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## ORGAN IMPROVISATION – AN INTRODUCTION

**Abstract:** Whereas musicological attention to improvisation tended to neglect organ improvisation, new initiatives, both musical and musicological, indicate an imminent rehabilitation. Such rehabilitation is more than justified: organ improvisation is the only unbroken western improvisation tradition, connecting contemporary music to music of pre-medieval times. This essay is an introduction to this new field of research. It provides a brief history of organ improvisation by focusing on some ‘capita selecta’, as well as a critical overview of current developments.

**Key words:** Organ / Improvisation / International Competition Haarlem / Contrappunto alla mente / Buxtehude / Bach / Dupré / Cochereau / Hage / Ferjencikova / Computer Aided Breathing / Wallenhorst / postmodernism

Most musicological essays on improvisation deal only briefly, if at all, with the fact that organists are the only musicians to have kept alive the age-old art of improvisation in western music. Indeed, one might occasionally be tempted to neglect their way of improvising, especially when visiting one of those many churches where the organ is used to bridge liturgical silences through the ‘knitting’ of one note to another, instead of making music. But this essay focuses on the other side of the coin: organ improvisation by serious musicians.<sup>1</sup>

### Definition

The definition of improvisation is quite complex, and becomes even more so when the organ is the instrument of choice. The crux of the issue can be summarised thus: anyone who plays the organ is, strictly speaking, improvising, since each organ is tailor-made, and hence different from any other organ. Even two organs built by the same builder in the same year do not sound the same, not only because of their different specifications (organ builders are proud of the fact that they never design the same instrument twice) and technical aspects, but also because of the acoustics of the hall in which the organ is located. A considerable proportion of the organ’s sound quality is defined by the acoustic parameters of its surroundings.

As a result, an organist who interprets a composition is obliged to translate the score to a far greater extent than, say, a pianist or violinist, whose instruments are, relatively speaking, more predictable with regard to sonority and handling. Moreover, a violinist can take her own instrument with

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<sup>1</sup> *Organs* means *pipe* organs in this essay.

her to her concert, whereas an organist is obliged, time and again, to become acquainted with instruments unfamiliar to her.

Consequently, striving for authenticity in the performance of organ literature is an almost impossible task. The sonority, tempi and indeed all other parameters intended by composers will not be reproducible in most cases, since specification-related and technical aspects of the organ to be played, as well as the amount of reverberation in the hall in which it is located, may force the organist to choose, for example, brighter colours, to play less legato and/or to adopt a slower tempo than that suggested in the score. Such compromises are often inevitable in order to allow the music to remain comprehensible.

In fact, the tailor-made nature of the organ is one of the two main reasons why organists have kept improvising, while other musicians have moved to reproducing music. Improvisation offers a useful possibility for the organist to approach an organ according to its own character, as well as according to the performer's own ideas about that character's musical potential. (The second main reason is that the unpredictable length of the silences in liturgy mean that playing literature would almost always take either too long, or would not cover the silence sufficiently).

Interpreting organ music implies not only choosing to what extent the indications of the composer will be followed, but it often obliges the organist to improvise in a more literal sense as well. In baroque music, for example, an organist needs to be able to improvise convincing continuo and to invent ornamental gestures. The practice of adding improvisational elements to compositions developed, and remained common, until the 19<sup>th</sup> century: Franz Liszt, for example, is said to have improvised this way quite often. Alexander Borodin wrote to Cäsar Cui in 1877: 'When Liszt plays something, he sometimes starts to add his own inventions, thus not representing the composition as such, but an improvisation on it.'<sup>2</sup>

A specific combination of these two improvisational aspects of interpreting music ('translating' the score and adding new elements) became rather popular in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Whereas Liszt had added a new chapter to the art of playing orchestral music on organ, organist Karl Straube (1873-1950) began to play baroque organ music on modern organs. Straube's most important inspirations were *Denkmäler Deutscher Tonkunst* volume 1, edited in 1892 by Max Seiffert (1868-1948), and the Sauer organ of the famous Thomaskirche at Leipzig (1889), where he was appointed organist in 1903. At the time, the modern organ was regarded as the ideal instrument for any music (implying, in turn, that baroque organs were no more than 'immature' versions). It was obvious to Straube that 'early' music required editing. He published several volumes of transcriptions of *organ* pieces for organ, adding numerous indications regarding a multitude of interpretation-related details. As a result, his interpretations of 'early' music somewhat resemble Liszt's way of 'improvising compositions'. Although Straube didn't add any new notes, his changing and adding of slurs, tempo indications, registration

