ANDREÆ Werckmeister’s
Benic. Cherubist, p. r. Musici und Organ, zu S. Martini
in Halberstadt
Erweiterte und verbesserte
Orgel-Probe
Oder
Eigentliche Beschreibung
Wie und welcher Gefallen man die Orgelwerke von
den Orgelmachern annehmen/prohibiren/unterfahren und
denen Kirchen liefern könne; Auch was die Verständigung
eines neuen und alten Werkes / so da zu renoviren
vorsam stünde/nichtwenigig in abge
nehmen fyn/
Nicht nur in einigen Organisten / so zu probirung
eines Orgelwerks erforder werden/zur Nachricthe: Son
dern auch den Verfechtern / so etw Organ
machen oder renoviren lassen wollten/
sehr mögliche:
Jiço von dem Arnotz sich überschien/mit gründlichen Ueberschien
densprüchig und zum Druck beforder.

Dydisburg/
In Verleugung THEODORI PHILIPPIS CALVISI,
Buchhändlers daßtih.
Anno 1698.

BuxWV 146. And no less a personage than J.S. Bach appears to have used the Orgelprobe in examining organs. Perhaps Bach learned of the treatise through J.J. Weinschläger’s colleague J.G. Walther, who was one of Werckmeister’s pupils and who, we know, owned a copy of the Orgelprobe. The treatise first appeared in 1681. It was revised for publication in 1699 under the title:

Werckmeister’s... enlarged and improved [handbook on] organ-proofing, or a detailed description of how one by which methods to accept, test, and examine organbuilders’ instruments for delivery to church; further, what must be considered in contracting for the construction of new organs or the renovation of old instruments; not only for the information of organists retained as consultants, but also for the benefit of officials contemplating the construction of new organs or the renovation of old instruments (p. viii).

The Orgelprobe addresses the entire sequence of events that normally transpired once a church decided to install a new organ, beginning with the preparation of a written contract with the organbuilder. Werckmeister strongly recommends that the church consult with an organist during the contract negotiations, lest it be taken advantage of by an unscrupulous builder. He specifically warns against stolists drawn up exclusively by the builder:

The specifications are now and then drawn up by the organbuilders themselves, in which case a multitude of small omissions often constitutes the stolist. Although those steps do not yield as many errors as the one before, the price. But the unsuspecting purchasers are already kept in the dark as to the sample fact that for the price of a single 8' stop some three 2's can be built and then some (p. 39).

Werckmeister also discovered that builders sometimes used cheaper pipe metals than those stipulated in the contract. (A favorite tactic was to use less tin for principal ranks than had been agreed on.) To protect churches against such tricks, he gives the approximate weights of a dozen or so different ranks of pipes. A rank of 8' principals, for instance, was supposed to weigh between 165 and 200 pounds.

Upon being laid in full, the builder began work. Contrary to present-day custom, most organbuilders constructed their instruments on site, that is, in the town—conceivably at the very church—where the instrument was to be installed. Once the organ was installed, an examiner was enlisted to inform the church in writing whether all the specifications of the contract had been met. Frequently, two or three examiners were hired. Werckmeister states categorically that the examiner should be an organist and not an organbuilder, since "jealousy and emotions sometimes run so high that one organbuilder cannot bear the sight of another, let alone approve the other's work" (p. 1). A conscientious examiner definitely earned his money, since he

... may have spoiled his clothing by crawling around inside the organ, and... he may have...
had to swallow not only dirt and dust but also ill-humored remarks and secret distrust. He may have incurred the overt enmity of the organ-builder for the sake of good old truth (p. 56).

The examination was not open to the public. It was attended only by the examiner, the builder, and the church's organ committee. Werckmeister emphatically claims that one or two hours are not enough time for one of these tests; it was presumably an all-day affair. Following the examination, the examiner supplied a written report to the committee. After discussing the report among themselves, the members of the committee would confront the builder—in the presence of the examiner—about any defects, and arrangements would be made for those defects to be corrected, at the builder's expense. If the builder refused to make the necessary alterations, he was expected to pay for another builder to take care of them. If all was in order, the builder might receive a bonus. To celebrate the completion of the organ as well as its successful examination, a lavish banquet was often held, with "toasts of recognition and wide-ranging and good conversation" (p. 58). We know from Bach's organ examinations that sometimes the examiner would play a public recital on the instrument, the equivalent of a dedicatory recital today.

