It is noteworthy that Albéniz was the only Spanish pianist of his time to write keyboard sonatas of any enduring significance, and in fact these works cement his reputation as the greatest Spanish composer of them since Antonio Soler in the eighteenth century. The sonatas are not profound in the sense that Liszt's Sonata in B Minor is. Stylistically they can be situated closely to the many character pieces, such as the impromptus, berceuses, waltzes and mazurkas, both Albéniz and Granados composed in abundance for their own concert use. One such piece was Albéniz's *L'Automne (Valse)*, published in Barcelona and London in 1890. However, this sentimental work takes a turn towards the serious in the way Albéniz works out his themes over almost thirteen minutes of music. If the sonatas exude the atmosphere of the salon, here is a salon-style work that displays some of the erudition of the sonata.

How surprising and regrettable it is that these lovely if uncharacteristic works should have remained out of the repertoire for so long. Guinovart does not simply bring them to our attention; rather, he breathes new life into them with his sensitive mastery. An added bonus is the excellent liner notes written by Jacinto Torres, one of the leading authorities on Albéniz and the author of the definitive catalogue of his works.

Walter Aaron Clark
University of California, Riverside

Best

The Organ Music of W.T. Best

CD 1 Festival Overture in B♭ major; Concert Fantasia on Old English Airs; Andante in G major; Sonata in D minor; Adagio in F♯ minor; A Christmas Fantasy on Old English Carols; Toccata in A major; Andante Religioso in F major; Allegro Festivo in E♭ major; Introduction, Variations and Finale on 'God save the Queen'.

CD 2 Fantasia; Christmas Fantasia on Popular English Melodies; Pastorale; Sonata in G major; Andante in C major; Fantasia and Fugue in E minor; Andante in E major; Christmas Pastorale; Fantasia on a Chorale; Allegretto in B♭ major; March for a Church Festival.

Christopher Nickol *org*
Priory Records (PRCD 681; CD 1 recorded on the organ of St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin, 74 minutes; CD 2 recorded on the organ of The McEwan Hall, Edinburgh, 78 minutes; digital audio), £19.99
Notes and organ specifications included.

If it can be argued that the nineteenth century's re-establishment of high-quality cathedral music was spurred on by the life and work of S.S. Wesley (1810–1876), then so can the establishing of the concert-hall organist at the highest professional level be attributed to W.T. Best (1826–1897). Each was a passionate advocate of that in which he believed, and such passion inevitably led to them being perceived as 'characters'. They came together at one pivotal point in their lives and in the development of the nineteenth-century organ: the building of 'Father' Henry

Willis's epoch-creating 1851–55 concert organ in St George's Hall, Liverpool. Wesley was the consultant for the organ and Best the first City Organist. Interestingly each proved uneasy in the other's field. Though Best held several church appointments during his lifetime, the strength of his personality was such that he found it hard to bend his organ-playing to liturgical requirements. In his turn, Wesley was no concert organist – his opening two programmes on the Liverpool organ were 'of a severely classical character'[1] thus the Liverpool authorities astutely comprehended that someone with a more 'popular' touch was required as their City Organist. Best was appointed in 1855 and so began a remarkable 39-year stint in which his regular recitals (three per week) drew many hundreds of listeners to enjoy a repertoire considered by his enthusiastic supporters[2] to consist of about five thousand pieces. Best was the world's first 'orchestral' organist.

Born in Carlistle, despite some early tuition from the assistant organist at the cathedral he was largely self-taught and had none of the liturgical or university background out of which traditionally sprang British Organists. This perceived lack of background was in fact a real strength, for he avoided becoming moulded into another establishment figure, forging his keyboard technique and his taste in music from quite different sources. Learning the orchestral and piano repertoire from attending, or playing the organ in, as many concerts in Liverpool and (later) London as he could, he became acquainted with central European orchestral repertoire (principally Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Meyerbeer, Spohr, Rossini, Haydn, Weber, Mozart, Schubert and Schumann) and the core piano repertoire, including the works of Chopin. Although no great fan of European organ recitalists, believing them to be inept when it came to registration and console management, he took pains to study the works of his contemporaries and also took a lively interest in a wide range of organ composers of the previous century.