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted from Ernst Ferand, *Die Improvisation in der Musik*, Zürich, Rhein Verlag, 1938, 16. Cf. David Lloyd-Jones, 'Borodin on Liszt', *Music and Letters* 42, 1961, no. 2, 117-126.

instructions, dynamics etc., changed almost every other parameter of the original composition. Straube's editions are, in fact, notated improvisations, using baroque compositions as basic, extended 'themes'.

Since the exact borders between organ improvisation and interpretation/transcription of compositions are vague, since no serious attempt has yet been undertaken to research the impressive multitude of aspects the domain of organ improvisation offers, and since a full analysis of the organ improvisation genre would require far more pages than are available here, it seems best to focus for now on the art at the heart of it: the production of one's own music directly at the organ, as opposed to reproducing other people's music in one way or another.

### **Historical Notes**

#### Middle Ages

'In the beginning', all music was improvised. Everyone hums a little melody from time to time, or even sings it out loud. Singing together was a logical second step, and the introduction of instruments further extended the ways music came into being.

Vocal improvisation is horizontally oriented (one melody) but can gain a vertical aspect, when two or more voices add their own lines. To what extent the results exceeded accidental heterophony in (pre-)medieval culture we will never know – we simply have insufficient information – but the eventual development of improvised counterpoint was a logical consequence: 'contrappunto alla mente'.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes, written music was involved. An example is the so-called *Cantus supra librum* with three singers: a tenor, singing the plain song notated in a book (or by heart), a countertenor, inventing a second voice note for note with the tenor, and a soprano, who was completely free to invent a third musical line in the manner of his choosing. The first book on organ improvisation was published in the last part of the Middle Ages: Conrad Paumann's (ca. 1410-1473) treatise *Fundamentum Organisandi*.

The Dutch ensemble Super Librum explores the way medieval musicians improvised by playing a reconstruction of a 11<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> century organ.<sup>4</sup> The instrument was built in 2003 by Winold van der Putten. Its concept is based on two treatises: *De fistulis Organis* (11<sup>th</sup> century, anonymous) and *Schedula Diversarum Artium* (12<sup>th</sup> century, written by Theophilus Presbyter (ca. 1070-ca. 1125). The appearance of the organ is inspired by a picture in the Belvoir Castle Psalter (ca. 1260).<sup>5</sup> Another 'Theophilus-based' organ, looking and sounding completely different however, is located in the Abbey of Royaumont, France. It was built in 1993, by Antoine Massoni, supervised by Marcel Pérès.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The history of the organ stretches back to at least the Roman Empire.

<sup>4</sup> Ernst Ferand, whose *Die Improvisation in der Musik* (1938) remains one of the main studies on improvisation, states that whereas vocal improvisation is based on acoustical imagination, instrumental improvisation is also driven by peculiarities of the instrument: a certain set of chords may, for example, appear to be easy to play, and be applied more often for that reason.

<sup>5</sup> British Library, MS add. 62925.

<sup>6</sup> Hans Fidom, 'Van Theophilus en Memling tot Massoni en Van der Putten', *Het Orgel* 91, 1995, 417-421.

Illustration 1



In 2003, Winold van der Putten built this reconstruction of a medieval organ, based on treatises and iconography from the 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. The ensemble Super Librum explores the way medieval musicians improvised on this instrument. *Copyright: Harry Cock, Assen, The Netherlands.*

### 16<sup>th</sup> century: Sweelinck

In 1578, Amsterdam became a protestant city. The reformed Calvinist leaders rejected organs and organ music as relicts of the Catholic era: organ music was forbidden during services. But the city of Amsterdam owned the organs, most of which were quite new at the time. The municipality found a creative solution to this problem, namely that the organists were retained as municipal employees.

The most famous of these Amsterdam organists was Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck (1562-1621), organist of the Oude Kerk. His students came from all over Europe, and through them he influenced almost the entire organ culture of Northern Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Sweelinck's task as the organist of the Oude Kerk was to play before and after the services, and to play the organs of the church during the week.

