

ROSAS – MEDIEVAL ORGAN IMPROVISATION AND MARIAN SONGS

‘I do not much enjoy the sound of the organ,’ confessed bishop Baldric of Dol at the beginning of the 12th century. Apparently he foresaw that his contemporaries might find this rather alarming, because less than a whole sentence later he added the following thought: ‘But it heartens me to consider that the diverse pipes, of varying length and weight, sound together in a melody as a result of the air inside them; in the same way people think the same thoughts, inspired by the Holy Ghost they form in this way a unity.’ In other words: the reverend Baldric enjoyed the organ after all – albeit in a theological sense. With this statement he unwittingly informed us that his ears weren’t musically very experienced.

Actually, a medieval organ doesn’t require all that much talent of its listeners: the similarities and the differences with other instruments make it accessible to almost everybody. Just as other instruments, it has a single tone color, a considerable contrast from later organ types. The differences, that it is played with wide keys and that people are needed to pump air from the bellows into the organ, make the organ music just that much more interesting: a medieval organ concert has as much to offer the eye as the ear. The stubborn idea that medieval organs must have sounded terribly loud (and that Baldric couldn’t stand the instrument because of an extremely refined sense of hearing) appears to be mostly a misunderstanding. Reconstructions of medieval organs throughout Europe demonstrate that, on the contrary, the sound is rather elegant and refined.

The organ featured on this CD is one of these instruments. Winold van der Putten built it in 1999 using two old texts as source material: *De fistulis Organis* (literally ‘About organ pipes’), by an anonymous author from Bern from the 10th century; and the treatise *Diversarum Artium Schedule* (‘Catalog of the various arts’), written by the Benedictine monk Theophilus at the end of the 11th century. An illumination from the Rutland Psalter, dated around 1260, was another important source. Combination of the material from these sources led to conclusions about the manufacture of the pipes, the bellows, the shape of the keys, the appearance, and the interior of the organ (the so-called windchest, which directs the wind to only those pipes belonging to a key which is being played).

The special sound of this organ, which can be described as mild and a bit throaty, is the result of a quite extraordinary way of pipemaking. The shape of all the pipes and the location of the all the mouths are based on a single basic conical shape. The result is that the large pipes are relatively narrow, so that they have a clear sound, while the smaller ones are comparatively wider, so that their overtones are less apparent. The pipes are made, as is the rest of the organ, of plane tree wood. The whole organ is painted in the colors shown in the illustration in the Rutland Psalter, with paint based on linseed oil as instructed by Theophilus.

For each key there are two pipes, each with its own pitch; the two are a fifth apart. The two pitches however blend in such a way as to produce a single sound.

There are four large bellows, constructed after the example of an old blacksmith’s bellows in the 300-year old ‘Smederi’ in Hellendoorn. Two bellows treaders are needed. Measurements indicate that the organ sounds best when the treaders realize a wind pressure in the organ of approximately 110 mm, which is quite high, and in the 20th century has often been seen as a typical sign of 19th-century decadence.

Which brings us back to bishop Baldric. For those who, otherwise than medieval theologians or 20th-century pedants, dare to allow their ears ‘enjoyment in the sound of the organ’, this CD offers an almost mystical journey through time – not in the last place because ancient music played on this organ sounds wonderfully modern.

Hans Fidom

The music

Until recently the 'medieval organ' existed in our imagination only as a picture. There's a very important reason that the manner in which these early organs were played was a riddle: there is little or nothing left of medieval musical notation that seems to refer to 'organ music'. Now that the first successful playable reconstruction of a medieval organ has been made, we can try to rediscover the missing links in the earliest organ tradition. The improvisations played on this CD are a first step in this direction.

It is striking that the earliest sources from which it appears that the middle ages had a rich organ tradition are met in the north of The Netherlands and Germany. The small but important organ tablatures from Winsum (1431) and Oldenburg (1448) contain a number of ornamented versions of proprium melodies, the regular sections of the mass: Kyrie, Credo, Agnus Dei. In the tablatures from Oldenburg there are couplets omitted from the Gloria, the Credo, and in a number of sequences. This may mean that the notated verses were improvised by the organist and that the missing verses were sung by the choir. The Kyrie in our performance follows this structure.

The organ fragments in these sources polyphonic arrangements in which the original Gregorian melody is heard in the tenor, and in the upper voice a rhythmic counterpoint: a style characteristic for the early 15th century, which was still indebted to the 'simple' late 14th-century ars nova. The organ parts are in fact notated improvisations.

