The organs of the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire

The Royal Birmingham Conservatoire is in the process of installing a fleet of exceptional organs. This article charts the journey from aspiration to achievement, highlighting the world-class instruments now shaping student training, performance, outreach, and international recognition in one of Europe's most exciting organ departments.

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The Royal Birmingham Conservatoire has a long-standing reputation for producing organists of the highest calibre, and a rich history of organ culture. But for years there was one major problem: suitable instruments – or, rather, a lack of them. There was always an aspiration that the quality of the teaching would be matched with responsive and inspiring organs. But, despite some modest acquisitions over the years, the Conservatoire was sadly unable to realise this dream. The arrival of an excellent new organ in St Chad's Cathedral (built by Walker in 1994) was a significant help for students and staff. But it was the move to a beautiful new building in 2017 which focused efforts to do something big. A major step was the Conservatoire's commitment to building a dedicated organ studio, to which organists would have round-the-clock access. It was a blank canvas. But there remained a problem: money – or, rather, a lack of it...

The first signs of a new dawn for in-house organ provision were thanks to a very generous donation from the Wolfson Foundation. For the first time in its history, this enabled the Conservatoire to commission an instrument of international quality and significance.

The Wolfson Organ (Flentrop Orgelbouw, 2021)

This is an organ modelled closely on North German practice, namely the 1698 Arp Schnitger organ in Dedesdorf, Germany. Unique in the UK for the precision of its stylistic parentage and lack of compromise, this instrument has allowed organ students to learn first-hand about performing the North German organ repertoire, including the earlier works of J. S. Bach.

Hauptwerk (CD–d'")	
Principal	8
Gedact	8
Octava	4
Nasat	3
Octava	2
Hinterwerk (CD–d'")	
Quintadena	8
Gedact	4
Quinta	3
Waltfloit	2
Siefloit	$1^1/_2$
Sexquialtera	II
Mixtur	IV
Dulcian	16
Trommet	8
Vox Humana	8
Pedal (CD–d')	
Untersatz	16
Posaune	16
Trommet	4

Hinterwerk + Hauptwerk (Schiebekoppel [shove coupler])	
Pedal + Hauptwerk	
Pedal + Hinterwerk	
Tremulant	
Tuned to sixth comma meantone temperament; pitch A440Hz @ 18° Celsius	

This organ has been widely praised by all who have heard and played it. It is a major addition to the UK organ scene, and an exceptionally fine instrument by any standard. It demands a finely honed and specific technique from the player if it is to sound at its optimum. The rewards can be beautiful, tactile sounds, supported by a gently flexible wind supply. The traps for the uninitiated are unformed pipe speech, bounced pallets, and gasping, unsteady wind… Cliché though it may be, the organ itself is, in this instance, a superlative teacher!

Such a generous gift set a hope that other instruments envisaged for specific areas of organ playing and study could be commissioned. It seemed, though, that might be just a pipe dream. The RBC was therefore thrilled to receive a substantial, multi-million pound donation from an anonymous source which would fulfil this long-held ambition of commissioning a fleet of world-class organs.

It was clear the first priority was for an instrument in the studio in strong contrast to the Wolfson Organ. This would enable the teaching and practice of a wide range of the repertoire. The only remaining questions focused on its stylistic provenance. Would the second new organ take its inspiration from the nineteenth or twentieth/twenty-first centuries? And what nationality of organ culture should be reflected? The first question was more easily answered, as the generous donation would also allow for a large, contemporary concert organ in the Conservatoire's Bradshaw Hall, so the obvious choice for the Juliet organ was the rich legacy of nineteenth-century organ culture.

