke Chapel, Liverpool in 1840 and then, in 1847, to a church for the blind and then the Liverpool Philharmonic Society in 1848. From 1854 to 1856, he was in the Royal Panopticon in Leicester Square. This was followed by posts at St Martins in the Fields and Lincolns Inn Chapel.



He was a freemason.

Among his many organ works is his Concert Fantasia on a Welsh March and a Sonata in D minor. He also wrote a festival Overture for organ.

He went back to Liverpool in 1856 as organist at St Georges Hall and he played the organ for the Handel Festivals at Crystal Palace and at the Royal Albert Hall where he inaugurated the organ in 1871. He was given a civil list pension of £100 a year and in 1890 gave organ recitals in Sydney, Australia.

By 1894 he was suffering from ill health and died in Liverpool on 10 May 1897.

A bust of W T Best made by Conrad Dressler is in front of the organ at St Georges Hall.

[*PDF of Grand Fantasia on a Welsh March*](#)

PERCY BUCK

Percy Carter Buck was born in London on 25 March 1871. He studied at the Merchant Taylors' School and the Royal College of Music. He was the organist at Worcester College, Oxford from 1891 to 1894 and Wells Cathedral from 1896 to 1899 and Bristol Cathedral from 1899 to 1901. Then he became Director of Music at Harrow School from 1901 to 1927 and taking a post as a music professor at Trinity College Dublin. He was King Edward Professor of Music at the University of London from 1927 to 1936 and music advisor to the London City Council. He was knighted in 1937.

Most of his early works were destroyed in World War Two. There are three organ sonatas, a piano quintet, a piano quartet, violin sonatas, piano pieces and songs.

He died on 3 October 1947. He was 76.

[*PDF of Organ Sonata no 1*](#)

BASIL HARWOOD

Basil Harwood was born in Woodhouse, Gloucestershire, on 11 April 1859, one of twelve children. His parents were Quakers but his sister Ada was converted to the Anglican Church when she was 21 in 1867. Basil attended this induction at Almondsbury and was drawn to church music. His father, Edward, remarried an Anglican.

Basil schooled at Montpellier, Weston Super Mare and, in 1871, enrolled in Clevedon, the preparatory school for Charterhouse where he went on 1874. In 1876, he won a place at Trinity College, Oxford where he studied classics and modern history. He went to the Leipzig Conservatory of Music studying with Carl Reinecke and Salomon Jadassohn where he composed his anthem, O Saving Grace.

He was appointed organist at St Barnabas, Pimlico in 1883 where he composed his Organ Sonata no 1. He moved to Ely Cathedral in 1887 and then to Christchurch, Oxford as precentor at Keble College from 1892 to 1909. He co-founded the Oxford Bach Choir and earned his Doctor of Music degree. He conducted the Oxford Orchestral Association from 1892 to 1898 and was the editor of the 1908 Oxford Hymn Book and Musical Examiner for Musical degrees from 1900 to 1925.

He married Mabel Ada Jennings who had been a pupil of his.

He retired in 1909 at the age of fifty, following the death of his father. He continued to compose. He let the estate at Woodhouse and moved to Bournemouth. In 1939, he moved to London and died on 3 April 1949 eight days short of his 90th birthday.

He composed organ music of quality and excellent sacred music as well as hymn tunes based on places he visited mostly to accommodate his passion for walking such as Thy hand O God has guided and Let all the world in every corner sing.

But he is also forgotten generally and part of the reason is the prejudiced attitude to church music in this increasing secular society.

[PDF of Organ Sonata no 1](#)

(1685)

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