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The French classical organ by Pierre Dubois

Musical instruments are born, develop and evolve, not by chance or arbitrarily, but in reason of the roles and functions that they have to perform. They are, after all, “instruments”. The changes that affect man’s conception of sound depend on the finds of instrument-makers, of course, but those experiments and discoveries are first prompted by the needs of society. For instance, the gradual decline of the lute, or demise of the viola da gamba in favour of the cello, reflect demands for more sonorous instruments, corresponding to new ways of performing music to ever-larger audiences. These changes also reflect aesthetic changes – the search for more assertive tone colours, the inclusion of instruments in larger groups or orchestras, etc. – and they prompt new aesthetic changes in their turn.

This link between the social functions of musical instruments and their own definition is nowhere more obvious than in the case of the organ, for several important reasons. The organ has always been primarily a church instrument (with the notable exception of England), and it is therefore closely interdependent on the liturgical roles that it is supposed to play. The very size, shape, inside disposition and structure of a church also play a great part. An organ depends on the acoustic of the building where it is situated, and, obviously, the acoustic itself is affected by elements of furnishing that are also linked to liturgical fashions as well as to architectural considerations. That the German, Italian, Spanish, Dutch, English or French organs of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries should be so radically different comes therefore as no surprise. These instruments were built in the same period but their development was variously affected by the types of churches for which they were built, the liturgical demands made upon them, the relative importance of singing and purely instrumental music in the services, or of the word in opposition to music, and the degree of involvement of the congregation in the service.

Such general considerations could easily be exemplified by studying any national school of organ building, and it is particularly obvious in the case of the French “classical” or baroque organ that developed in France from the end of the sixteenth century until the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century. The very fact, incidentally, that the radical change that affected French society after 1789 corresponded to the gradual demise of the type of organs that had heretofore been in use for over two centuries indicates that there is undoubtedly a link between the way instruments are defined and the use to which they are put.

The first factor that influenced the development of the French baroque organ and its repertoire was therefore the way it was used in the Catholic liturgy. The congregation were not invited to join in, and the organ was therefore not used for accompaniment purposes. Generally set on a loft at the west end of the church, it would answer the verses chanted by the chantres from the chancel. This alternate plainchant was based upon Gregorian melodies. The organ would play every odd alternate verse (starting from verse 1, then 3, 5, etc), while the even verses were sung. This means that there could be five different pieces for the organ in the Kyrie, for instance (1st Kyrie, 3rd Kyrie, 2nd Christe, 4th Kyrie, 6th and last Kyrie). The character of these various movements was soon more or less regulated. It was usual to

use the *plein jeu* for the first verse, while the second verse devoted to the organ was generally a fugue, the third one usually a trio or a *récit*, etc. This more or less systematic order of the movements was set down, for instance, by the instructions given for the ceremonies in Paris in 1662 (*Ceremoniae parisiense ad usum omnium collegiatarum, parochialium et aliarum urbis et dioceses parisiensis*). Thereafter, most organists were to follow the same pattern, the same basic principle being used for both Masses and Magnificats. Each type of movement was considered to be well adapted to the mood or character of the corresponding verse. The very logic of the alternate use of the organ implied that each of these pieces had to remain short. Conversely, contrast and changes of sonorities were essential: each new organ verse had to sound strikingly different from the previous one, the time during which the chantres sang their verse being used by the organist to effect the stop changes required. The only moment in the Mass when the organist had more time was the offertory. As there used to be a long procession with incense, the organ *offertoire* had to be a long, jubilant piece usually performed on the *grand jeu*, that is the combinations of all the reed stops of the organ – the most powerful ones. All this, as we shall now see, is reflected in the composition practices of the French organists of the time, as well as in the structure of the French organ.

The brevity of the pieces that the organist had the time to play necessarily implied that he must endeavour to concentrate the musical material. Unlike a German organist, therefore, he had no opportunity to develop his themes. Nor could he write a long fugue according to all the formal rules of counterpoint. He had to establish a given mood as quickly as possible and strike the listeners at once. This was the art of allusion and euphemism, in which ideas were alluded to rather than elaborated on. Philippe Beaussant has shown in his beautiful study of François Couperin, that the art of the latter was akin to that of the painter Antoine Watteau (1684-1721), and we might suggest that the music of the French organists of the period could best be understood in the light of this comparison, or, one might add, if compared to the art of the writer Jean de La Fontaine (1621-95). Not unlike Jean de La Bruyère (1645-96) in his *Characters*, the organist composed short vignettes, just as harpsichordists painted musical portraits that were meant to move the listener in some half-hidden way, without being too long, without ever seeming too complex. Grace and ease were the all in all. “For my part, I frankly confess that I would much sooner be moved than be astonished”, Couperin wrote in the preface of his 1st book of Harpsichord lessons in 1713, and this could be given as an apt motto for the works of most of his contemporaries. Often considered superficial, French baroque music was in reality an art of elegant illusion, in a court society in which appearance was content. You were what you looked. And, similarly, it was the impression produced by the music which mattered primarily, not its inner intricacy that only the specialist musician could be in a position to assess. The way the French tackled the fugue is a good case in point. In the German school, a fugue was built systematically, each subject being followed with a counter-subject, and each part taking up both of these in due order, etc. In France, on the other hand, a fugue simply gave the illusion of an organised construction of successive entries, but nothing was carried systematically to the end. Less well structured and less developed, the fugue was therefore conceived as a hall of mirrors, where parts echoed as it were with one another in a discourse of freedom and fanciful suggestion.