The Juliet Organ (William Drake Ltd, 2024)


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Great	
Open Diapason	8
Keraulophon	8
Flauto Traverso	8
Principal	4
Twelfth	$2^2/_3$
Fifteenth	2
Cremona	8
Swell	
Violin Diapason	8
Stop Diapason	8
Gamba	8
Voix Celeste	8
Flauto Traverso	4
Flageolet	2
Mixture	3 rks [with tierce]
Cornopean	8
Oboe	8
Coupler manual	
Pedal	
Bourdon	16
Bass Flute	8 [by extension]
Trombone	16
Couplers	
Swell to Great	
Swell Suboctave to Great	
Swell to Pedals	
Great to Pedals	
Manual compass	CC–c3 (61 notes)
Pedal compass	CC–g1 (32 notes)
6 Great pistons & 6 Swell pistons, duplicated by toe pistons	
6 Toe pistons to the Pedal	
6 General pistons and General cancel	
5 Reversible pistons and toe pistons	
999 levels of general piston memory	
16 levels of divisional piston memory	
Stepper, operating the General pistons in sequence	
Balanced swell pedal	
Tuned to equal temperament; pitch A440Hz @ 20° Celsius	

A German or French Romantic organ would ideally have a larger specification than the space permits in order to render its repertoire convincingly. Likewise, German music on a French organ, or vice-versa, is a strong mix of flavours which doesn't always work.

English organs of the time, on the other hand, tend to sound well in more intimate settings. The other advantage, given our situation, is that English instruments fused stylistic traits of both their German and French cousins. This makes their tonal qualities highly suitable for teaching a wide range of Romantic music. Our choice to model the Juliet Organ on the best English organs of the time gives the instrument a strong tonal integrity and a wonderful flexibility; it also allows us to present something of great interest to our overseas students.

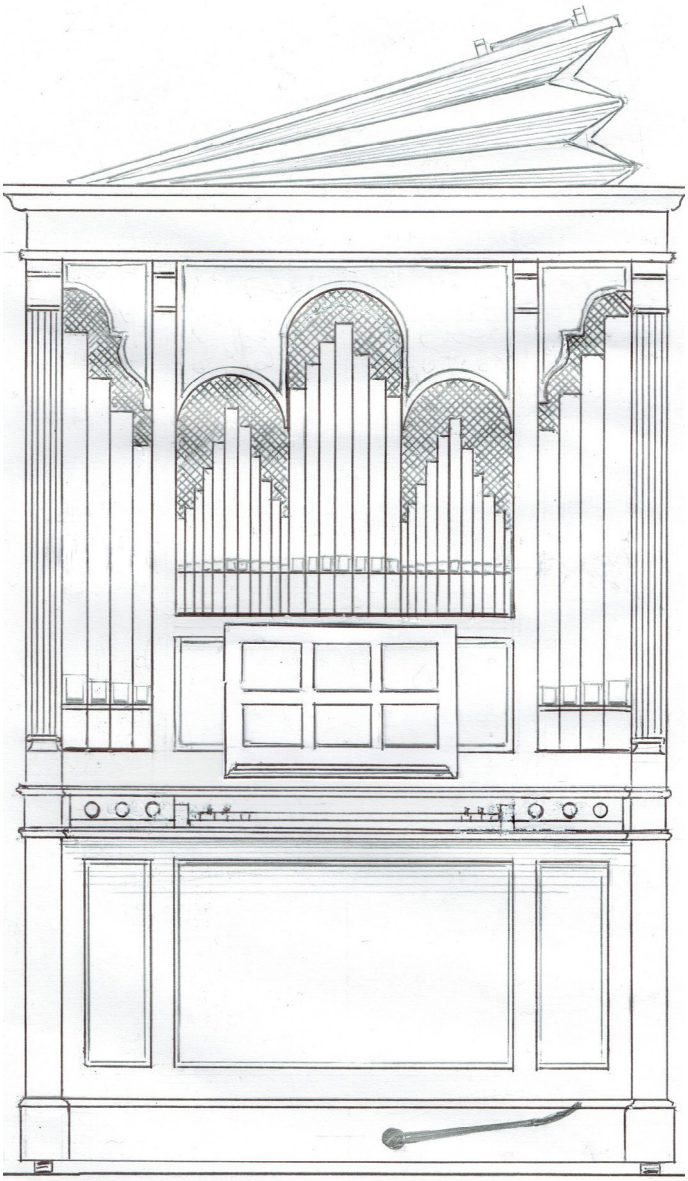
We realised at an early stage that this organ would be doing duty for a range of music wider than the nineteenth century. For this reason, we decided to expand the key compass and equip it with modern playing aids. The extended key compass took us to 61 manual keys and 32 pedal keys. The extra keys would allow for the comfortable and uncompromised rehearsal of various parts of the twentieth-century canon. The inclusion of modern playing aids and the addition of a coupler manual mean that organ students can prepare effectively for performances on larger concert and cathedral organs. Neither of these departures from our stylistic model compromise the distinctive soundworld of the Victorian era that the Juliet Organ captures so brilliantly!