There survives just a single report of Sweelinck's keyboard art, and it may be no coincidence that it describes him improvising. 'As I recall,' Sweelinck's friend Guillelmus Baudartias wrote in 1624, 'some good friends and I were at the house of my good friend Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck, with more good friends, in the month of May; and he, having begun to play the harpsichord, continued until about midnight, playing among other things the tune "Den lustelicken Mey is nu in zijnen tijdt", which he, if I remember correctly, played in twenty-five different ways, first this way, then another.'<sup>7</sup>

### 17<sup>th</sup> & 18<sup>th</sup> century: Buxtehude & Bach

In 2004, Ibo Orgties completed his PhD thesis on the temperament of North German organs in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup> One of his hypotheses is that meantone temperament<sup>9</sup> remained popular until the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>10</sup> According to Orgties, there is no evidence that the organ at the Marienkirche in Lübeck had another than meantone temperament during the tenure of Dieterich Buxtehude (1637-1707). This, combined with the fact that the organ's compass extended from C to a2, leads to the conclusion that many of Buxtehude's great organ works cannot have been played on his 'own' organ.<sup>11</sup>

What, then, *was* played on organ in the baroque era? The answer seems to be improvisations. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that improvisation was still seen as a high art at the time. This is confirmed by the well-known account of the contest held in Dresden in 1717: Johann Sebastian Bach had invited Louis Marchand, who visited the city, to take part in an improvisation competition. Marchand, however, did not show up – probably, as most anecdotes presume, due to his having heard Bach play the day before. Equally famous is the story of Bach's visit to King Friedrich at Potsdam in 1747. Friedrich invited him to play his collection of new pianofortes. Bach asked him for a theme, and immediately improvised a complex fugue.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Quoted after Pieter Dirksen, *The Keyboard Music of Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck*, Utrecht, KNVM, 1997, 123; original text: 'My gedenckt, dat ick eens met eenighe goede vrienden by meyster Ian Petersz. Swelinck, mijnen goeden vriend gegaen zijnde, met noch andere goede vrienden, in de maend van Mey, ende hy aan het spelen op zijn Clavecymbel ghecomen zijnde, het selfde continueerde tot omtrent middernacht, spelende onder anderen het liedeken Den lustelicken Mey is nu in zijnen tijdt, d'welck hy, so ick goede memorye daer van hebben, wel op vijfen-twintigerley wijsen speelde, dan sus, dan soo.'

<sup>8</sup> Ibo Orgties, *Die Praxis der Orgelstimmung in Norddeutschland im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert und ihr Verhältnis zur zeitgenössischen Musikpraxis*, Göteborg, Göteborg University, 2004. Orgties's dissertation is not available in print, but is published by the author on the internet: <http://ibo.orgties.googlepages.com/phd-dissertationiboorgties>

<sup>9</sup> Meantone temperament: four of the twelve fifths are a quarter of a syntonic comma smaller than pure; seven are tuned pure. As a result, the twelfth fifth is too impure to be usable (g# - eb, the so-called 'wolf'). There are many temperament variations developed based on this '1/4-tone meantone temperament', as it is often called. Another class of temperaments are the well-tempered temperaments, which are fifth-oriented, whereas meantone temperament and its variations are third-oriented.

<sup>10</sup> Orgties, *Die Praxis der Orgelstimmung in Norddeutschland im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert und ihr Verhältnis zur zeitgenössischen Musikpraxis*, 179-210.

<sup>11</sup> Kerala Snyder reconsidered some parts of her book on Buxtehude (first edition 1987) in the second edition (*Dieterich Buxtehude / Leben, Werk / Aufführungspraxis*, Kassel, Bärenreiter, 2007). Relevant here is that she takes back her hypothesis that Buxtehude's organs at the Marienkirche were retuned in 1683. However, she states that we will never be sure what temperament the organs actually had.

<sup>12</sup> Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach / The learned Musician*, Utrecht, Bijleveld, 2000, 202-207 and 455-457.