In the Oldenburg tablature and in the Præambula in the tablature of Adam Ileborgh (1448) we find a number of rhythmically free pieces called 'redeuntes', which can be viewed as 'documents' of such improvisations, and which were possibly used as intonation before an antiphon or responsory sung by the choir. In this recording we have followed the principle of the redeuntes, an improvisation above bourdon or drone, as the oldest tangible example of free improvisation.

The improvisations all have the following structure.

Opening

Often beginning with a second below the final, followed by a prelude in which the modus is explored. Modus means here both the color of the ecclesiastical tone and the groups of notes (called 'cells') which are constantly heard, with slight variations, in the melody.

Continuation in a longer phrase

Sometimes this phrase is derived from a Gregorian melody, sometimes the form is free but containing ingredients derived from various melodies. This is the core of the improvisation.

Continuation in rhythm

Here appears the first (short-long) or the second rhythmic modus (long-short). In this rhythmic version some of the melodic cells from the longer phrases should still be heard. Examples of the music for this application of rhythm can be found in the conductus and clausulae of the Notre Dame-school. This is music that was heard in and around the church during the liturgy and during processions and feast days, and which was thus probably performed instrumentally.

Postlude

The postlude recalls the introduction and ends with a second below the final to emphasize the end of the piece.

The bourdons or drones, which sound from the large pipes at the sides of the keyboard, are heard prominently in all the improvisations and as accompaniment to the vocal compositions.

The melodies we use are shaped within the bounds of the ecclesiastical tones. On this CD we used the dorian (the most accessible, sweet; often used for Marian songs), the phrygian (with the pure second f-e, which is considered a symbol of Christ's cross), and the lydian modus (possibly derived from North-African music, with the characteristic augmented fourth between the first and the fourth steps; often used in dance-like music).

It is important to know that a scale as such was not a musical ingredient in the middle ages – so there are no long scalic passages.

The rhythmically free approach to the improvisations is conceived as a development from chant. The 11th-century organum manuscript St.-Martial de Limoges provides contemporary starting points for ornamentation and melodic shape.

Non-western music of our own time can also give us an idea of how medieval organ improvisations sounded. There seems to be a relationship between traditional classical Armenian music and the earliest European polyphony: the Armenian shvi (recorder) ‘forces’ the reed instrument (duduk) playing the drone in its improvisations to slide to an other tone. We can find the same idiom in the 11th-century organa (polyphonic song) of the manuscript St.-Martial de Limoges.

It is a challenge demanding some considerable imagination to lay a relationship when improvising on this medieval organ between western and non-western music. We’ll never know for certain how this music sounded. We might find the mechanical noise made between the key and the pipe disturbing; but we could also hear it as percussion, like that sometimes heard with exciting ud music in North Africa. In the same way, the sound of the treading of the bellows seems equally natural.

Jankees Braaksma

The organ builder

Winold van der Putten learned organ building with the brothers Reil of Heerde. He now leads his own organ building firm in Finsterwolde (The Netherlands).

He is specialized in the medieval organ, but is also interested in later styles. Departing from his ideas about historic continuo-playing, he builds, for example, box organs, in most cases for music schools and professional musicians. Among his works, the restorations of several positive organs, among them an Italian instrument (Napoli 1760) and organs in the region around Finsterwolde, are important, as is the construction of a new large 17th century-style organ (with meantone temperament and subsemitones) for Bremen-Walle.

Whether building a portative or a blockwerk organ, a box organ or a church organ, Van der Putten is inspired always by historical sources, be it regarding the architecture, the iconography or the literature of the respective period. Most of the organs he built can be heard on CD.

The musicians

Marian van der Heide studied voice at the Conservatory of Groningen. After earning her diploma she continued her studies with the Canadian soprano Ann Monoyios, a well-known early music specialist. She is a member of Super Librum and of La Poetica, the Ensemble Josquin Desprez, and the Collegium Musicum Groningen. She is regularly heard as soloist on radio and television.

Both early and modern music fascinate her. Together with a pianist, a dancer and an artist she created a performance around ‘Apparition’ (1979) by George Crumb.

Marian van der Heide teaches voice and vocal ensembles at the Municipal Music School at Groningen.

Jankees Braaksma studied recorder at the conservatories of Groningen and Amsterdam with Jeanette vanWingerden, Kees Boeke and Baldrick Deerenberg. With a stipend from the city of Groningen he studied medieval music at the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis in Basel.

Braaksma is not only a recorder player but also plays four medieval organs built by Winold van der Putten: three portatives and the larger instrument heard on this recording. The four organs belong to the collection of Super Librum, the ensemble for medieval music that Braaksma began in 1985. The study of ancient improvisation practices is the main accent of Super Librum.

Super Librum appears at most European early music festivals. This is the seventh CD van the ensemble has made.

Jankees Braaksma is a guest teacher at various conservatories in The Netherlands and Germany.