

Artistic Director - Spanish National Concert Hall in Madrid (2007 - 2008)

Creating new audiences for the organ - *The 'Organ Project' - its origins, ethos & design*

Text written by Geoffrey Walker, UK



In 2007 the Spanish National Orchestra and Choir signed a contract with the 27 year old Raul Prieto Ramirez for a very special assignment. The audiences for organ concerts in the National Concert Hall in Madrid had dwindled to just a handful of people in recent years. So poor was the situation that the promoters were resolved to stop the series of concerts at the earliest opportunity.

Just when all hope was lost, the name of Raul Prieto Ramirez came to the attention of the authorities responsible for organizing the events at the Auditorio Nacional. Raul's reputation for building large and appreciative audiences at his performances throughout Spain had reached Madrid, and the Directors of the National Concert Hall asked Raul to create and develop a project whose final result would be a loyal and growing audience for their organ events.

The programme developed by Raul is called the *'Organ Project'* and it comprises a number of integrated areas:

Three different educational activities for children, directed by Raul himself and using several collaborators.

A series of informal concerts for interested music-lovers, linked by common 'themes', in which Raul plays, talks about the organ and its music and answers a wide range of questions put to him by audience members.

A great variety of concert designs that integrate artistic light and video projection with well-developed concert programmes (agreed with the invited artist) - giving a fully-rounded annual series with sense of unity from the first to last activity of each year.

Raul himself is also the main organist for the National Orchestra and Choir concerts.

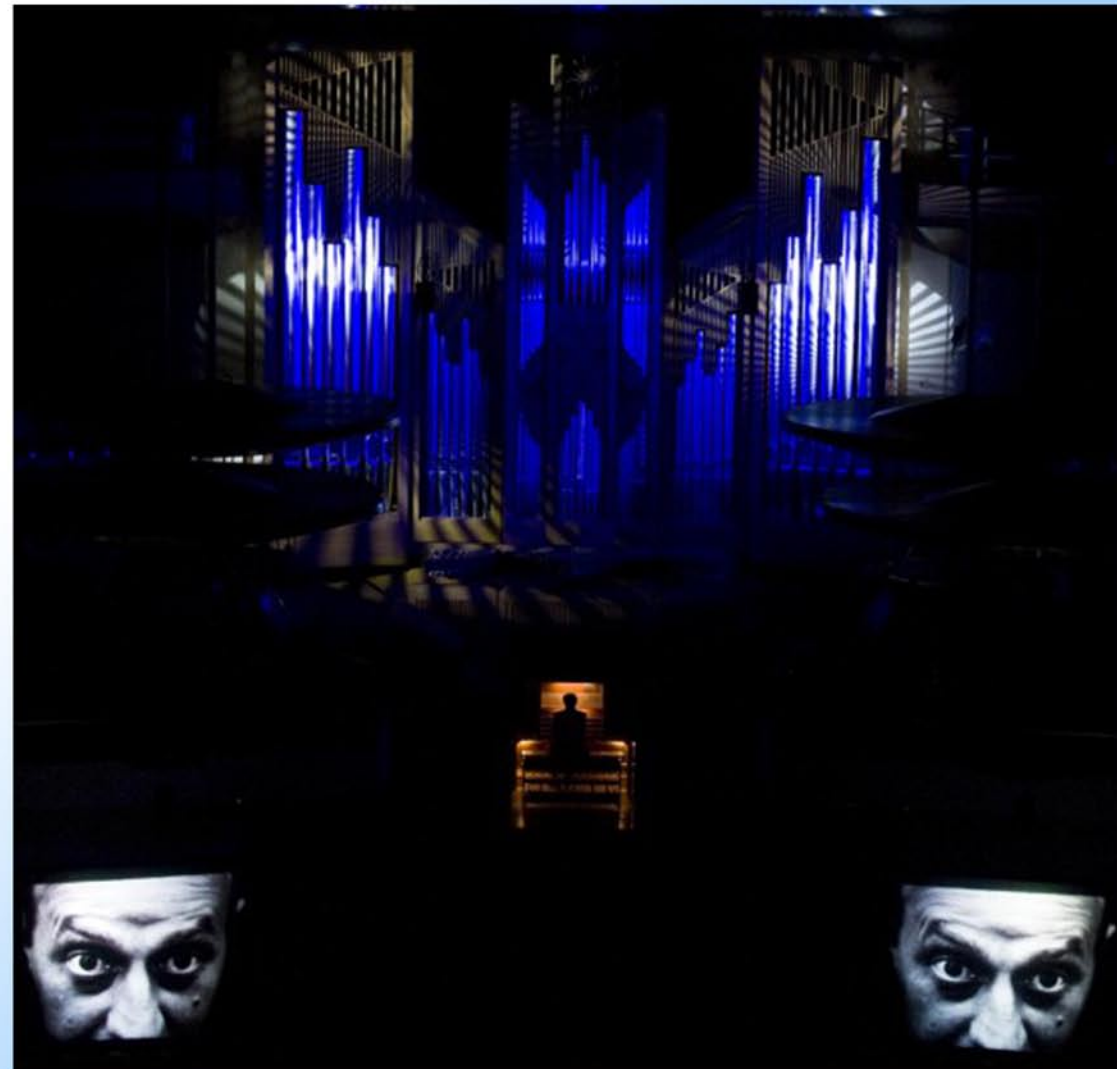
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Raul personally oversees all aspects of promoting the organ events – planning the publicity strategies, undertaking press and media interviews, arranging the hand bills and poster designs, preparing the programme notes for all concerts, organizing the lighting and other technical features used in the concerts, and building a close relationship with the newly-won audiences through the National Orchestra's special Blog at its website.