As a keyboard player he took as his model the pianist Thalberg, building his keyboard technique in imitation. In Best's *First Organ Book* (1883) he writes of the correct position of the hand; he taught his (few) pupils to play with a level wrist and straight fingers, with just the tips bent.[3] He applied the best pianoforte fingering to the organ, and, interestingly, disliked the practice of 'finger-substitution' by which organists attempt to play legato. 'In conversation he used to speak of it as "crab-like"'.[4] He also became a most adroit player of the pedals. Sir John Stainer told Levien that 'Best stood alone. I never put anyone in the same class with him. Widor might perhaps be put second to him as a player on the manuals, but only in that one respect; he could not pedal like Best, and as to registration, he was not to be considered in relation to Best.'[5] Statham remembers how that other great player, Wesley 'looked down at the pedals constantly while playing, which no-one ever saw Best do'.[6] As well as *First Organ Book*, instructional books that Best wrote were *Modern School for Organ Playing* (1853) and *The Art of Organ Playing* (1896). Despite his determination to possess and to preach a supreme technique, Best had apparently decided that four hours practice per day was sufficient for any organist.[7]

1 H. Heathcote Statham, The Organ & its Position in Musical Art (London, 1909), 217.

2 Such as Statham.

3 John M. Levien, *Impressions of W.T. Best* (London, 1932), 13.

4 Ibid., 25.

5 Ibid., 29.

6 Statham, in ibid., 26.

7 Quoted in W.L. Rushton, *Shakespeare a Lawyer*.

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Best gave up studying civil engineering and architecture (for which he retained a life-long passion) to forge a career as an organist, drawing sufficient attention to himself to cause the progressive and determined Henry Willis to invite him to London to give recitals on the highly innovative instrument his company had made for the Great Exhibition of 1851. This organ had several novel mechanical features, which Willis then patented: his version of the pneumatic ('Barker') lever to lighten the touch of all manuals coupled to the Great, the world's first pneumatic combination pistons, and the first radiating and concave pedalboard (called the 'Wesley-Willis' pedalboard – for it was Wesley's idea to apply radiativity to the concavity of the Exhibition pedalboard of Edmund Schulze). The organ and Best's playing were a sensation; the instrument was sold to Winchester Cathedral (part of it going, unsung, to Cranbrook Parish Church, Kent, where it remains), and Best was soon offered a significant London appointment as organist at the Royal Panopticon of Science and Art with its novel Hill organ, returning in triumph to Liverpool in 1855 on his appointment as City Organist.

Following on from his success at the Great Exhibition, Willis built the St George's Hall organ with 58 mechanical or pneumatic devices for controlling its 100 speaking stops. These included 'general' combinations, as well as departmental pistons to each section, reversible pedals to the principal couplers, and pneumatically balanced swell-pedals. The keyboards were brought as close together as possible (earlier mechanical-action keyboards often did not overhang one another) to allow for rapid manual changes and even 'thumbing-out' of a melody on a lower manual. A range of wind-pressures was employed, so that Willis's famous chorus and solo reeds had sufficient pressure to speak out with the scorching brilliance for which they became famed (Best in 1867 had the pressure for the Solo reeds raised from 9 inches to 22 – a fabulous pressure for the time). Willis included the pneumatic lever throughout, so that the touch was light, and included a host of semi-orchestral tonalities the voicing of which he and his rather under-appreciated brother Harry sought to perfect.

Inspired by this organ – reputed by those who knew both to be superior to its 1871 sister at the Royal Albert Hall – and to fulfil the demand for repertoire demanded by this post, Best turned to that which he knew best, the orchestral repertoire, and began to make arrangements of it for organ solo performance. In his ear was the newly fledged quasi-orchestral sound of the Willis, of which Best said to John M. Levien 'This is not an organ to play hymns and psalms on, though one could do that'.[8] He arranged works by all the composers listed earlier, plus others such as Berlioz and Gounod, entertaining and gently educating his audiences in repertoire that they had but little opportunity to hear played by an orchestra. In addition to hundreds of these orchestral arrangements, many of which were published in Best's series such as *Arrangements from the Scores of the Great Masters* (1862–74), Best produced editions of the organ music of a wide range of composers, from the Baroque – Bach (virtually the complete organ works and the '48'), Couperin, Handel (the organ concertos, also in an arrangement for solo organ, with virtuosic and idiosyncratic cadenzas, movements from oratorios, operas, and of course a complete *Messiah*), Krebs, Rameau, Scarlatti and Zipoli, through to his contemporaries such as Bossi, Chipp, Dubois, Gade, Merkel and Rheinberger. The quality of Best's playing and programming was such that major musical figures such as Ernest Newman, Thomas Beecham and Edward German were regular listeners, as was the young Henry Wood, who in his autobiography

