

Friends of the Mühlacker Organ Summer will already be familiar with Martin Setchell. Concert tours have taken the New Zealand organ virtuoso to the United States, Canada, Australia and Europe on numerous occasions. He has now taken his place at the console of the organ in St Paul's Church for the third time.

MÜHLACKER — During his many tours through the churches of the world, Setchell must constantly adapt to organs of widely differing construction. That alone is a considerable challenge, since each performance must satisfy both his own expectations and those of his audience. To an expert, the new Mönch organ in St Paul's Church is a comparatively small instrument, but it is no longer unfamiliar to him.

"I very much enjoy playing here in Mühlacker," he said, delighted to meet again so many acquaintances—and by now some friends as well. "Seldom-heard English and French rarities, seasoned with a dash of British humour, will ring out from the organ loft," the concert announcement had promised. Setchell completely fulfilled his aim of making organ music entertaining, without sacrificing the seriousness and depth of his playing or compromising the dignity of the church.

With virtuosity, he delighted the audience with a varied programme. Before taking his place at the organ, he introduced it personally from the floor of the church. He then opened the evening with *Celebratio*, a festive organ work by the contemporary Welsh composer Karl Jenkins.

He reached back 300 years into the Baroque era to pay homage to Johann Sebastian Bach, the great master of organ literature. First came Bach's original chorale prelude *Nun freut euch, lieben Christen g'mein*. Setchell then surprised the audience with three further works by Bach in his own arrangements, including the second movement from the *Double Concerto for Two Violins*, BWV 1043.

He shaped this *Largo* with exceptional intimacy and feeling. No mighty orchestral organ chords filled the building; instead, the listeners were enveloped by soft, singing string tones. Musical vistas opened into which one could dream oneself, surrender completely to the music or even lose oneself within it—always clearly defined with the gentlest touch and never lapsing into sentimentality. The audience listened as though spellbound.

"He played that piece with particular heart," his wife Jenny said afterwards. She accompanies her husband on his concert tours and helps him beforehand by recording the registration details.

Two interpretations of Schumann brought another great Classical-Romantic composer into the programme, before Setchell's many-faceted playing turned the spotlight on composers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the present day.

During Alfred Hollins's *A Trumpet Minuet*, one might have imagined that a trumpeter was hidden somewhere beside the organ, so authentic was the trumpet sound. Not at all—the virtuoso at the console simply knew exactly which stops to draw.

A little later, he transported his listeners into the bustling life of a busy shopping street, captured in music by the American composer Percy Grainger and heard here in the Setchell/Stockmeyer arrangement. A Prelude and Fugue by the French composer Camille Saint-Saëns allowed the “Queen of Instruments” to appear once again in her “full regalia.” A cheerful *Jig* by John Gardner and the jazz-inflected *Blues Toccata* by the Norwegian Mons Leidvin Takle then brought this unconventional concert evening to a close and swept the audience into storms of enthusiasm.

It should be noted that this applause came only at the end of the concert, so the carefully created atmosphere was not “chopped to pieces” after every work. The result of this welcome restraint was, as could be heard on all sides, a concert to enjoy from A to Z.

Martin Setchell is a significant figure among today's distinguished organ virtuosos. What makes him so immensely likeable is that, despite all his international successes and honours, he has remained completely down to earth. He is an approachable artist, and one senses that talking with concertgoers as equals is genuinely important to him.

Over a light supper of pretzels and “organ wine,” many guests enjoyed this direct contact with the performer. One of Setchell's chief aims is to bring organ music to a broad audience in an entertaining way. Through his interpretations, he succeeds in bringing the “Queen of Instruments” down a little from her pedestal and closer to ordinary people.