Given our shared commitment to base the Juliet Organ on the best Victorian practice, Joost de Boer (MD of William Drake Ltd) was keen to identify specific models for inspiration. While the firm has restored instruments by master Victorian builders such as Gray & Davison and Thomas Elliot, their experience with William Hill's work was felt to be particularly appropriate for our studio. Hill's work would often combine the older English qualities of sweetness and understatement with a larger palette and scope for power more typical of his contemporaries. By happy coincidence, Hill also built the important flagship organ at Birmingham Town Hall in 1837: an organ on which Mendelssohn and many other famous musicians performed during their visits to the city.

As a younger man, Joost was entranced by the 1882 John Nicholson organ in his hometown of Schagen, the Netherlands. In another remarkable coincidence, this was an organ originally built for a church in Worcester, not far from Birmingham. Worcester's most famous son, Elgar, makes a further connection: he was appointed Visitor to the School of Music at the Birmingham & Midland Institute in 1902, which later evolved into the RBC. So, 122 years later, we selected the first movement of his *Sonata* to inaugurate the Juliet organ! Having been transplanted to Schagen, Nicholson's organ was restored by the Drake firm in 2015. Joost relished the chance to recreate some of its beautiful and distinctive sounds, and the RBC Juliet Organ offered him this exciting opportunity.

All these tonal capabilities are compromised if the key actions do not respond to the player's touch, not least in an organ primarily envisaged for education. The Drake team have excelled here, with wonderfully sensitive actions and a pleasing variety of weights available (aided by the couplers) to focus on different aspects of organ technique.

The Lady of Clare Organ (William Drake Ltd, 2025)



Compass CC, DD, EE, FF, GG, AA–c4 [45 notes]	
Open Diapason	8
Stop Diapason	8
Principall	4
Nineteenth Bass	$1^{1}/_{3}$
Twelfth Treble	$2^{2}/_{3}$
Fifteenth	2

Tuned to fifth (syntonic comma) meantone temperament; pitch A440Hz @ 20° Celsius

The new Lady of Clare instrument is a small but very significant organ, primarily envisaged for sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century English repertoire, which is some of the

world's finest keyboard music. As many of our organ students follow careers that encompass choral directing as well as organ playing, engaging with the intricacies of this style is doubly apt. The choral music of Byrd *et al* is at the heart of many English choir and cathedral music lists, and organists will often accompany such repertoire in their regular duties.

The Italian school of the same era can be realised on it with integrity and conviction: the choice of wooden pipes throughout the instrument links the Italian *organo di legno* (literally 'wooden organ') and English domestic organ tradition in soundworld, concept, and raw material. The English Civil Wars and changing tastes both played their part in the disappearance of native organs from our chosen period. While the organs might now be the subject of conjecture, the music associated with them is very much alive and at the heart of European traditions. Here was an opportunity to create boldly something new and appropriate, undaunted by the scant evidence.