8 Levien, *Impressions*, 16.

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describes Best as his 'ideal of a great organist'. The quality of Best's arranging also applied to his arrangements for chamber groups and string ensembles of keyboard works; Bernard Shaw speaks of Best's 'cleverly showing off the 'cellos' in the Handel Festival orchestra in an arrangement for strings of the Minuet from Handel's *Berenice*.[9]

As an aside on Best's use of the organ; lest it be thought that he viewed the instrument solely in terms of *ersatz* orchestral sonorities, in 1881 Best declared 'It is particularly necessary at the present time to urge the extreme importance of "mixture-work" artistically tempered, and of melodious sonority. No other means exists, nor can ever exist, of adding harmonious power to an organ'.[10] It is worth noting that Best's design for the organ in Bolton Town Hall (1874) specifies that the keys should be as close together as possible and that the stop-knobs should be as near the player as can be contrived. Despite Thistlethwaite's astute observation that 'Best was in danger of making all the manual divisions apart from the Great into solo departments'[11] one can observe that each department other than the Solo itself has a strong ensemble of both flues and reeds, with four mixture stops on the manuals.

With so much arranging and editing, along with his weekly recitals, it is remarkable to contemplate that Best found any time or musical inspiration for composing. He managed to find the former, and perhaps some of the latter too. His starting point remained more orchestral-inspired rather than church-inspired, and thus drew him into a range of pieces that exploit the colours of the organ dramatically and richly, without reaching for either the more 'churchy' contrapuntal techniques that Wesley would certainly have employed in his improvisations (endless fugues and so on, for which Best had no time), nor resorting to the easy populist style of his almost equally renowned near contemporary Henry Smart, with whom incidentally he was on congenial terms. Perhaps Best had neither the skill to do the former nor the easy flow to manage the latter, but, be that as it may, Best's own works fall into four main categories: 1) variation-based pieces (for which he is best known) such as *Concert Fantasia on Old English Airs*, *Concert Fantasia on a Welsh March*, *Christmas Fantasy on Old English Carols*, *Christmas Fantasia on Popular English Melodies* and *Introduction, Variations and Finale on 'God save the Queen'*; 2) single-movement works such as the Andantes, an Allegro Festivo, an Adagio, a Toccata, and an Allegretto; 3) more descriptive or atmospheric pieces such as *Pastorale*, *Christmas Pastorale*, *March for a Church Festival* and *Festival Overture*; and 4) the more substantial and complex Sonata in D minor, Sonata in G major, *Fantasia* (op. 1 – dedicated to S.S. Wesley) and Fantasia and Fugue in E minor.

In this most welcome new Priory release, organist Christopher Nickol has contrived a richly varied and well-balanced programme including all the works mentioned above except the most famous one – *Concert Fantasia on a Welsh March*, presumably because it has been recorded by others quite recently. This is a shame as I would like to have heard him play it: on the evidence of the rest of his 'Best' playing he is a doughty and persuasive advocate for Best's music.

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9 In ibid., 26.

10 W.T. Best, *Musical Standard*, quoted in Bernard Edmonds, 'Notes & Queries', *The British Institute of Organ Studies Reporter* 17/3 (Jul. 1993). Available online at http://home.freeuk.com/glandy/jul93/f793.htm (accessed 17 Nov. 2005).

11 Nicholas Thistlethwaite, *The Making of the Victorian Organ* (Cambridge, 1990), 348.

Best is imaginative: he contrives many a grand gesture, an arresting opening, a fine orchestral effect, a rich use of organ colour, quite a wide variety of variation technique (in some of which he almost anticipates Reger and even Karg-Elert). His weaknesses are his codas (he simply doesn't know how to conclude a substantial piece effectively), his melodic invention (rather introspective – little of the sunny fluent cheer of Smart), thematic development (almost non-existent), and the natural linking of one idea or passage with the next (more a matter of a succession of ideas rather uneasily bolted together). He is at his best (one can almost sense the relief) when he is varying someone else's melodies. Using popular tunes in this way at least guarantees your audience humming along with you. A careful selection of the 21 works recorded on this double CD release would nevertheless provide a pleasurable hour's listening.

I am mightily impressed with Christopher Nickol, who trained with Simon Wright, Nicholas Danby, Gillian Weir and Naji Hakim, won joint first prize at the Paisley International Organ Festival in 1990 and the audience prize (in the view of many, the most significant prize) at the 1991 St Albans International Organ Festival. Simply to learn all this music (some of it very tricky) must have taken weeks. His technique is impeccable; he projects every aspect of the scores and finds the most wondrous range of organ colours to enliven Best's notes.