How was this reflected in the organ itself? Considering that the foremost goal of the organist was to strike his listeners and give a strong contrasted impression, the quality of the sounds was of primary importance. But not only did the organ have to sound beautifully – it also had to provide a great variety of colours, so that each verse would sound totally differently from the previous one. Surprise, variety and contrast were therefore key aesthetic criteria.

Like a good French meal, the French Ancien Régime organ was all about change of flavour. Monotony and equality of tone were proscribed. Each specific registration was therefore treated as a different character stepping onto the stage one after the other, each being the actor of a precise, albeit abstract, part: the *plein-jeu*, full of majesty and solemnity; the reeds, glaring and triumphant; the *tierces*, colourful, warm and supple; the *fond d'orgue*, grave, soft and meditative; the various solo reed stops – *cromorne*, *voix humaine*, *hautbois* – each with its distinctive voice to express either melancholy, or naive innocence; the *grand jeu*, exuberant and powerful, apt for the celebration of God's – or the Kings' – greatness and glory. The French organ was theatrical. It was an instrument that reached its maturity at a time when the *tragédie lyrique* and ballet were the first of the arts at the court of Versailles: this shows in the dance movements used by the composers in their organ verses, of course, as well as in the shape of these *récits* directly inspired by opera arias; but it is also manifest in the way this organ speaks, "highly and proudly" ("*hautement et fièrement*"), to use the words of an 18th-century "Noël". It belongs in the same world as that of Bossuet's emphatic orations pronounced in St. Gervais, the very church whose organist was François Couperin. Short though its interventions might be, this organ spoke with majesty and eloquence. Another consequence of the need to put varied sonorities at the disposal of the organist was the number of keyboards. On the largest instruments, there could be as many as 4 or even 5 keyboards (*Grand Orgue*, *Positif*, *Récit*, *Écho*, *Bombarde*). This enabled the organist to use a variety of combinations, not only with his hands on two separate keyboards, but even sometimes with the two hands touching three keyboards at the same time, which, added to the pedal part, permitted the performance of colourful quartets, such as those written out by Jacques Boyvin, Louis Marchand or Jean-Adam Guilain. De Grigny wrote beautiful, complex fugues à 5 that make full use of the possibilities provided by the contrasted sonorities of the different manuals and pedal.

What the French organ could not do, conversely, was blend all these sonorities together indifferently. Whereas the German baroque organ was conceived as a kind of pyramid, the plenum being the result of the addition of all the stops of the instrument, the French organ was thought of in terms of different families of sounds, which remained distinct and separate. For instance, one cannot have a *tutti* with both the reeds of the *grand jeu* and the *plein jeu*. The scale of the trumpets and clarions is much too big for them to blend well with the mixtures and furnitures, the only case of their being used together being in a *plein jeu* with a *cantus firmus* played on the pedal trumpet in long values. This is an art of differentiation. Nor would the organist change registrations in the course of a piece: if he needed another sonority, he changed manuals. The French organ – which one could in this respect compare to the social system that prevailed at the time – was not supple. It was the metaphor of a pattern of order and hierarchy, in which each constituent knew its place exactly and never stepped out of it. The solemn *plein jeu* was at the apex of this hierarchy as far as its role was concerned, since it was the registration used for all the most solemn parts of the service. The *grand jeu* was systematically requested for all that was of a celebrative character. The feminine *tierce* was used either for the meditative airs, or for playful, flippant duos. The grave *cromorne* was manlier, while the warm, glowing brightness of the *cornet* lent its graceful colour to sparkling recitatives. The union of both *tierce* or *cornet*, and *cromorne* in duos, trios and dialogues can almost be seen as a kind of allegory of the conversation between contrasting characters or ideas – man and woman, the celestial and the earthly, man and God, lightness and seriousness.

It is difficult, of course, to express such notions as tone-colours and registration with words. What one may easily grasp, however, is one of the obvious consequences of all that we have just explained: dependent as it was on the sonorities of the specific organ for which it was

composed, French baroque organ music cannot easily be “exported”. It does not make sense on an instrument that does not have the proper sonorities, because its beauty depends, not on the structural aspects of the composition, but on the charm and immediacy of the sounds themselves. It is sensual rather than intellectual, emotional rather than abstract, proceeding through seduction rather than theoretical demonstration.

The French organ and its music are therefore the aesthetic translation of the whole ethos of ancien régime France. It expresses imperious confidence in the primary importance of manners and show considered to be ethically positive values. It also asserts the power and authority of both Church and king, as the beautiful crafted cases of the large instruments testified. Order and symmetry in the design met with grandeur and exuberance in the carving and decoration. Above the west door at the main entrance of the church, the organ reminded parishioners that the pomp and haughty decorum of the ceremony were synonymous with the power of their sovereign.

