

What does a typical day or week in your life look like?

No week is ever the same as the week before or after. One of the joys of being freelance is that there is a huge amount of variety of schedule – and of course you get to meet very interesting people, rehearse and perform on some fantastic instruments and see some great parts of the globe!

Just to get an idea of schedule, here is a 'spot-check' of a week earlier this month.

Monday: Rise early to take our daughter, Eloise, to school on the A train from 125th Street to 20th Street in Manhattan. Enjoy my usual coffee and muffin at a local coffee shop and then walk back uptown about 2 miles – amid the noise and chaos of Broadway and Times Square, I try to imagine some new musical ideas for a piece I'll be working on later.

After tending to emails for an hour, I crank up my Compaq desktop, ready to embark on more of my present composition project, the transcription of Mahler's 6th Symphony (from the Full Orchestral score) – a 50th birthday present for my wife, Madge. What a wonderful piece.... I work out how to create a satisfying organ texture for each bar, what is essential, what can be left to illusion. Take a lunch break and watch some of a programme on the Philharmonia Orchestra, bringing back many wonderful memories of conducting them at the Three Choirs Festival at Gloucester. Back to the Mahler until 5pm when Madge, and Eloise come home. Check more emails until 6pm when all our computers are switched off (our family rule – it *usually* works!). We enjoy a quiet evening at home – watching the American quiz show 'Jeopardy' at 7:00.... hoping Madge and Eloise won't humiliate me completely, I am thrilled to answer several questions correctly. Before bed, I read a chapter of Stephen Johnson's biography of Gustav Mahler.

Tuesday: At 10am, to Holy Trinity Catholic Church on 82nd Street where I rehearse for about 8 hours per week. It is a heavenly instrument by Létourneau – 3 manuals, French romantic voicing, 5 second acoustic (very rare in NY) and beautiful, mechanical action. I take half of the Mahler Finale for a trial run. Play the first 5 pages at 2/3 tempo on three beautiful 8ft Flutes all coupled, gradually increase the tempo, add pedaling and fingering as needed (usually when there's a wrong note in rehearsal...). Practise the hardest bars "until you can't get it wrong" (as the great G D Cunningham used to say). Have fun playing the same five pages on the proper registration for 15 minutes or so, then revert to the Flutes for another half an hour. Repeat this process, all the time making small amendments in the score (inverting parts, changing configuration of chords etc) ready to change on the computer later.

In the afternoon, I attend an open rehearsal with the New York Philharmonic and Esa-Pekka Salonen – preparing for the premiere of his piano concerto that evening. I think Salonen is my favorite orchestral composer alive today – like Stravinsky, Debussy and Sibelius all rolled into one (a century later).

Tuesday evening: Attend a concert given by the Tiffany Consort – an inspiring programme of Mendelssohn and Schumann a capella choral works.

Wednesday: Spend much of the day preparing for my San Francisco trip where I'm playing at St. Mary's, Moraga on Saturday evening. The highlight of the afternoon is a phone conversation with my quite musical British daughters, Kerensa and Miriam. Mim plays five new violin pieces down the phone and Kerensa fills me in on her latest dance performance.

Some exciting new invitations have come in recently via email and need responding to – Busch Reisinger Museum at Harvard University, St Bartholomew's Church, New York, Union Station, Cincinnati, St Ignatius Loyola, New York, Stiftskirche, Stuttgart, Germany and Westminster Abbey.

Madge and I spend a couple of hours in the late afternoon discussing the promotion and distribution of our three recently released CDs: "Dreamworld" (Recent Organ commissions (recorded at Gloucester) and a new, post-impressionist Song Cycle), "Requiem/Organ Concerto" (recorded in Blackburn Cathedral with 'Euphony', the Northern Chamber Orchestra, Greg Morris and Richard Tanner) and "Tchaikovsky 4/Schubert 8" (again recorded at Blackburn). They are sold on our website ([www.david-briggs.org.uk/!](http://www.david-briggs.org.uk/)), at concerts and now, through a distributor in the US, Albany Records. We also discuss our plans for recording Mahler 6 on our label, Chestnut Music, in the coming year.

Thursday: Continue working on the Mahler. The premiere is scheduled for 6th November in New York this year. Work also on a new Organ Work commissioned for the Opening series of the rebuilt 4-manual Klais at the Abtei, Himmerod, Germany. Three hours at Sibelius 3 music composition programme seem like ten minutes – almost like going into a parallel universe. Take the new piece to Holy Trinity Catholic in the afternoon and make some minor harmonic modifications.

