

“Music for a Long While”
Reminiscences of Dr Francis Jackson CBE
[born October 2nd 1917]

On October 14th, members and guests gathered in the pleasantly refurbished Princes Street URC, to enjoy an illustrated lecture celebrating the legend that is Dr Francis Jackson CBE. Ronald Watson, himself a published composer, is a long-standing friend of Dr Jackson so was able to give us a delightful miscellany of biographical and anecdotal snippets, demonstrating Dr Jackson’s character, personality and musical achievements.

Sir Edward Bairstow (1874-1946) admitted the young Francis to the choir of York Minster in 1929 at the age of 12 - quite old by today’s practice. He became organist at Malton Parish Church at the age of 16. The first recording we heard was Dr Jackson speaking affectionately of Bairstow whom he clearly idolised as his mentor and teacher. We then listened to the Prelude in B minor BWV 544 played by Bairstow in 1927, a fascinating insight into how Bach was played in England in the 1920s – a surprisingly fast tempo, the music beginning quietly and building to a grand climax. (1)

Whenever possible, Dr Jackson composed whilst serving in the forces during the war – most notably the expansive *Impromptu* Op.5, completed in 1944 in Bari, Italy. Whilst stationed at Catterick and before being demobbed, he became assistant organist at York Minster as Bairstow was becoming very ill. In practice, he ran the whole caboodle until Bairstow’s death on May 1st 1946, when he became Organist and Master of the Choristers. Consequently Dr Jackson’s first major service was Bairstow’s funeral!

Ron continued to weave the fascinating story of Dr Jackson’s long and distinguished career around some significant recordings. Most memorable for me were great man’s performance in York Minster in 1990 of Bairstow’s *Toccata-Prelude on Pange lingua* and his own *Agnus Dei* from the virtually unknown *Missa Matris Dei*, the latter surely a fine example of what Dr Jackson means by *espressivo*. Ron emphasised that Dr Jackson considers musical *expression* a core principle and this quality is always inherent in his approach to music.

To expound on the compositions further, we also heard Dr Jackson play his splendid *Diversion for Mixtures* at Blackburn cathedral. Another especially beautiful piece is the *Arabesque* recorded in York in 1994/5.

Dr Jackson’s best-known individual composition must be the splendid hymn-tune *East Acklam*, originally intended for *God that madest earth and heaven* – much more fitting to the text than that miserable Welsh thing! However, this fine marriage of words and music did not catch on; only later did the great Methodist hymn-writer, The Revd Fred Pratt Green CBE (1903-2000) write the lovely Harvest hymn, *For the fruits of his creation*. Dr Jackson wrote a fine Prelude on *East Acklam* (Banks Publications) as has Ron Watson (Fagus Music), both well worth learning for use at Harvest-tide or for a contemplative spot in a recital.

Dr Jackson has a music studio in the grounds of his house in East Acklam where he has lived since 1983. Sadly, his wife died four years ago. Ron reported that he still maintains the large sloping garden unaided; when Ron and Isabel visited Dr Jackson two years ago they interrupted him mowing the lawn with a hand-mower – at the age of 98! The studio contains an organ and a piano plus all his scores etc;

Dr Jackson has never lived further than 18 miles from York and he has never formally applied for any of the three jobs he has held! He is also the only living organist/composer to have made recordings on 78s, LPs and CDs!

Recordings played during the afternoon were:

A spoken tribute to Bairstow by Francis Jackson.

Prelude in B minor BWV 544 played by EC Bairstow (York Minster, 1927)

Percy Whitlock *Folk Tune* played by FJ (St Michael's, Malton, 1997)

Billy Mayerl *Marigold* played by FJ (Welman piano at East Acklam, 1997)

Bairstow *Andante in F* played by FJ (the organ at his home, 1997)

Vierne *Impromptu* (Pièces de Fantaisie) played by FJ (York Minster, 1981)

Bairstow *Toccata-Prelude on Pange Lingua* played by FJ (York Minster, 1990)

Bairstow *Let all mortal flesh keep silence* dir FJ (Choir of York Minster, 1974)

Jackson *Agnus Dei* from *Missa Matris Dei* (Exon Singers dir Matthew Owens)

Jackson *Gabriel's Message* (Exon Singers dir Matthew Owens)

Jackson *Diversion for Mixtures* played by FJ (Blackburn Cathedral, 1993)

Jackson *Arabesque* played by FJ (York Minster, 1994)

Jackson *Daniel in Babylon* (St Peter's Singers dir Simon Lindley; FJ organ)

For those wishing to delve further into this afternoon's story, I would cite three books. First, "*Blessed City: the Life and Works of Edward Bairstow*". (William Sessions, York). Bairstow began to "write up his reminiscences" (to quote FJ) when he was 70 and the completed portion ends at the time, tantalisingly, when Bairstow moved from Leeds to York Minster in 1913. Dr Jackson completed the book in honour of his great mentor, publishing it in 1996. Secondly, Dr Jackson's own autobiography, "*Music for a long while*" (available on Amazon) and finally, Ron Watson's biography of his musical journey so far, "*A thousand blended notes: musical tales of three cities*" (Roseberry Press c/o Ron Watson)

We thank Ron for the hours of research involved in preparing such an event. We also thank Melanie Macey for providing the delicious cakes – especially the flapjacks - and Prue Goldsmith for serving the refreshments.

The Norfolk Organists' Association sent a 100th birthday card to Dr Jackson whom we are proud to have as a member and we have received a gracious acknowledgement.

Harry Macey

(¹) Is such skilful hand registration taught nowadays when general pistons and steppers are available on even a modest-sized organ?