The recreation of the 'Wetheringsett' organ in 2001, by Martin Goetze and Dominic Gwynn, reveals some fascinating aspects about organ playing of the time. The very high pitch reminds us that Tudor organists would have transposed accompaniments as a matter of course to match the choir's pitch (itself between a semitone and a tone higher than A440). This presented us with a difficult question: as we were building a non-transposing organ, did we choose this Tudor pitch or settle for the slightly lower modern standard of A440? However attractive the notion, there were various problems with adopting the original pitch standard as suggested by the Wetheringsett organ (and there is no compelling evidence to confirm how widespread this was in England, pitch not being standardised until the early twentieth century). Such a pitch would be 'between the cracks', rendering it difficult to coordinate with other groups of musicians. In our times, nearly every musician can expect A440 as a standard pitch and adapt to it, even in the context of historical performance with its myriad of different pitch standards. As all the other organs are A440 (following similar processes of deduction), it was decided that the Lady of Clare would follow suit!

We know that earlier English and Italian organs were sometimes made with entirely wooden pipes (the so-called *organo di legno* referred to above). In England, we can see later instances of this wooden tradition in the organ at Knole House, Kent. Here is an instrument traceable back to 1605, but altered over the course of time. It is entirely made from oak. The sweet and gentle sound of wooden pipes struck us as especially apt for use in a practice room, with sustained use at close quarters, and a clear contrast to the bold sounds of the Juliet and Wolfson organs in the studio. We wished for something a little larger than the Knole organ, to give the full (albeit modest) range of tone known to Byrd's generation. A slightly larger specification would also provide something of the additional higher-pitched stops, to realise the Italian repertoire to greater effect.

As the organ is a creative reimagining of earlier practices, and not an historical pastiche, we have taken various creative liberties. The case design is Italianate, with its striking, unadorned Roman arches. The drawstops are of brass. While these may not have been found on our historical model (although they do appear on later organs by Snetzler and Green), they are a durable choice. Moreover, they form an elegant aesthetic connection to the Juliet Organ's brass pistons when the two organs are side-by-side. The new organ is mobile, and the sturdy castors will enable it to travel (primarily) the short distance between a dedicated practice room and the organ studio. In the practice room, students can access the instrument for study while the Juliet and Wolfson organs are being used. In the studio, the organ can be enjoyed in concerts, masterclasses, and workshops by a larger audience. It can then form a trinity of world-class instruments in the same room, covering a vast spread of the organ repertoire!

The George Cadbury Organ (Niels Klop, 2024)

Manual I (CC–g3)	
Principal	8
Gedackt	8
Octaaf	4
Manual II (CC–g3)	
Fluit does	8
Rohrfluit	4
Nasard	3
Pedal (CC–f1)	
Subbass	16
II–I	
I–II	
I–Ped	
II–Ped	
Tuned to equal temperament; pitch A440Hz @ 20° Celsius	


Bradshaw Hall

The Klop practice organ is a most generous donation from the Cadbury Foundation to join the stock from the previous building (see below). It lives in a practice room situated in the Organ Department's corridor (located behind the organ studio, with the Historical Performance Department as our neighbours and colleagues). The wooden pipes, excellently responsive action, and avoidance of higher stops (a colourful solo Nazard aside) make for a perfect practice instrument. The choice of manual couplers (II to I, and the less typical I to II) allows for a variety of different weights, which is very useful in practice and teaching.

The Tunku Sarina Organ (forthcoming)

While the funds are fully committed for this exciting new organ, the complex procurement process is still underway. Following acoustical tests and structural investigations, the organ will sit in the RBC's flagship concert space, The Bradshaw Hall, in two cases cantilevered either side of the stage. A moderately large, symphonically inspired, electric-action instrument with 40-50 stops, it will have a mobile console (stored off-stage when not in use). This organ will serve various functions: to perform and teach organ repertoire primarily from the twentieth century onwards; to join orchestras and choirs as required in major repertoire (such as Elgar, Strauss, Fauré, Poulenc, etc.); and, finally, to expand our educational outreach. Further details of the scheme will be announced in due course.