Friday: An early start to the day as I've decided to take the A train to Kennedy Airport – the time it takes to get to the Airport is exactly the time it takes to listen to Pierre Cochereau playing Vierge 3, Carillon de Longpont, Berceuse and Arabesque on the Notre-Dame recording from the 1960's. I wonder how many other people on this subway train are listening to Cochereau at this very moment (and just think what they are missing!)...On the plane I spend five hours listening to 26 performances of Buxtehude *Prelude, Fugue and Chaconne*, and Vierge *Feux Follets/Toccata*, played by young organists from all over the world hoping to

take part in the Nurnberg International Organ Competition in June. As Chairman of the Jury this year, my job is to assess the preliminary, CD round. All of the competitors are anonymous. An encouragingly high overall standard has made it a pleasant task and I look forward to hearing the 16 players who make it through to the competition.

Arrive in San Francisco – amazing weather (83 degrees and DRY heat). I'm staying in the monastery – the food was superb and the homemade port was flowing ceaselessly!

I'm delighted with the 1997 three manual Austin and spend a couple of hours registering the organ. The programme is the same that I played in Washington National Cathedral several weeks ago. I register the concert in about two hours. Sometimes (depending on the programme, and the instrument) it can take up to 4 times as long. I usually clear the generals I have been allocated, and then set the divisionals in a conventional crescendo format. Often in the USA, I've found that organists are much less conventional in their use of the divisionals – so you can find Swell Tutti on Swell 2, Celestes on Swell 7 etc. The setting of the generals depends always on the piece – but often the positioning of the pedal general pistons has a bearing on what goes on. Sometimes it's useful to hit a pedal general which is very nearby – rather than having to search somewhere high and virtually out of reach. Unfortunately steppers aren't very common over here, only independent sequencers (which I avoid like the plague!). When all is done for the concert, I find some nice 8ft Harmonic Flutes and Bourdons on which to learn the Scherzo of Vierne 3 for a recording at S Sernin, Toulouse in October. The biggest focus at this stage is always finding the best, most streamlined fingering and pedaling -- to promote the 'easy life' later on. I sometimes play each bar 4 times in succession, slowly but always in rhythm, and with accuracy. I never practice at a speed which I can't manage. Often I'll start in the middle, or near the end and gradually work backwards. Initially I try and practice slowly more than I need to – so that when I come back to it a few days later, some of it has stuck in the memory.

Saturday: Wake up around 4.30am (which is 7.30am in New York). Dealing with circadian rhythm changes (i.e. jetlag) is still the most problematic part of being 'on the road' a lot.. I do some practice in the morning, both for the recital in hand and working further ahead. In the afternoon, I'm taken up Mount Diablo, to the East of San Francisco. I marvel at the road holding, going round hairpin bends at a speed which I wasn't really expecting. I guess it's the monks' power of prayer – and German automobile engineering (we're in a Mercedes open-top). Back to the monastery for a rest, dinner (no alcohol, alas!) and then the concert at 8pm. I played all transcriptions: Walton, Mahler, Grieg, Rimsky-Korsakoff and Ravel – followed by an Improvised Symphony in the second half. I asked them about the earthquakes – and they said it was just part and parcel of living in part of the world. St Mary's College is built directly over a fault line – nice of them to tell me

that, I thought. They said they get earthquakes every day (most v. small) – but three weeks ago there was a “sizeable jolt” which threw books off bookshelves.

They are about 4 miles from Oakland – where they had to close the cathedral after the 1989 quake.

Sunday: My 10.15 a.m. return flight to New York takes about 6 hours. I respond to more emails and clear my Inbox, and listen to a Ravel Orchestral Disc. Then I watch Mahler 6 conducted by Leonard Bernstein. In the ‘extra feature’, Bernstein is interviewed about conducting Mahler. I’m spellbound as he explains, cigarette in hand, that in conducting Mahler, “every measure, every crescendo, every diminuendo, must be performed at full intensity”.

An uneventful flight (no turbulence at all, *very* boring) and we land at JFK at 9.45pm.

2. What are your principle philosophies of performance?

Nowadays I only play pieces which I really love, and I always try to communicate to the audience that “look, guys, I think this really is the best piece of music that’s ever been written”. From a technical point of view, I try and balance making things as streamlined and dovetailed as possible with taking some risks and being impulsive. It made a big impact on me when, as a 12 year old, I heard the great cellist Paul Tortelier say in a masterclass “The biggest crime is to be boring”. If there are a few wrong notes, I always mentally try to move on – reboot my computer, so to speak. I loved it when the great Lionel Rogg once explained to me, in a competition de-briefing, “I never mind playing a few wrong notes because I know I will have made someone *happy!*”.

