The Silbermann Organs at Dresden

Author(s): John Matthews

Source: *The Musical Times*, Vol. 63, No. 955 (Sep. 1, 1922), p. 643

Published by: [Musical Times Publications Ltd.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/912227>

Accessed: 23-12-2015 20:48 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Musical Times Publications Ltd. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Musical Times*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Church and Organ Music

THE SILBERMANN ORGANS AT DRESDEN

By JOHN MATTHEWS

As Saxony is likely to remain a *terra incognita* to most English organists of this generation, some particulars of the old Silbermann organs as they existed in Merkel's time may be of interest.

In 1885 their most characteristic features were absolutely unaltered. One might hear and play Bach under the same conditions as when Bach himself visited the city and gave a recital in the Frauenkirche. Equal temperament had long since been adopted, and one little peculiarity of Silbermann's corrected: he invariably omitted the lowest C $\sharp$ in the pedals, deeming it a needless expense with the limited range of keys allowed in the old system of tuning—to which he adhered in spite of Bach's refusal to consider an organ for Leipsic built under these conditions. No doubt new and more convenient pedal-boards—though still very wide in scale—had long since been added, but the old key-boards mostly remained. They were, of course, but little suited to our modern organ music, yet one certainly realised Bach as is not always possible even on a fine and up-to-date English organ.

With each great advance in the art of organ-building a different type of instrument is created*, which in turn creates a style of its own in composition. One could not imagine a Widor Symphony or a Hollins Concert Overture on a Silbermann organ, and the Dresden organists had almost of necessity to keep to the well-known classics; I doubt if any of them were so much as even acquainted with César Franck.

The Silbermann organ I was best acquainted with personally was that in the Frauenkirche, where it stood in an elaborate case of white and gold in a commanding position behind the altar. The reader may imagine the dome of St. Paul's, reduced in size, and with four or five galleries encircling its interior. The tone floated away freely, though the echo was not so great as that in the Chapel of the Royal Court, and the twelfth-sounding ranks stood out rather prominently to modern ears. The touch was not unpleasant, and the mechanism quite reliable, as all these organs—in those days at any rate—were maintained in good condition, and mostly well in tune. This organ was a three-manual of forty-three speaking stops, as follows: Great, 14; Echo, 11; Choir, 10; Pedal, 8; yet, owing to the light wind-pressure, and the system of blowing by connecting six planks to stand on with separate feeders, students, by merely stepping from one plank to another whilst the others were slowly settling down could blow for each other's practice for a long time without fatigue. The draw-stops were huge china-faced knobs as large as door-knobs, set in a rim of brass inside rosewood. There were, of course, no composition pedals, but one or two knobs labelled 'Sperr ventil' cut off the wind from groups of stops such as the mixtures or reeds without withdrawing the stops themselves. The reeds would not find any admirers to-day, though they were not so crazy as those in Silbermann's organ in the Church of St. Sophia opposite the Opera House. The gambas and flutes

were good, the diapasons free and bold in tone, the twelfth-sounding ranks in the mixtures perhaps, as already noted, unduly prominent—but Silbermann, like our own Henry Willis, had certainly learnt the art of building up the tone into an artistic whole, expressing his own individuality. This feature with Silbermann was more noticeable than the excellence of any particular stop. I can fully endorse, from my own recollection, the following remarks of Dr. Albert Schweitzer:

'On going from a modern organ to one of Silbermann's a player feels at first only a lack of all the auxiliary devices which appeared indispensable for a delicately graduated interpretation of Bach's works. But in a short time there is a change. One begins to delight in the obligatory simplicity, and is surprised to see how little the refinement of the transitions is missed, and how characteristic, yet natural withal, are the effects now obtained, simply because one has control of but a few gradations of tone-power which cannot be shaded off into the other. There are works whose full beauty is manifested only under such conditions.'

The English organist who has never played a large organ without a Swell may be surprised to hear that one does not miss it so much as might be supposed when one has an ample number of foundation-stops in nice gradation as to power, and not differing very much in quality, with every stop blending in a free and open space. Under such conditions a fine *crescendo* can be built up with a friend to pull out the stops—each one a handful—in accordance with a carefully pre-arranged scheme. Although Merkel had no Swell pedal in any of the organs he played, he by no means despised it—in fact he praised the little Walker organ in the English church, and extemporized charmingly on it to my friend the former organist, Mr. B. S. Ward.

In the 'Church of the Three Kings' at Dresden Neustadt stands another Silbermann organ, where, in company with the late Mr. Franklin Peterson (formerly principal of Melbourne University), we met the organist Herr C. A. Fisher, who played to us. Here for the organist's use stood by the keys a large and ancient hour-glass, and the very organ-seat upon which Mozart once sat and played to the people of Dresden. What an opportunity for a novelist to describe how he enraptured the people—half a column of high-flown descriptive writing at least should follow. But, alas! the cold fact remains that Mozart, the 'divine Mozart,' left a record in the vestry stating that he 'could not warm the people by his playing.'

What the present condition of these Silbermann organs may be I do not know. Perhaps some reader will tell us if, during the war, in the great search for metal, any of them were stripped of their metal pipes. The bells in the English Church were broken up in the Church itself, but the organ was spared, as probably was the case with most organs in Saxony.

ALL HALLOWS', LOMBARD STREET

This interesting old City church—the last that Wren rebuilt after the Great Fire, on the site of which a church has stood since 1067, mentioned in Domesday Book as All Hallows Grasschurch—is now having its organ rebuilt. The first organ was built in 1703, at a cost of £350, subscribed for by a few generous supporters of the church. It stood in

* An organ was opened last December in Freiburg University (i/Br.) built in accordance with the directions in the *Syntagma Musicum* of M. Praetorius, in order to interpret the old organ music with historical correctness.