Within the first few months of its existence the Organ Project is proving to be extraordinarily successful –audience numbers have multiplied by more than 20 times the previous attendances, literally hundreds of children have been able to explore and work around the musical and technical aspects of the organ and, for the first time ever in Madrid, audiences have been able to talk with Raul during live concerts as he answers the questions put to him by the interested members of the public.

The audiences, in turn, have been hugely appreciative of the Organ Project series – demanding encores at every organ concert (the first time for many years that this has happened at the Madrid auditorium). Raul clearly is succeeding in making friendly and welcoming organ events in which audiences feel artistically involved.



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Educational Projects

Raul Prieto Ramirez has a long history and much experience of working with children on music for the organ. He is an artist totally convinced of the value of music as an expression of culture within society. Avoiding any tendency to judge one musical tradition against another, he presents the organ as the most complex and fascinating musical instrument developed in human history – and he explores this through music written for the instrument and new music developments of nowadays.

Raul's approach is, however, far from the dry explanations of music played or tedious histories of the 'normal' concert format. Instead, Raul gets a real sense of active 'hands-on' involvement from the children. Through three sessions (two at school and one at Madrid Concert Hall) the children build the activities themselves –within Raul's overall supervision and educational plan:

All Aboard! I

All Aboard! II

Cutting a path through a forest of pipes

All Aboard! I & II

Here the National Concert Hall in Madrid becomes a big sailing ship in the imaginations of primary schoolchildren from the Madrid community. Through three sessions the pupils, like pirates of old, prepare a plan to 'take possession' of the Hall space during a public concert – by actively participating in the concert and its decoration, format and presentation. This activity becomes a sort of poetic 'repossession' of every-day experience, with music as the backcloth. It is an affirmation of the young person's ability to convert everything they do into 'art' – to gain possession of its reality through converting it into an object of their imagination. The intention of the project is to enhance motivation and learning in the pupils through their own expressive channels.



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The Project: January to March - 'Naturalism' in Buxtehude and the discovery of expression in childhood

written by Raúl Prieto Ramírez

Children openly have a special gift, that we adults hide, of converting everything that surrounds them into expressions of themselves. The animism typical of preadolescence is a projection of themselves onto their environment. Why not place a piece of music in that environment and invite them to take possession of it in their own way? Why not let them appropriate the experience of that piece of music and give it the expressive form they feel fits it best? In this way each child sets the limits of their own participation and claims ownership of their reaction to the musical activities. As a result, the National Orchestra enters the child's life in a playful and attractive form, allowing them to choose more freely, and in the future, what kind of music they want to irrigate their inner 'garden'.

Buxtehude's Prelude, Fugue and Chaconne in C major is the piece which acts as the catalyst for the imagination (and it is the first piece played in the concert programme for this project area). Through it the pupils discover music built on a foundation parted into separate sections, each one expressing different and contrasting emotions as the piece unfolds. The whole piece is organised as if it were a story or tale, each chapter of which contains a different action characterised through expressive elements which allow students to imagine a particular environment, characters, scenes, moods, narrations and so on.



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'Cutting a path through a forest of pipes'

written by Raúl Prieto Ramírez

This part of the Organ Project is designed for students in primary and secondary schools throughout the Madrid area. In this educational activity and concert the organ becomes a forest of pipes through which organist Raul Prieto Ramirez cuts a pleasing pathway - exploring the instrument's impressive structure, history and music. The great organ in the National Concert Hall, one of the most important in Spain, is the perfect vehicle on which to introduce the King of Instruments to young people.