Regarding authenticity, I think it’s very important to keep a clear overview of the sweep of the music not get too involved in *minutiae*. Having said that, I sometimes use some elements of baroque fingering and pedaling, coming from having played quite a few historic instruments in Holland and Germany, but more often say to myself “well, just try to make it sound as it would if played by a baroque oboist, cellist, or whatever”. I’m big on listening to other musicians/singers and learning how I can make my own performances more convincing and expressive.

3. What are your philosophies of improvisation?

I would say that you're always trying to give the illusion of a written piece, but the sheer spontaneity and ephemeral nature of the art can give a good improvisation an edge over the performance of a previously-composed piece. Most jazz musicians would certainly agree with that statement. I have always found it easier to improvise than to play written pieces, for some reason. Maybe it's to do with the way the human brain is hard-wired. It has something to do with being totally at home with the musical language which surrounds you and then being able to re-fashion it, subconsciously and at will. Good improvisers have usually always been so, rather like good composers. It's a matter of gift, environment and (of course) training. There are certainly parallels between good improvisers and good mimics ... in terms of in depth assimilation of syntax, grammar and characterisation. I also believe that the ability to improvise well helps you to 'lift the music off the surface of the page' when performing repertoire. That can make a very big difference.

4. What are your views on Organ Building?

My favourite instruments are in France and my favourite organ in the world has always been the Grand Orgue of Notre-Dame de Paris.

I used to be sceptical about people who talked endlessly about mechanical action – but the more instruments I have played, the more I realise that the type of action can actually make a big difference. There is nothing like the reality of a finely-balanced mechanical action. I remember an interview with Glenn Gould talking around the issue of piano vs. harpsichord, when playing Bach. He said that he always chose piano, because of the sensitivity of a modern Steinway action – it allowed him to express much more of what he wanted to say in the music. Having said that, of course many very large instruments would not be so good (or even possible) with mechanical action. Barker lever (and the Servo-assisted pneumatic action, patented by Fisk) can also be very satisfying.

In general terms, I think the best instruments are those with very well-blended pipework and an action which is fast, both in attack and release. The best electric action instrument I've played (and every day for 8 years) is at Gloucester Cathedral. That is almost as responsive as a mechanical action instrument.

5. Apart from Notre-Dame, which are your other favourite instruments, and why?

I particularly enjoy playing on the big, symphonic instruments over here in the USA. There is something about the banks and banks of American strings which I love, especially with liberal use of octave couplers! With so many swell boxes, it's possible to make virtually seamless crescendo and diminuendi, especially good for transcriptions.

I mentioned the Gloucester organ, earlier on. This is a really wonderful sound, greatly aided, of course, by the unique 8-second acoustic. Gloucester had a big influence on the way I played (particularly improvised). It is a very eclectic instrument, playing all styles with a good integrity. Bach sounds marvellous on it, as does French Classical, Romantic and Modern music. And I think it accompanies very well, as well... it's very clear for the choir to hear, and there is a lot of colour (especially if you're slightly unorthodox in the way you register!). When I left Gloucester in 2002, I thought I would miss it terribly, but that wasn't really the case. When you bond with an instrument like that over 8 years, it becomes part of you and you take it around in your imagination. But I always love going back there.

For 6 years I had the privilege of having daily contact with the Father Willis organ at Truro. I believe it's the best of the Willis's, with Salisbury and Hereford coming in a close second. Truro has the advantage of great presence in the building (owing to its excellent position). The Truro Willis has a unique character, and is so musical. It can be incredibly fiery, too – I used to liken it to a Ferrari, whereas Hereford (where I was Assistant before moving to Truro) is more like an old Bentley (more plush...).

I was Organ Scholar at King's College, Cambridge and the Harrison Organ there is marvellous at what it does best – accompanying. I think the most beautiful

organ stop in the world has to be the Claribel Flute on the Choir Organ ... pure velvet.

Recently, I've done a lot of playing in Germany and have very much enjoyed the instruments there – always in great acoustics. I really admire the organ culture in that country, too – very good publicity (colour posters, etc) and consequently sizeable, intelligent and enthusiastic audiences (including a lot of young people).

The best organ I ever played in the Southern Hemisphere was the 5-manual Hill at Sydney Town Hall – a really great experience. I remember playing a Bach Fugue on forty-four 8fts, all coupled. Wonderfully inauthentic, but fabulous, all the same.