At least a portion of the large works by Buxtehude, until recently published as *organ* works, may have been written to show students how to improvise. These students may have practised the compositions on harpsichords, or on comparable instruments such as the pedal clavichord. If this is the case, it underlines the fact that compositions were considered to be stepping-stones *towards* the art of improvisation: making music oneself.<sup>13</sup>

That the organ remained an improvisation-oriented instrument throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century is also suggested by the remarkable lack of high quality organ music in the Netherlands in both the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Dozens of organs, world-famous today, were built in that era in the provinces of Holland and Friesland, but Dutch compositions that could be compared to Buxtehude's or Bach's works, simply did not exist. Although dozens of compositions are left to us, for example those by Jacob Wilhelm Lustig from Groningen, they do not bear any comparison to German baroque organ music.

#### 19<sup>th</sup> century: the watershed between western and non-western music

There are several reasons why the history of western music has become a history of composers and compositions. The most important of these is surely the development of counterpoint: music with up to four, or more, different parts is hard to memorize. Bach is the obvious exception to this rule. Later, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the focus on scores was also stimulated by the new concert halls, which required programmable music, i.e., compositions, in order to sell tickets.

Liszt's attitude towards improvisation was a late echo of an ancient tradition rather than the start of a new one. His above mentioned way of 'improvising a composition', developed further by Karl Straube in his editions of early organ music for contemporary organs, is typical of the 19<sup>th</sup> century attitude towards improvisation. That musicians should make music 'their own way' remained self-explanatory, but a score was increasingly indispensable.<sup>14</sup>

There is no evidence that the rise of jazz improvisation and the decline of western improvisation are in any way related to one another. The effect of their coincidence, however, was its prompting of western musicians to once more look down on improvisation, as a typical aspect of frivolous, 'light' music, encompassing not only jazz, but also klezmer, folk music and non-western music in general. Eventually, the essential criterion by which to judge whether music was 'good', or not, seemed that it had to have been *written down*, preferably by white males.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Joel Speerstra, *Bach and the Pedal Clavichord*, Eastman Studies in Music, Rochester NY, University of Rochester Press, 2004.

<sup>14</sup> This is in opposition to the idea that musicians are just servants to composers, an idea which is still quite popular in the early music scene.

<sup>15</sup> Hans Fidom, *Diversity in Unity / Discussions on organ building between 1880 and 1918*, Dieren, KNOV, 2002. The tendency to analyse and review anything organ-related in Germany in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century had a negative effect on the 'production' of organ music in Germany. Only Max Reger, who always kept himself at a certain distance from the organ scene, managed to compose organ music of impressive quality.

Early 20<sup>th</sup> century: Paris

Now that secular music had become serious, composition-based concert hall music, organ improvisation withdrew itself to the ecclesiastical realm.<sup>16</sup> The most significant flowering of improvisation culture in churches developed in Paris. Major composers (of whom César Franck (1822-1890) is certainly the most famous example) were, primarily, organists. The following generations, commencing with Charles Tournemire (1870-1939) and Louis Vierne (1870-1937), and continuing with Marcel Dupré (1886-1971) and his student Pierre Cochereau (1924-1984), developed a rich improvisation tradition.

That all this took place in Paris was no accident. Organ builder Aristide Cavallé-Coll (1811-1899) managed either to build a new organ, or to restore or rebuild the existing organ, in almost every significant church in Paris. His concept was new: he had developed a symphonic organ type, as opposed to the classical French organ, which had resembled the smaller baroque ensembles. The artistic challenge of his organs was so impressive, that improvisation remained relevant to organists in Paris, to say the least. Organists could study improvisation at the Parisian conservatories. Marcel Dupré, one of the most famous organ professors at the Conservatoire de Paris, brought his improvisation pedagogy to a wider audience by publishing his educational method, the *Traité d'Improvisation à l'Orgue*, in 1925. An additional set of *Exercices préparatoires à l'improvisation libre* followed in 1937. Together the two books formed Dupré's *Cours Complet d'Improvisation à l'Orgue*.

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<sup>16</sup> Although this may seem quite logical from a modern point of view, which automatically connects organ music to liturgy and churches, it was, in fact, quite remarkable: organs had, until then, also been used for secular music. The way Amsterdam saved its organ culture in Sweelinck's time, to name just one example, shows that this was considered important.