With the instrument now tested and approved, the organ committee's work was still not done. For one thing, Werckmeister recommended that a maintenance contract be drawn up with the builder, which would cover at least the next twelve months. A more daunting proposition was to find someone to be the regular church organist. A good organ needs a good organist, says Werckmeister, and one who will delige to do minor repair work, as opposed to organists who out of vanity or fear or laziness refuse to move so much as one adjustment screw at the keyboard after a weather change; or to hook back into place a loose treble; or merely to remove a speck of dust or dirt that may have gotten into this or the other reed pipe (p. 85).

Werckmeister also relays against organists who read only tablature and play the same set of memorized pieces for every service, year round. A good organist, according to Werckmeister, is one who can improvise on chorale tunes and realize a figured bass. Werckmeister also implores organists to be sympathetic to well-tamed tuning, simply because it allows them to play in many more keys than would be possible in old-fashioned mean-tone.

The steps necessary for the actual examination of an organ are discussed in considerable detail. Werckmeister suggests that the examiner begin by visually inspecting the instrument, starting with the bellows. Are they located so as to withstand damage from rain, snow, and exposure to sunlight? Are they made of good, sturdy wood? Do they inflate properly? One curiosity here is the recommendation that "horsehair" (either strips of horse skin or actual dried horse veins or tendons) instead of common leather be utilized to line and seal the interior surfaces.

The next step was to check the wind pressure by means of a special gauge, pictured on the bottom left side of the book's frontispiece. If the examiner had no wind gauge, Werckmeister shows how to construct one. The examiner was then to move on to the pipes, checking for placement and disposition. Mixtures were to be given special attention as to whether all their pipes could actually speak, for many builders, since they could not properly voice or tune these tiny pipes, resorted to closing the pipe mouths! The section on reed pipes opens with these remarks:

• Selected Resources in Church Music and Related Fields—a 26-page bibliography of articles and books, presented in an easily usable alphabetical format, from "Acoustics" to "Textile Art"—$2.00
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must be adequately strong and [the holes throughout] should be so evenly drilled as to ensure smooth touch with the reeds; otherwise they should be too feeble. They must easily yield to tuning and should sit neither too tightly nor so loosely as to drop down (pp. 5-6).

Werkmeister offers similarly detailed comments on all the basic components of the organ: the windchest, pallets, sliders, roller boards, stops, stop irons, keys, pedals, and so forth.

Having tested with his eye, the examiner was now to let his ear be the judge. In Werkmeister's words:

"For the purpose of discovering by ear all that cannot be examined with the eye, one cancelling all stops of the organ, but opens all pallets, not only those with legitimate but possibly also some with supernumerary functions; while the bellows are being operated in proper fashion, one places a plank across the entire pedalboard and steps on it so that all or most pedal keys are depressed. If one then can hear [wind] bustling inside the blocks, all things are well. Otherwise they are not good. Such a defect is usually related to the stop action. For unless the sliders have been reliably engaged, the full force of the wind lifts the reeds only so that the bellows are escorted around them into the holes and pipes. The same test is applied to the manuals by placing both arms on the keyboard. If an organbuilder indicates displeasure with this procedure, one must pay particular attention to ensure that the bellows are actually being operated while all pallets are open. For some organbuilders install secret valves to be opened or closed at the right moment, so that for the duration of this test no wind is admitted to the windchest. In order to detect this [cheating] one need only draw a stop now and then [during the test]. Honest people, however, will not act so shrewdly. If the wind drop and the bustling is not too noticeable, one may let it pass, particularly if the weather has been dry. For it could be otherwise, since sliders do shirk: this is, in a manner of speaking, a congenital characteristic of the slider chest. However, the limits of tolerating this defect are reached when—all stops having been cancelled, the manual keys being depressed with both arms—the wind drop is so extensive as to appear to shuck. In order to determine this [tolerance limit], one of the examiners must test the keyboard by tapping [the keys] with both arms in quick succession, while the other observes the bellows. If these are shaking, there can be no doubt that the wind is allowed uncannily to escape, that holes have been drilled all over the top boards and the pipes, and that toes have been washed. Some organbuilders have so masterfully developed such practices that not one out of a hundred organists will detect these defects (p. 17).

(The as passages quoted earlier demonstrate, these are but a few of many deceitful practices of organbuilders cited in the Organbuilders' Code in which the trade was once held in high regard.)