The choice of organs is tempting in itself. The stentorian late Willis of 1901–2 at St Patrick's Cathedral Dublin is richly endowed with the registers Best would have used (despite J.W. Walker's misguided 1963 efforts to remove many romantic registers in favour of the then fashionable neo-Baroquery). The voicing of its orchestral flutes, strings and reeds is exquisite, recently refreshed by a Harrison & Harrison restoration. The power of its blazing Tubas and mighty Pedal reeds would have brought a smile even to Best's rather sour visage (one wonders why such a highly respected player should have been known also as a crusty, awkward, blunt, sarcastic character, but so he was). A daring choice for the second CD is the Hope-Jones / Willis / Rushworth & Dreaper instrument in the McEwan Hall, Edinburgh. This 1897 organ was probably Hope-Jones's finest, despite its awkward location. Blessed with a rich acoustic, the Pedal diaphonic 32ft and 16ft ranks blurt forth magnificently, the remaining Hope-Jones's sonorities being augmented by many ranks of fine Willis III work from 1953, to which the Swell reeds and Solo Tuba from the old St Giles' Cathedral Willis III have successfully been added. It is an organ that on paper should not work, but it does, and as its Solo and Swell contain a host of timbres suitable for orchestral use in the Best manner, it suits the repertoire like a glove.

The recorded sound of both organs is rich, well-balanced and perfectly placed in the resonant acoustics of the buildings. The CD booklet is full of information, mainly written by Christopher Nickol; I just wonder if the published Choir Organ stop list of the McEwan Hall organ is complete (at six stops it looks rather tiny). I congratulate Priory on this imaginative and worthy release. A recording of some of Best's transcriptions on the St George's Hall organ would be a delightful follow-up.

In a way Best, who had declined a knighthood, was both the first and the last of his kind. His successor as the country's leading concert organist and transcriber of music for organ was the widely travelling Edwin Lemare; with Lemare's generation intercontinental virtuoso concert tours were born – never again would a player of such stature be quite so rooted in his home turf. Let Best's epitaphs have the last word: on the unveiling of his bust in St George's Hall, Lord Derby made this tribute in the *Liverpool Daily Post*:

> Mr. Best knew music, he knew the organ, he knew literature. He cultivated all these with a refinement which, savouring of precision, conferred a classical stamp on all his achievements: but his classicism was warmed by an energy never excelled by the wildest impulses of extempore genius … The combination of force and fire and feeling with brilliant nicety and fastidious purity constituted the distinguishing glory of Mr. Best as an organist. On his gravestone in Childswell Cemetery, Liverpool is inscribed simply 'Here rests in hope the body of William Thomas Best'.[12]

Paul Hale
Southwell Minster

Mahler

Lieder und Gesänge (selection)
Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen
Fünf Rückert-Lieder
Kindertotenlieder

Stephan Genz *bar*, Roger Vignoles *pf*

Hyperion CDA67392 (73 minutes: DDD)
Notes and translations included.

Comparatively young (30 at the time of making this recording), the baritone Stephan Genz has already established himself as a major force in, among other things, the field of Lied performance. His debuts in London (1997) and New York (2000) were highly acclaimed, while his recording partnership with Roger Vignoles has included three volumes of Wolf Lieder, one of Brahms's German folk songs and a Gramophone-award-winning set of Beethoven Lieder from 1999, all but the Brahms with Hyperion. In terms of his Mahler performances, Genz seems to me to show very clearly the influence of two of his most illustrious teachers, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, whose own 1968 recording of the *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* songs with Georg Szell and the LSO has of course attained legendary status. Even in the more intimate setting of the piano version or reduction, and within the smaller structural scope of the earlier *Wunderhorn* works and others from the so-called *Lieder und Gesänge* collection sung here, Genz exudes Fischer-Dieskau-like authority and produces a highly focused and strongly projected tone quality and range of expression typical of his forbear. These characteristics are particularly evident in, for example, the folk-like 'Hans und Grete' (track 2) where the assiduous attention on the part of both performers to Mahler's surprisingly complex and constantly changing tempo, dynamic and mood indications intensifies the song's inner imagined dialogue of bravado and nostalgia, whilst also bringing home the fact that even from his early years the composer was always far from being some simple 'finespun "singer of Nature"'

12 Levien, *Impressions*, 53.

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