Illustration 2



In 1937, Marcel Dupré's added *Exercices préparatoires à l'improvisation libre* to his *Traité d'Improvisation à l'Orgue*. Together the two books formed Dupré's *Cours Complet d'Improvisation à l'Orgue*.

Dupré was convinced that improvisation had always been a cerebral art, something his preface to the 1925 edition of the *Traité* states very clearly. In it, Dupré explains that Handel, Bach, Mendelssohn, Chopin, Liszt and Franck had been excellent improvisers, and continues: 'It is not surprising that the great composers had at their disposal the gift of improvisation, which is, just like composition, essentially a cerebral phenomenon. Just like the eyes of the one deciphering a score precede his fingers, the thought of the fine improviser precedes his hands. It is easy to recognise the improviser that lets himself be guided by his fingers. He will not be able to keep balance between banality and incoherency. He speaks without saying anything and quickly becomes unbearable to listen to.'<sup>17</sup>

As Derek Bailey recalls in his short book on improvisation, Jean Langlais (1907-1991), who was one of the later famous Parisian improvisers, told him that he did not believe in the concept of 'free improvisation': 'The most important thing to an improviser is to be able to think quickly.'<sup>18</sup> Whereas Langlais extended the rigid aspect of Dupré's approach, his contemporary Pierre Cochereau explored the freedom that Dupré's strict course left him. Although clearly influenced by Dupré's demand that the organist be aware of what he or she improvises, he nevertheless managed to present his music as though he had just followed his intuition, without any hesitation.<sup>19</sup>

### Late 20<sup>th</sup> century (1): Haarlem

After World War II, European organ culture was primarily driven by a movement which had already been given its first impulses in Germany in the 1920's, led by organ experts like Hans Henny Jahnn (1894-1959) and Christhard Mahrenholz (1900-1980). The point of their 'Orgelbewegung' was that the modern organ of that time was not at all better than the original baroque organ, as had been the conviction of Karl Straube and his contemporaries around 1900.

The new postwar organ style focused not just on organ building, but on creating contemporary organ music as well. In 1951, the first edition of the International Organ Improvisation Competition was held on the impressive organ at the church of St Bavo, Haarlem, The Netherlands. Well-known past winners of the competition include, for example, Anton Heiller (1952), Piet Kee (1953, 1954 and 1955), André Isoir (1966) Naji Hakim (1982), Ansgar Wallenhorst (2000) and Zuzana Ferjencikova (2004; the

<sup>17</sup> Original text: 'Il n'est pas surprenant que des grands compositeurs aient possédé le don d'improvisation qui est, tout comme la composition, un phénomène essentiellement cérébral. De même que les yeux de celui qui déchiffre précèdent ses doigts, de même du bon improvisateur devance ses mains. Il est facile de reconnaître celui qui se laisse guider par ses doigts. Il ne peut tenir en équilibre entre la banalité et l'incohérence. Il parle pour ne rien dire et devient vite insupportable à entendre.'

<sup>18</sup> Derek Bailey, *Improvisation*, New York, Da Capo Press, 1993, 36-37.

<sup>19</sup> The fact that Cochereau's improvisations have been transcribed meticulously by organists like François Lombard, Jeremy Filsell and David Briggs, indicates to what extent Cochereau was, and still is, admired. Several films on [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) also underline how popular Cochereau's legacy remains.

first female organist to participate and win the competition). The themes given to the candidates were sometimes just hymn melodies, but more often the organizational committee invited composers to write new themes, a practice which continues to this day. The results varied: on a number of occasions the competitors were confronted with a dodecaphonic, or, on one occasion, even a graphic theme (Enrique Raxach, 1982). In most cases the themes were, and are, moderately ‘modern’.<sup>20</sup>

The example of ‘Haarlem’ inspired other initiatives: international improvisation competitions are held at St Albans, Chartres, Leipzig and Odense, to name just a few. All these competitions are comparable: the quality of the improvisations is judged by criteria such as the quality of musical form and development, appropriate use of the organ and idiomatic originality.<sup>21</sup>

### Late 20<sup>th</sup> century (2): Ancient styles

Starting in the early 1970s, the focus on ancient music and the quest for its authentic performance resulted in exploring historic styles of improvisation, as well. The research at the Göteborg Organ Art Center (Sweden), initiated in 1996 by Hans Davidsson, gave tremendous stimulation to this field. Pamela Ruiters-Feenstra, who was one of the researchers in Göteborg, plans to publish a book entitled *Bach and the Art of Improvisation* in 2009.