If the basic format of the French baroque organ remained substantially the same in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, yet it still gradually evolved. The tendency was towards ever-larger instruments. Organ builders tended to add more reed stops, doubling trumpets on the Great, adding a trumpet, and sometimes even a clarion, alongside the cromorne on the choir. The extent of the pedals tended on the other hand to shrink. The pedal part was getting less and less developed. Whereas de Grigny or Marchand wrote polyphonic movements (fugues or quartets) with elaborate pedal parts, or used the pedals for the cantus firmus in the *Plein Jeu*, the tendency later in the eighteenth century was to use the pedals merely as a means to produce a grand effect, especially in the cadenzas. Hence the difficulty today of finding the appropriate authentic organ to play (and record) de Grigny’s music, for instance. For there are indeed few seventeenth-century French organs extant today. Of the organ played by Nicolas de Grigny in Rheims cathedral, there only remains the beautiful case. Numerous organs were altered as from the eighteenth century. For instance, François Couperin’s organ at St. Gervais, Paris built by P. Thierry, in 1649-59 and enlarged by Alexandre Thierry in 1676, was repaired and transformed by the great organ builder François-Henri Clicquot in 1768. After other alterations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the organ one can hear at St. Gervais today, beautiful and moving though it may be, and in spite of its being the oldest in the capital, cannot be said to be Couperin’s own instrument. The organ built by Jean de Joyeuse at Auch in 1694 is another good case in point: its original pipe-work was still extant in 1955 when it was ruthlessly discarded by Gonzalez, under the guidance of organ “specialist” Norbert Dufourcq, and replaced with new pipes. It caused such a row that the whole movement of protection of period organs can be said to have gathered momentum from that time onwards, with leading organists such as Michel Chapuis in the vanguard of the rediscovery of the French repertoire and performing practices of the seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries. The Auch organ has been re-restored since (by Jean-François Munro in 1998), but of course today’s instrument is only a reconstruction in the style of the original instrument.

The situation is better when one turns to the eighteenth century, where such masterpieces as the Louis-Alexandre Clicquot organ at Houdan (1734), the Isnard organ at Saint-Maximin (1774), the François-Henri Clicquot organs at Souvigny (1783) and Poitiers (1791), have either remained mostly unaltered or retained a large proportion of their original pipe-work. The other good news is that there are quite a few builders in France today capable of restoring such organs to very high standards, as is testified by the dazzling reconstruction by Pascal Quoirin of the organ originally built by Dom Bedos at Ste. Croix in Bordeaux (1748), or that by Bertrand Cattiaux of the organ built by Robert Clicquot in the Chapel of Versailles

(1711). As a matter of fact, the latter is almost a new instrument in the style of the eighteenth-century, rebuilt inside the original case. It's been a long road, but organ-builders have now re-discovered and mastered the technique of the builders of the past. Dom Bedos' amazing treatise on the art of organ-building, *L'art du facteur d'orgues*, published between 1766 and 1778, has naturally proved very helpful. In it, the Benedictine monk-cum-organ-builder described, in pure Enlightenment fashion, all the various steps to follow in the building of an organ, from the making of the necessary tools to the construction of the bellows, action, pipes, etc. Beautifully illustrated, this remarkable work is the "Bible" of any would-be organ-builder interested in the French baroque and classical organ.

The repertoire for the French ancien régime organ is both wide and frustratingly limited. If Titelouze, Lebègue, Nivers, Boyvin, Raison, or Dandrieu, etc., published several Magnificats, Hymns, Masses, or Suites, one notices however that most organists of the period contented themselves with publishing one *Livre d'Orgue*, often when they were young, newly appointed organists (as was the case with de Grigny's outstanding *Livre d'Orgue* and Couperin's two Masses). Then, they would spend the rest of their life improvising during services, and some first-class organists of the period never even bothered to compose anything for their instrument. Therefore, the art of French baroque organ music has this inescapable elusive quality. It must be partly imagined and reinvented, as such an amazing artist as Michel Chapuis manages to do. Improvisation, fluidity, fancy, simplicity, "naturalness" and wit are part and parcel of this art of allurements and charm. Just as the quality of the sounds is of primary importance in the French organ, inventiveness and ease are central to its music. What there is on the sheet of music may look deceptively simple and banal: what matters is the way you do it. The genius of the French baroque organ and its music lies in its many paradoxes: these concise, elliptical pieces are also regally triumphant or pathetically moving; this standardized instrument and the fixed format of the pieces it was dedicated to playing are an invitation to never-ending impromptu inventiveness; and those under-written scores are the product of a refined conception of musical rhetoric. Between order and freedom, simplicity and refinement, haughtiness and softness, logic and sensual charm, the French baroque organ dwells in the unique locus of that "je ne sais quoi" that may well be the ultimate characteristic of French classical art.