As the passages quoted earlier demonstrate, these are but a few of many deceitful practices of organbuilders cited in the Organbuilders' Code in which the trade was once held in high regard. Much to his chagrin, that his explanations of these ruses will probably be read most sagely not by examiners but by dishonest builders anxious to try out such tricks on unsuspecting parishes. Indeed, according to Werkmeister, the whole organ-examination system was replete with controversy. For instance, some examiners secretly received from the builder in exchange for a positive report a free clavichord or harpsichord, even though the organ might have a thousand defects. Kickbacks from the builder in the form of cash payments to members of the organ committee were not unheard of either.

Werkmeister's next step was to listen one stop at a time, note by note, through all key-boards and the pedalboard to determine if the individual pipes are in tune, if they have been evenly voiced, and if they speak promptly. He recommends that this be done in major thirds, since "it is well known that when one organ is played on a slider chest, the middle key is also heard" (p. 23). In other words, if the pitches C and E were played simultaneously, a D pitch might also sound. The examiner was then to determine if each stop was in tune with the 'principal, presumably the stop used by the builder to tune the organ. Last of all, the examiner was to play with various combinations of stops, to ensure that a variety of ensembles was possible, and to employ a wide range of organistic techniques. As a means of checking the steadiness of the wind supply, sustained chords were to be used in the right hand against rapid figuration in the left hand or the feet. In passing judgment on organ balance, Werkmeister sensibly recommends that the examiner listen from various locations in the room.

There are, as well, some comments on special-effects devices. For instance, the tremulant

must be very gently and must steadily maintain the speed to which it is set, even with big registrations. . . . All tremulants must be hidden from view, lest one or the other [of the parishioners] be invited to laugh on seeing it in operation, causing thereby a public offense in the church (p. 29).

The Zimbelstern was supposed to tinkle brightly, and not sound like cowbells.

Finally, Werkmeister makes clear his disdain for keyboards with short octaves, since they require abnormal fingering:

[With the short octave,] the normal order of the keyboard is totally contradicted and a great deal of special effort in practicing is required. It is ridiculous to ask for propriety, detonus, and bombast in order to achieve something that could be attained by a more direct and more comfortable route. I, for one, have yet to see an organist who is as adept in the low [i.e., short] octave as he is in the other octaves. So far I have heard no other defense [of the short octave] than that it allows reaching [with one hand] an octave and a third (i.e., a tenth). That is a rather poor expedient. For it could hardly be considered advantageous to spoil a keyboard, particularly in the bass range, just because one can reach with one hand the two thirds [in the chord] D-I-I-I and E-e-g-g. Not only is the low range unsuitable to [such] thirds, but we also have a right hand with which we can accommodate [chord spacing] in many more ways than these thirds could ever effect (pp. 46-47).

Werkmeister is hardly being fair to the builder here, and one suspects he is not being entirely sincere either, for how could he not have known that the principal justification for the short octave on an organ was financial? By omitting large bass pipes whose pitches were rarely called for by composers, much money could be saved. Nonetheless, and in spite of all the other attacks on organbuilders in the treatise, the Orgelprobe was championed by the greatest organbuilder of the day, Arp Schnitger, who contributed this charming poem to the preface of the revised edition:

How oft has scarred sloth human imagination
And wrought such art as does command our adoration?
Could those long departed now awaken, resurrected,
What man has wrought, with awe by them would be detected.

Though music has been used with art and skill forever,
Our own high standard ancients had reached never.
A huge and complex organ one single man can tame.
And thousands upon thousands in fervent prayer inflame.

But how could it be so, if defects should abound?
What could an organ do? Outlandish it would sound.
Just take pure harmony away from this fine art.

And see, a ghastly howl is all it will impart.
Now, have Werkmeister can give us much information.

A master and a man of gifts and education
And of experience! He shows how in detail
Organists one must test and try them without fail.
A worthy task, to be by wise men commended.
One which shall cause his fame to be richly augmented.

For as posterior this treasure will accept,
His name always among the famous shall be kept.
Of course, some blockhead will find fault, it's not surprising.
Cynics so satirical can not help criticizing.
But know that only fools this treatise can resent.
While you, dear Werkmeister, to heaven shall ascend.

NOTES
2. He hardly had much financial success in this capacity though, attested to by his confession that "if an organbuilder could not profit any more than he did in this venture, his wife and children should have to go begging." See p. 50 of the English translation.
5. According to Walther's Musikalisches Lexikon, Werkmeister's official title as an organ examiner was "Royal Provision Inspector of All Organs in the Vicinity of Halberstadt.""6. The page number for this and all subsequent quoted passages refers to the English translation.

An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the symposium, "The Historically Organ in America," held in January 1992 at Arizona State University.

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