The problem of improvising in an earlier style is that understanding the other style is a very complex task, if not impossible. However, one can also look at this from the opposite perspective. Recognizing the ‘early music’ culture as part of contemporary culture sheds an even more critical light on improvising in ancient styles, because it reveals that its significance is bound to remain limited. Indeed, it can be of utmost importance. It can function as a practical companion of musicological research, constituting as such a very valuable form of ‘artistic research’. It can also function as a way to explore ancient organs and compositional methods. As an artistic endeavour, however, improvising in ancient styles falls short as long as the results fail to meet the artistic quality of original early compositions. It is an inconvenient truth: no matter how much data historical musicology provides us, such data is bound to remain incomplete.<sup>22</sup>

### **Contemporary developments in organ improvisation**

What can be said about 21<sup>st</sup> century organ improvisation? Let us start with a few musical examples. The first example is a composition: *4 Raps*, composed by Jan Hage, a professional organist in The Hague. Hage composed his very precise and complex four-part score for the 2006 edition of the International

<sup>20</sup> A number of the previous Haarlem competitions can be heard at <http://orgelconcerten.ncrv.nl>; the most recent ones at <http://www.organfestival.nl>.

<sup>21</sup> This is understandable. On what other grounds would a jury *discuss* something that withdraws itself from the intellectual domain of discussing, such as music?

<sup>22</sup> Hans Fidom, ‘What is to be done in such a situation – Seven thoughts about making music on the organ’, in: Hans Fidom, Jan Luth, Christoph Wolff (eds), *Pro Organo Pleno: Essays in Honor of Ewald Kooiman*, Veenhuizen, Boeijenga, 2008.

Composition Competition in Kampen, where he performed it himself on the magnificent baroque organ of the Bovenkerk. In *4 Raps*, influences from hip-hop and children's songs are combined with a thorough knowledge of what a historic Dutch organ, such as that in Kampen, is capable. Typical of Hage's music is a high level of virtuosity, the use of fast glissandi, the searching for special sonorities and the, often rather abrupt, alternations between introverted and extraverted expression. The result is overwhelming music that sounds freshly improvised, akin to good rap music.

Illustration 3



The organ of the Bovenkerk in Kampen is one of the most famous baroque organs of The Netherlands. It was built in 1743, by Albertus Anthoni Hinsz. Hinsz reused pipes from the previous organ. The instrument was enlarged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Hence, it incorporates renaissance, baroque and romantic stops. The biannual international composition competition at Kampen proves that this mix can sound quite contemporary.

The second example is Zuzana Ferjencikova's improvisation-based composition *Miserere (Psalm 51) für Orgel und Sprecher*, written in 2005. Ferjencikova works in Bratislava and Vienna as an organ professor and organist. In *Miserere*, she applies, among many other compositional techniques, stationary blocks of sound; at such moments only the sonority seems to change, and even then just slightly. She achieves this by the addition of single notes or stops, or by gently manipulating the organ's swell box. In this respect, her music resembles the minimalist approach applied by Arvo Pärt, especially in the latter's compositions based on sacred texts. At other moments, Ferjencikova's approach reflects her study with Jean Guillou. Both aspects, however, comply with Ferjencikova's strongly religious way of life. While this contrasts with Jan Hage's approach (Hage's ears are open to influences from virtually any musical style) the similarities are equally evident: both Hage's and Ferjencikova's music reflects, and expresses, their own perception of life going on around them, rather than focusing on pre-conceived 'cerebral' musical criteria, such as those found in Dupré's *Traité* or those applied at improvisation competitions.