6. What is your favourite repertoire and what is your approach to learning and performing it?

I love playing the French Symphonic repertoire and think that is suited well to my temperament (whatever that is!). I studied with Jean Langlais for two years in Paris and that was a marvellous experience. Langlais was incredibly fussy and fastidious (I remember spending 30 minutes on the first 8 bars of the Franck *Fantaisie en la*) – but also very affirming. He was a genius at improvisation pedagogy – we worked a lot at that, concentrating on modes, harmony, form, counterpoint etc. People used to say that Langlais 'could make stones improvise'. The other thing he said to me once was that "it takes fifteen years to learn how to improvise". I think he's probably about right.

7. Who are your favourite composers, and why?

I think the composer I really couldn't live without is Gustav Mahler. His symphonies are so life-giving and enriching. One of the greatest experiences I ever had was playing the Viola in Mahler 5, during my four years in the National Youth Orchestra. I became very emotionally involved – it was inescapable! Later I transcribed (and recorded) Mahler 5 for organ, and am now engaged on a

similar project – Mahler 6th. Other composers who are very important to me are Debussy, Ravel, Poulenc, Scriabin and Strauss. I actually much prefer going to Symphony Concerts than Organ Recitals (maybe I shouldn't be saying that in this magazine!) and we try and hear the New York Philharmonic as often as possible. Recently I went to a rehearsal of Scriabin 'Le divin poeme' with the Philharmonic and Riccardo Muti – I was transported to another world

8. Who have been the most major influences on you? Who are your heroes?

Pierre Cochereau. Cochereau was Organist of Notre-Dame from 1955-1984 and a very generous human being, as well as generous musician and (in my opinion) there has never been anyone come close to him as an improviser. I spent eleven years transcribing many of his famous improvisations from Notre-Dame, which were released on the Solstice label. His harmonic style, although closely related to that of his teachers Dupré and Duruflé, was so original and so evolved. For twenty years, I listened to Cochereau every day. Although I never met Pierre Cochereau, I feel quite close to him in spirit,

9. Do you have any words of wisdom for beginning organists?

Make sure that you have quite a good piano technique before starting the organ. I know that's a contentious point, but I think it's critical – especially if you want to go above a certain level of expertise. The other thing is to learn how to practice well – set yourself continual and obtainable challenges and make your time at the instrument as efficient as possible. I do about 75% of my practice on three or four coupled 8fts, and then enjoy playing louder once I can play the notes. Practising with the metronome can also be very hypnotic – except that the metronome I have here in New York never seems to keep with what I'm playing!

In an ideal world, it's good to learn a piece several months before you play it in public, and then put it to bed for a few weeks. Mind you, like most people, I'm always 'up to the wire' so that approach doesn't always seem to fall into my lap. Interestingly, I've found that British Organists are the best in the world at coping with putting things together at the last minute. In the USA, organists seem to take much longer to get things under their belt. It's interesting that Pierre Cochereau

once said that he found it very difficult to sight read.... I guess it's all a question of pedagogical emphasis. In the UK, Organ Scholars have to play (and learn) a different Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis every day.

10. What made you want to start the organ?

My grandfather was a very well-known organist in Birmingham and I used to go and sit on the bench with him (aged 6). His teacher was G D Cunningham, the famous predecessor of Thomas Trotter and Sir George Thalben-Ball. My dad used to take me to New Street Station to see the Deltics (in the sermon!). When I was nine, I became a chorister at St Philip's Cathedral, Birmingham, under Roy Massey. It was at that period that I really decided I wanted to be an organist. Roy's marvellous playing (and also the brilliant improvisations of John Pryer, the Assistant Organist) really inspired me. I even had some planks of wood either side of pedals on our grand piano at home made out with pedal pistons inscribed – including (of course) Bombarde 32' (reversible) and Full Tubas (solo). Sad, or what?!

When I was a Music Scholar at Solihull School, I came under the influence of Colin Edmundson, who had been a Domus Music Scholar at Magdalen College, Oxford, under Bernard Rose. Colin was an extremely inspirational teacher, who encouraged a strong sense of rigour and single-mindedness. At one point there were four schoolboy FRCOs at Solihull – surely something of a record.

Finally, when I was sixteen, I studied in London with Richard Popplewell, at the Chapel Royal. Richard was a fabulous and very generous teacher as well as an extremely kind person. I lost my father when I was sixteen, and Richard in many ways took over. I owe him a huge amount.