

Competing forces

The music of J.S. Bach may be at the heart of organ competitions, but **Stephen Farr** in Alkmaar and **Chris Bragg** in St Albans found so much more besides



JAN ZWART

‘**M**usic in Space’ was the theme of this year’s **Orgelfestival Holland**, so Alkmaar was emblazoned with striking representations of the Laurenskerk’s Van Hagerbeer/Schnitger organ in the guise of Starship Enterprise, powering towards a distant galaxy – symbolic, perhaps, of this remarkable instrument’s apparently limitless potential. The International Schnitger Competition, as always, formed the centrepiece of the event; alongside it, teaching and lectures by jury members (their Academy students performed an impressive showcase concert at the end of the week), concerts, lectures and forum discussions completed an imaginative programme, carefully structured to emphasise the broader musical and cultural context of the city’s outstanding collection of organs. During a week when there was already much to celebrate, a particularly festive atmosphere was engendered by the recent completion of Flentrop’s restoration work on the Schnitger – tonally unaltered, but now with fully restored lead pipework and conduits.

The resulting aural splendour – and rock-steady wind – was exploited to magnificent effect in the finals of the competition, where three players remaining from an initial entry of 25 (Megumi Hamaya, Adriaan Hoek, and Manuel Schuen) performed programmes including contemporary works (Benoît Mernier, Daan Manneke, and Wolfgang Sauseng respectively) alongside baroque repertoire; earlier rounds had included not only ‘standard’ repertoire but also the requirement to compose (and perform on the Van Covelens instrument) an intabulation of an Ockeghem motet. Despite the Schnitger suffering a minor mechanical malfunction (the result of extreme heat and humidity, and quickly resolved with consummate grace and humour), all finalists played to the highest standard. The contemporary works in particular displayed consistently remarkable virtuosity and sense of colour, but it was equally intriguing to hear close similarities of rhetorical and registrational approach emerge in the Buxtehude works, where (perhaps ironically, given the intrinsic qualities of

◀ Alkmaar’s 1511 Van Covelens organ

the genre) something like a uniformity of approach was discernible. Adriaan Hoek, whose programme of Manneke (a Guillou-like 'Dialogue', in which he drew some extraordinary sonorities from the instrument), Bach, Buxtehude and Distler explored the full range of the Schnitger's resources and won the first prize *cum laude*, as well as the Izaak Kingma audience prize; Megumi Hamaya and Manuel Schuen took second and third prize respectively.

The following evening, after a tour exploring the instruments of the surrounding area in concerts featuring voice, saxophone, and cello, the closing concert brought together not only the Schnitger and Van Covelens organs of the Laurenskerk but also (in various permutations) brass, saxophone, chamber organ, recorder and electronic keyboard, with the resident organists of the church (Pieter van Dijk and Frank van Wijk) producing wonderful musical and registrational finesse (not to mention enviable rhythmic discipline) in a concert including a commission for each instrument (Andries van

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Rossem's witty monody *Oneliner* for the Van Covelens, and Franz Danksagmüller's more enigmatic *From Sol to BD+42550* for the Schnitger), Gabrieli (brass ensemble), organ duets (the intriguing 19th-century Dutch composer Johannes Bastiaans, represented by a labyrinthine and astronomically symbolic *Fuga canonica*), and J.S. Bach (extracts from the violin Partita in D minor, played here on the saxophone by the Raaf Hekkema, who, when viewed from a position next to the stage, seemed never to need to breathe). Alongside an extended Bastiaans setting of Psalm 98 for organ and brass, two works by Piet Kee completed the programme: *Network*, in which recorder, chamber organ, organ, keyboard, and saxophone created a unique and often eerie soundworld; and the work inspiring the theme of the festival, *Music in Space*, composed for brass and the two organs of the Laurenskerk in 1969. In a fascinating pre-concert discussion which touched on many issues concerning the performance of contemporary music, Piet Kee and Pieter van Dijk outlined the difficulties inherent in performing the works following the restoration of both organs – the instruments' pitches no longer matched as they had at the time of composition – but the Klop chamber organ imported for the occasion proved a convincing addition to the instrumentarium, creating particularly exquisite tracery in combination ▶



JANZVART

▲ The world-famous Van Hagerbeer/Schnitger organ

▼ Winning smiles for (l to r) Manuel Schuen (3rd), Megumi Hamaya (2nd) and Adriaan Hoek (1st)