The relevance of individual and intuitive processing of experiences and convictions is also reflected in the work of improvisation ensemble 'Computer Aided Breathing'. This ensemble was formed in 2006 by Kirstin Gramlich (Germany, organ), Stelios Manousakis (Greece, electronics) and Stephanie Pan (USA, vocals, sampler) and specifically endeavours to avoid the use of cerebral forms and controlled developments: 'Our improvisations focus on mood, ambiance, texture and gesture', they explain.<sup>23</sup> 'A fundamental aspect is that sonic elements flow from instrument to instrument and migrate from one perceptual quality to another. The performers are considered to be part of one sonic environment, playing the same collective instrument. There are no solos; everyone is allowed to introduce a new element or elaborate an existing one.' The result is music which is minimalist in the Ferjencikova-sense, but which also resembles a discussion; at times the three performers 'agree' (ruminating peacefully), and at other times they do not.

The fourth example is Ansgar Wallenhorst. Educated in the French tradition by Latry, Escaich and Guillou, he has started exploring new ways of improvising, although his point of departure is completely different from that of Hage, Ferjencikova or CAB. Wallenhorst's organ at the church of St. Peter und Paulkirche in Ratingen, Germany, is presently being equipped with a new electronic system by the young organ builder Benedikt Auferbeck and his company SINUA. This allows the organist to play each pipe separately, and thus to facilitate all possible sostenutos, keyboard divisions and interval couplers, creating, for instance, chords with different tonal colours or counterpoint-like independent

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<sup>23</sup> Interviews with CAB by the author.

sound structures. Just as Computer Aided Breathing ignores the borders between instruments such as the organ and electronics, Wallenhorst frees the organ from its own ‘inner’ borders.

There are many other musicians that should be mentioned here as well. With Thierry Escaich, organist at St. Etienne-du-Mont at Paris, and Olivier Latry, organist at Notre Dame, the Parisian improvisation culture is enriched once again with a new generation, whose music is communicative, inventive, and symphonic. The Dutch harmonium player and organist Klaas Hoek, praised by both Ligeti and Xenakis for his interpretation of their music, is developing a highly autonomous attitude towards music, by improvising on early and contemporary compositions, thus following Liszt’s initiative in a new way. The Up There Trio (led by the Canadian saxophonist Alan Laurillard, who currently lives in Bulgaria) improvises jazz-oriented but, in fact, totally free music. Jörg Abbing of Saarbrücken, Germany, specialises in improvising film music to early 20<sup>th</sup> century silent movies. Another interesting example is the ‘Art of Doing Nothing Ensemble’ in Rotterdam, who often invites special guests such as Mike Garson, keyboard player of David Bowie’s pop group. Many jazz musicians, such as Barbara Dennerlein, have also ‘discovered’ the organ. The list goes on.

Although one must be very careful about predicting the direction any artistic development will take next, some elements of recent improvisations indicate that 21<sup>st</sup> century improvisers are (re)searching new ways to make music at the organ. Some of the characteristics of these ‘new ways’ apply to just more than one of them:

- *Historical attitude* Improvising organists feel free to choose and mix elements of their own musical preferences, using the history of organ music as a library from which to choose resources, inspiration, samples etc., at will. This includes, of course, the history of 20<sup>th</sup> century music: approaching music cerebrally is just one of the many ways of performing adopted by 21<sup>st</sup> century organists. Intuition, emotion and lust can, and do, also play important roles.
- *Originality* The urge to be original is less constrained than it was in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: organ improvisers are aware that anything they attempt may already have been done. Today’s improvisers are quite relaxed about doing it ‘their way’: they are not afraid to play series of inter-related improvisations, thus artistically researching their sources of inspiration.
- *Significance* To be able to explain music is no longer considered an important criterion either: improvisers do not feel the need to impose their ideas about the meaning of their music onto their audience.
- *Audience* As a consequence, it is only logical that the first aim of the new generation of improvisers seems to be *communication*. The audience is ‘drawn in’, and inspired to keep listening. This can be achieved, for example, by applying balanced successions of virtuosic and calmer episodes, by the differentiated use of the many sonorities of organs, or by introducing complex situations in such a way that the audience has time to relax, be it by referring to music

the audience can relate to more easily, by adding humorous material, or by allowing the music to be stationary for some time.

### **Conclusion**

Today's organ improvisations seem to reflect some positive effects of postmodernism. Once believing in cerebrally oriented prefabricated criteria is identified as just one of many ways to strive for musical quality, musicians are free to explore their own artistic talents in their own ways. Another consequence is that audiences must no longer be considered as crowds requiring education about good music. Third, the negative attitude towards improvisation, developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and echoed in the organ culture of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, seems to be disappearing now that improvisation and 'light' music, as well as non-western music, i.e., world music, are generally no longer regarded as less significant than white western music.

