

ORTOA Celebrity Recitals at the Rochdale Town Hall Organ

A beacon for the Town of Culture

Tuesday 20 April 2025 at 1 pm

Keith Hearnshaw concert organist

ORTOA (Oldham, Rochdale & Tameside Organists' Association est.1908) are back at the newly renovated town hall presenting top performers at the JJ Binns organ. A new time for this set of recitals was Tuesday at one pm. This gives lucky concert goers the opportunity to explore the magnificent, restored building and enjoy a tasty brunch in the Martlet restaurant beforehand.

ORTOA presented a great exponent: the exuberant and charismatic virtuoso **Keith Hearnshaw** with his gift for making music accessible.

Part of the skill set of a top-notch organist is the ability to adapt to many different, individual instruments and deal with whatever idiosyncrasies, quirks and foibles they may present. Keith knows the Rochdale Binns instrument well. However, even he



was surprised when he arrived for his pre-recital day's practice and part of it sounded as soon as he switched on ... and it stayed sounding. (For techies, the Swell 16 reed slider stuck on, due to humidity). But have no fear, Hearnshaw's here; with his cool head and tons of experience, plus a visit from the specialists, disaster was averted.

The audience were oblivious of these problems, but it does highlight the need to keep our Rolls Royce instrument in fine fettle. Keith referred to it as 'a Grade 1-listed building with a Grade 1-listed organ'. **This recital placed it firmly as a beacon at the centre of Rochdale as Greater Manchester's Town of Culture 2025-26.**

Prize winning **Keith Hearnshaw** was born in West Bromwich and began learning the organ at the age of thirteen. He gained ARCM and ARCO whilst studying at the Birmingham Conservatoire and has held several organist and choral conducting posts. In July 1997 he became a Fellow of the Royal College of Organists and from September 1997-98 was organ scholar at Liverpool Cathedral under Professor Ian Tracey.

As a recitalist, Keith is much in demand and has performed throughout this country and Europe. He has made several radio and TV appearances and has several recordings available on CD. Twice a year, Keith produces the recordings for the aural tests for the Royal College of Organists. This concert was dedicated to the memory of his friend and long-standing ORTOA committee member, David Birch who sadly died last year.

His varied programme began with a beguiling and sonorous presentation of the well-loved favourite, Dvorak's Largo from the New World Symphony adapted by the late, great Carlo Curley (the 'Pavarotti of the organ' with whom Keith collaborated several times).

In contrast, Guilmant's take on Handel was a bright and stirring number and A Fancy by John Stanley harked back to a simpler time.

Another popular favourite, JS Bach's Toccata & Fugue in D minor made full use of the instrument. Keith's fresh approach brought out the improvisatory qualities of the piece and he revelled in the crescendos and full passages in the Great Hall.

Hymn to the Fallen by John Williams from Saving Private Ryan was atmospheric and a fine example of moving screen organ accompaniment of which Keith is a keen exponent.

Barber's Adagio for Strings is another classical piece often used in films and this adaptation for organ by Strickland demonstrated why. The sustained build up of sonorities over a period of time is transcendental, deeply moving and quite unique.

Keith. In his inimitable way, described Elgar's Pomp and Circumstance No 4 in G, as roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. So, by the same token perhaps the same composer's Salut d'Amour is a romantic tryst in the Malvern hills. Beautifully played on an ideal instrument for Elgar's Edwardian sound world.

Finale from Symphonie No 1 by Vierne was a meaty masterwork to show off the Binns instrument to the full and continue Keith's aim to promote the art of organ playing and help establish it in its rightful place as 'The King of Instruments'.

ORTOA 2025 further recitals on Tuesdays at One!

Tuesday June 17th at 1 pm EDWARD TAYLOR (from Carlisle Cathedral)

Tuesday July 15th at 1 pm LEE LONGDEN Cinema Organist

Tuesday Sept 16th at 1 pm ALEX FISHBURN (from Liverpool Cathedral)

Admission £10 (concessions £8) concerts last one hour. Card or cash at the door or visit www.rochdaletownhall.co.uk/events or iao.org.uk/ortoa.

Dr Joe Dawson