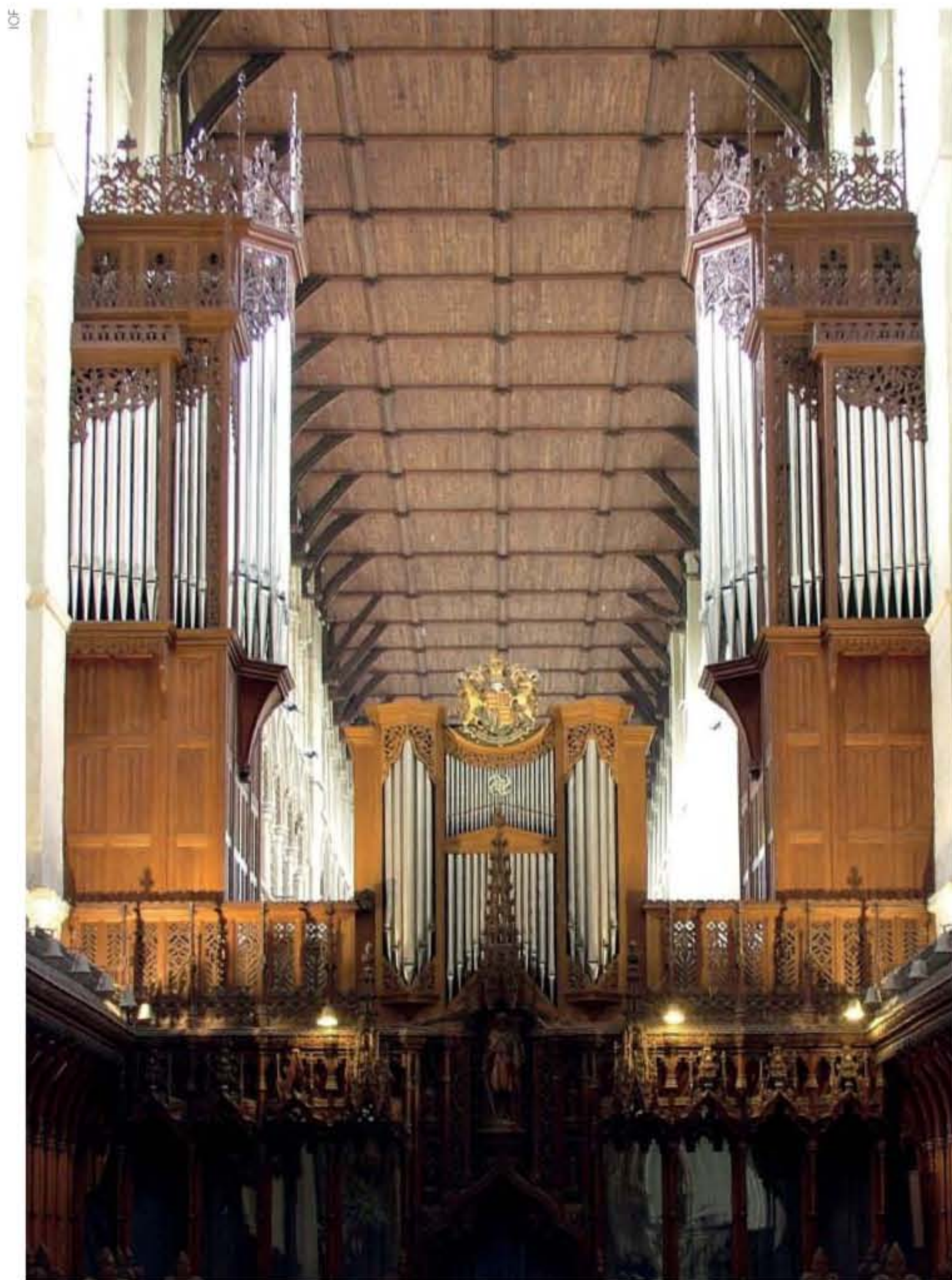
ORGELFESTIVAL HOLLAND

ORGAN COMPETITIONS



▲ Orgelfestival Holland's opening concert included a 17th-century ballet from the court of Louis XIV

◀ with the recorder of Elina Keijzer (who also played electric keyboard). Saxophone and Schnitger also proved an alluring pairing, in which the organ's peerless voicing seemed somehow to assume the living, breathing character of the wind instrument, and vice versa; an unforgettable and rather moving experience. If delicacy of effect was the characteristic of *Network*, *Music in Space* was more directly arresting, with (occasionally mobile) brass stationed in the crossing, organ gallery and triforium, a layout requiring the assistance of a conductor to coordinate. Piet Kee's intimate knowledge of the Laurenskerk's acoustical properties was clearly apparent here, and the antiphonal possibilities of the forces were exploited to the full; the standing ovation he received from the large audience was clearly sincere, reflecting in no small part the listeners' fully deserved appreciation of the festival as a whole. A refreshing experience, from which one emerged reassured that this significant and much-valued event will continue to boldly go.



‘I always knew that **St Albans International Organ Festival** [4-18 July] was a well-established, highly respected competition,’ remarked jury member Hans Davidsson, ‘but I had the impression that in earlier times it represented the highest standards in English and American-style playing and performance. My experience when I come now is of a place alive with lots of opportunities for the people involved and a rich variety ... this is a dynamic, vibrant event.’

Reflecting the creative and international philosophy of current artistic director David Titterington, the 2015 competition was characterised by the diversity of its challenges, something noted as a particular strength by the jury, who unanimously expressed their admiration for the standard. Interpretation competitors performed a broad spectrum of repertoire, including a new commission by Paul Patterson, and – a first for the competition – a Handel organ concerto with the Orchester Wiener Akademie directed by jury member Martin Haselböck. And, also for the first time, the competition moved to London for a round on the newly restored Richard Bridge organ (1735) at Christ Church, Spitalfields [see feature, p.18], which jury members felt enhanced the experience of the competitors. Carole Terry commented that ‘the action on that organ is so sensitive, it allowed the competitors real expressive possibilities which we were able to enjoy.’ Davidsson added a note of caution: ‘When you add in a historic organ like this, it becomes more than a conventional competition, it becomes a learning opportunity,

◀ St Albans Cathedral's Harrison & Harrison organ