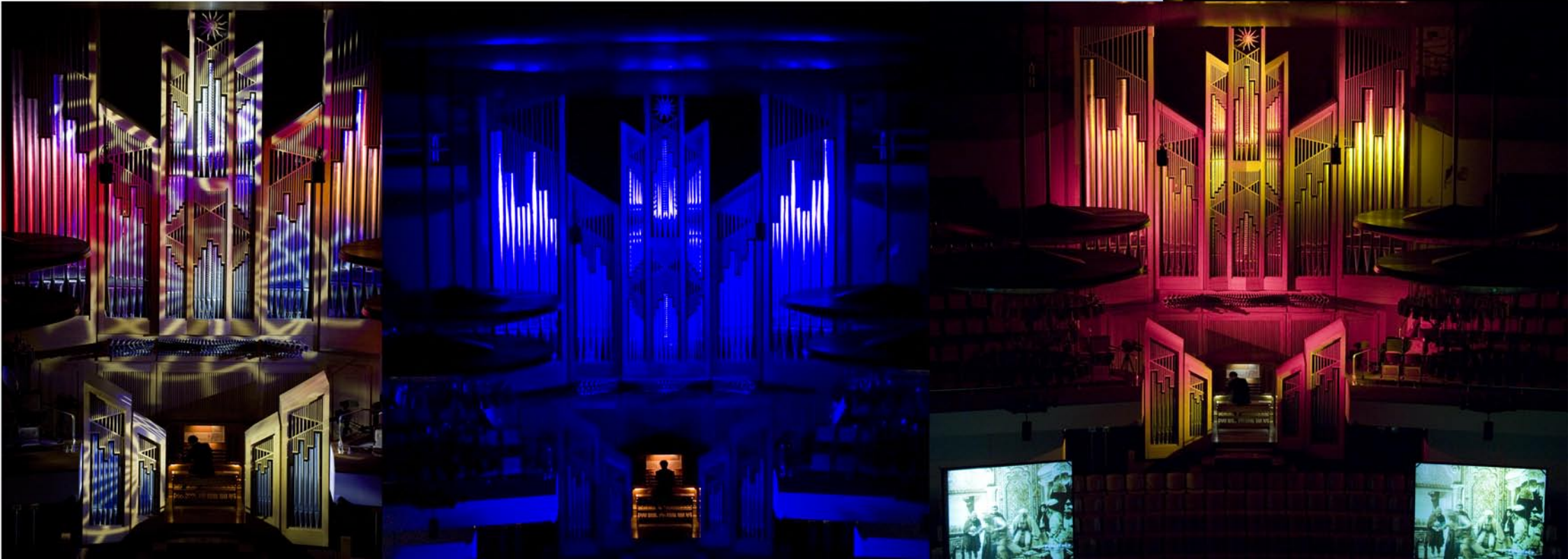


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'The new Organ Concert series

Raul's innovative approach to the arrangement of the organ concert series comes from an integrated artistic conception – helping the audience to enter into the world of imagination through the music they hear. The lighting and video screen presentations used at Madrid, discussed in advance by Raul with the visiting international solo musicians, deepens the audience's enjoyment of the organ concerts.

Special programme designs are also linked to the programme notes specially written by Raul for the concert booklets. Again, the aim is to create at the Madrid National Concert Hall a unique audience experience – not merely 'listening' to music, but rather experiencing it as life-enhancing.



The Informal Concerts

Prepared, designed and played by Raul himself, these informal concerts are a unique way for members of the general public to find out about the organ and its music.

Every season is organized around a special theme or idea, and members of the audience are free to ask questions whenever they want through microphones situated around the concert hall. Raul plays, then answers questions and engages the audience in active discussion of the music and their reaction to it.

The result is a wonderfully relaxed and friendly format in which the audience interacts with organist and instrument in live performance.



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Press coverage and reactions

From its inauguration and first public events onwards the Organ Project has been greeted very favourably by the press. The coverage of the programme of activities has been extensive – and not just in the expected music columns of newspapers and journals. A wide variety of media have been attracted to cover the success story with headlines such as ‘Something new is happening around the organ at Madrid Concert Hall’.

The press reviewers and journalists seem to be impressed by Raul’s youthful energy, clear focus and professional skills. He is clearly a musician with a mission – to overturn the conventional views and prejudices about the organ amongst general concert audiences.

Raul’s impact has extended to one of the leading newspapers in Spain, ‘ABC’, who have published a whole page about his Project entitled ‘The organ comes out from the darkness’. All of this coverage confirms Raul as a major new force and leading player in the international concert scene through his work at Madrid Concert Hall and with the Spanish National Orchestra and Choir. Checking the box office statistics, and comparing it with precedent years, the audience was enlarged more than 20 times in a few months! from some tens to nearly one thousand people per concert. These dates and others in this document can be consulted to the Spanish National Orchestra and Choir authorities.