Existing practice organs

Three practice organs were moved from the previous building, and occupy dedicated practice rooms. Two were built by **Kenneth Tickell** in 1993, with the specifications of 8′ 4′ / 8′ 4′ and 8′ 2′ / 8′ 4′ (with the usual three couplers by hitchdown pedals). With only a modest amount of restorative work, they are amazingly resilient and very useful instruments on which students undertake much of their 'nuts and bolts' practice. There is also an instrument by **J. W. Walker** (1983: 8′ 2′ / 8′ 4′ plus manual coupler – pedals permanently coupled to the lower manual), and an itinerant box organ (**Kenneth Tickell**, 1993: 8′ 4′ 2′).

The primary role of all the new organs is for the training and practice of talented young students with whom it is our privilege to work at the RBC. The instruments are used for many hours of lessons, practice sessions, and masterclasses, along with the iconic 1994 Walker at St Chad's Cathedral. The studio organs have also been enjoyed by the wider community, though, and we believe that this is an important part of our mission and outreach. We instigated free public concerts, beginning with week-long inauguration festivals for both the Wolfson and Juliet

organs. Subsequently, we welcomed some of the world's finest organists (including Nathan Laube, Pier Damiano Peretti, and Erwan le Prado) to perform on both the current studio organs in an exhilarating Spring 2025 season. We intend to continue this initiative.

An exciting new venture has been our outreach programme in local primary schools, commencing in January 2025. We believe that this is unique in any conservatoire, as our scheme is focused on training interested students to be the project animateurs as well as the performers. Leading such workshops is an important aspect of the current UK music profession. It gives a new generation of school children the chance to experience an instrument which many of them have not encountered, and offers the chance for a community little exposed to classical music to experience its beauty and magic. Our philosophy has been to present the musical heritage of the organs without apology or condescension (whereas other well-meaning outreach schemes tend to dilute the experience with pop music and film scores). It has been extremely well-received to date, and we look forward to its future iterations.

The launch of the outreach programme has been the subject of a short film commissioned by the RBC, and due for release in Summer 2025. The film outlines, in the course of its 20 engaging minutes, some of the human aspects of the building of the Juliet organ, its usage, and the community engagement it enables. We hope that it will document this unique musical instrument and some of the creative uses to which it will be put.

We are keen to explore further ways in which the organs can sing to a new audience, benefiting the students and opening their eyes to future professional possibilities of evangelising. We will be launching a YouTube channel in due course to promote all the organs, the students, the institution, and organ art itself. The existing Juliet and Wolfson organs will be shared with an international audience, along with the upcoming Lady of Clare and Tunku Sarina organs (the latter of which is intended to offer wider engagement through digital interfaces via its mobile console).

From an acclaimed department with barely any resources, we have become one of the most recognised organ schools in Europe, offering access to a fleet of exceptional instruments. The most generous donations of beautiful organs have been game-changing. It is a legacy which will inspire and potentially transform those who play and hear them.

If you'd like to keep in touch with our new organs (and much more besides!), we are on:
Facebook: Royal Birmingham Conservatoire Organ Department
Instagram: @rbc.organ
Twitter/X: @RbcOrgan

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Daniel Moult is an internationally acclaimed concert organist, film presenter, and recording artist. Based in London, Daniel performs regularly and leads masterclasses throughout the UK, Europe, Asia and Australia. He is the presenter and performer on various film box-sets and recordings, most recently *The Great Toccata* (Fugue State Films). He directs the highly acclaimed Organ Department at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, and has spearheaded the commissioning of five new organs at the Conservatoire, acting as main consultant for the instruments. He has broadcast frequently on BBC television and radio, and has recorded for various labels including Fugue State, Signum, Regent, and Sony BMG.
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Nicholas Wearne's recent solo performances include appearances on the historical instruments of St Wenzel, Naumburg, and Merseburg Cathedral (Merseburger Orgeltage). He is Senior Tutor in Organ Studies at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, and a sought-after educator on specialist courses. Previously he held positions at New College and the University Church, Oxford; St Mary's Episcopal Cathedral, Edinburgh; and St Martin-in-the-Fields, London. An experienced broadcaster on the BBC and other national platforms, he has been involved in multiple critically acclaimed recording projects, and performed with many leading ensembles in venues including the Barbican, the Concertgebouw, and the Wigmore Hall.