But it is not only musicians who are paying intensive and enthusiastic attention to organ improvisation; organ improvisation and its spin-offs in the field of ensemble improvisation are also gaining increasing musicological attention. Dr. Karin Johansson defended her valuable thesis *Organ Improvisation – activity, action and rhetorical practice* at the University of Malmö, Sweden, in 2008.<sup>24</sup> In it, she investigates 'how receptivity and creativity can interact and balance between literacy and orality'.<sup>25</sup> The University of Guelph, Canada, is working on a special programme dealing with musical improvisation in general, and the Orgelpark in Amsterdam will begin an extensive international research programme on improvisation in November, 2008.

This may be considered good news to any musician and/or musicologist: researching improvisation artistically and scientifically means researching the core of music. We may have forgotten it to some extent, but music is essentially about what is actually played and heard, and not so much, at least not in the first place, about scores.

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<sup>24</sup> Karin Johansson, *Organ Improvisation – activity, action and rhetorical practice*, Studies in Music and Music Education 11, Malmö, Malmö Academy of Music, 2008.

<sup>25</sup> Johansson, 2008, 194. Johansson differentiates between 'literacy', referring to musicians that play written music, and 'orality', referring to musicians that have learnt to play by studying how others make music, and thus, in a way, aligning themselves with the ancient oral traditions.

Ханс Фидом

**ОРГУЉСКА ИМПРОВИЗАЦИЈА – УВОД****САЖЕТАК**

Мада су музиколози до данас тешко то признавали, оргуљска традиција била је једина у Западној Европи која је неговала уметност импровизовања. Дефинисање линија развоја оргуљске традиције је компликован задатак. Оргуљаши су, заправо, одувек импровизовали, јер их је начин на који су оргуље биле конструисане спречавао да испрате партитуру тачно онако како је записана, односно, бар не тако прецизно као што је случај у извођачкој пракси других инструмената.

Традиција оргуљске импровизације је веома стара. Још је (пред)средњовековна музика за оруље у основи била импровизициона. Јан Питерсон Швелинк (Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck) је сваке недеље импровизовао на ренесансним оргуљама у цркви Оуд Керк у Амстердаму (Калвинистичка црква је забранила оргуљско извођаштво током служби), Букстехуде (Buxtehude) и Бах (Bach) су такође били знаменити импровизатори, а Лист (Liszt) је био познат по слободном начину извођења, импровизујући према сугестијама у партитури.

Уметност импровизовања била је све мање популарна након Листа, посматрана је као мање значајан и незрео начин музичког мишљења, и стога је била претежно ограничена на цез, клезмер итд. Међутим, париски оргуљаши који су радили у цркви ипак су успели да оживе овај вид извођаштва, развијајући симфонијски стил. У 20. веку, Међународно такмичење у импровизовању у Харлему (International Improvisation Competition, Haarlem) подстакло је оргуљаше да поново импровизују у области световне савремене музике. Крајем 20. века развило се интересовање за оргуљску импровизацију на начин ранијих стилова, али је проблем био у томе што музиколози нису могли у потпуности да реконструишу и дефинишу те стилове у свим њиховим појединостима.

Церебрални приступ који је био карактеристичан за импровизициону извођачку праксу 20. века (рачунајући париске и харлемске савремене стилове, али и оне раније), чини се да у данашње време препушта место другачијем начину импровизовања. Карактеристика новог стила огледа се у односу импровизатора према историји музике као према библиотеци којом он слободно располаже и која му служи као извор инспирације. Поред тога, жеља за оригиналношћу данас је замењена потребом да се истраже начини стварања музике других, који се намерно не предочавају публици, јер се од ње очекује да сама процени резултате тог стваралаштва.

Неистражено богатство у области оргуљске импровизације неизоставна је потреба озбиљних музиколошких и естетичких изучавања. Иницијативе попут оних са универзитета у Малмеу и Амстердаму или Гелфовог универзитета у Канади, указују на то да та истраживања најзад постају плодносна.