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TEN TOP HISTORIC ORGANS

By Daniel Moult

The question has been weighing heavily on my mind for weeks. Your editor asked for an article highlighting the ten most significant European organs to visit or listen to. As you are no doubt aware, every organ is unique, and the differences between instruments even by the same maker and within the same geographical radius can be very daunting. I decided to limit myself to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Is there such a thing as a "baroque" organ? The differences in sound, action, layout and even purpose can be more striking than any similarities. But these instruments do share some broad common characteristics. The sound is always clear, the actions are always mechanical of course (although weight and responsiveness vary considerably) and the organs are always wed inseparably to their intended repertoires.

The agonising choices were which of the superlative, breathtakingly beautiful instruments of the era to omit. In the end, those which "made the shortlist" were included for their broad historical scope, each organ representing one of the best of its genre. It is all too easy, given the mechanical and tonal complexities of the instrument, to be led by the organ rather than the music. I have tried to keep my focus on the broad sweep of great organ music in this so-called "baroque" era. This was an era in which the organ was at the heart of music-making, a mechanical marvel which represented the height of human engineering and craftsmanship, and a sound which was potentially (at its fullest) louder and more penetrating than anything else ever experienced.

Inevitably this list is subjective, but most of these instruments are well-documented on commercial recordings (and some on YouTube etc.), and all are unquestionably amongst the best in the world. The order is also rather arbitrary: there is arguably little to distinguish instruments of this calibre in terms of importance and musical worth.

10 St. James', Great Packington, UK (Thomas Parker 1749)

Organs which Handel played are rather like beds in which Queen Victoria slept: too numerous to be believed! But this instrument can claim an even greater fame: it was designed by the composer for the librettist Charles Jennens. As with many English Handelian organs, it is modest: there are no reeds or mixture stops (even the small, second manual division was added some years after the organ's completion). The sound is wonderfully warm but characterful, with a singing quality to every pipe. Although originally built for Jennens' family home of Gopsall, it suits the Packington Estate chapel well. The action gives some idea as to the ideals of the time: fairly light and controllable, but not overly so, and the wind is flexible without being unsteady. The pitch was controversially raised to A440 (for a recording session of Handel organ concerti) in 1959, although the instrument did receive a sympathetic restoration by Noel Mander in 1968.

9 Toledo Cathedral, Spain (J. Verdalonga, 1796)

As with many Spanish instruments, the impressive case belies a relatively modest

number of pipes inside. No large Spanish organ could be regarded as typical, although the bold and direct trumpet and regal ranks *en chamade* (horizontal) became an eighteenth century feature. These ranks were exploited in the Spanish repertoire of the time, as were the singing, gentle choruses. Spanish registration treatises of the time mention many colourful sounds, including much use of the "half-stops" so that a reed solo could be accompanied by a flute on the same manual, for example. The swell division and knee levers for changing stops look forward to the more orchestral ethos of the 19th-century organ, whilst the curious pedal keys (literally buttons on the floor) remind us that pedals played a less than pivotal role in non-Germanic baroque organs .

8 S. Petronio, Bologna, Italy (Lorenzo da Prato, 1471–1475)

Although outside of our "baroque only" time scale, the Bologna organ is more than worthy of inclusion for various reasons. It is exceptionally beautiful, both tonally and visually, and is still eminently suitable for the music of Frescobaldi *et al.* Its sound is singing and breathy, the unforced principals projecting beautifully into the large acoustic. In Italy, the bass compass was longer in relation to the size of the church. At S. Petronio, the bass descends to AA at 16′ pitch (i.e. into the 32′ octave). Typically, such Italian organs contained no reeds or mixture stops: the focus was on a divided chorus of principals, supplemented by flute stops for "solo music" (*da concerto*). If they had any at all, pedal divisions were elementary in Italy and would probably have been used only for long pedal points in toccatas, etc. The decorative framework of stone around the case was added between 1661 and 1675. The church also houses a fine 1596 organ by Malamini: both organs are in excellent playing condition.

7 Saint-Croix, Bordeaux, France (Dom Bedos, 1744–1746)

The sheer *panache* of much of the French baroque repertoire is reflected in organs with rich and varied colours. These organs are capable of power, but never at the expense of charm or clarity. From the warm but penetrating reeds and cornets to the limpid principals and flutes, the instrument allowed organist-composers to be specific in marrying musical effect and form with largely standardised registrations. To hear the music of the *Grand Siècle* played on such a wonderful instrument is revelatory! François de Bedos de Celles (1709-1779), described as a "monk of notable erudition," was also a highly trained and supremely talented organ maker in 18th-century France whose monumental treatise on organ making remains highly respected. This is his finest instrument and has been sensitively restored since its installation, most recently in 1995 by Pascal Quoirin.

6 Saint Etienne, Marmoutier, France (A. Silbermann, 1709–1710)

The organs of Andreas Silbermann (brother of Gottfried: see the Freiberg paragraph below) represent a fascinating mix of French and North German styles. Much of their tonal palette is French, as Andreas trained with the celebrated Parisian builder Thierry, although the bolder choruses and more harmonically developed flutes are all German in inspiration. Amongst other changes, Andreas' son Johann Andreas added four new pedal stops in 1746: again, more developed pedal divisions mark out the German organs of the era from their cousins. For these reasons, players enjoy performing music of both French

Classical and of Bach on such instruments: a curious situation, as the French and North German organ styles of the era are regarded as being very differentiated. Such cross-fertilisation is of course a strong feature of the Alsace region as a whole. This organ has survived unscathed over the centuries. Albert Schweitzer helped to promote the instruments through a "Friends of..." group founded in 1951, and just four years later, the instrument was fully restored. More recent work was undertaken in 2010.

5 Benediktinerabtei, Weingarten, Germany (J. Gabler, 1737–1750)

In some ways the most opulent and certainly the most extravagant organ of our "top ten", the Weingarten organ was meant to be exceptional. Although there is still the backbone of balanced choruses which characterises the Northern European baroque organ, the undulating stops, and distant and special effects (such as thunder, timpani, nightingale and bells) all suggest a later musical aesthetic. The organ is built around the west window and the console is detached and reversed, so that the organist has a good view of the whole church. Inevitably, this leads to a heavy and relatively unresponsive mechanical action, and the sound feels distant and remote to the player. Nonetheless the sheer scale and sumptuousness of this celebrated organ appeals to many, and it sounds well since its restoration in 1981–1983 by the Swiss firm of Kuhn.

4 Sint-Bavokerk, Haarlem, The Netherland (C. Müller, 1735-1738)

Arguably the world's most famous, and certainly the world's most photographed organ, this iconic instrument was famed throughout Europe and became something of a centre of "organ pilgrimage"! Handel and Mozart both played on it, the 10 year old Mozart describing it as "an excellent, beautiful instrument". Its stunning case (whose restoration in 1959 cost more than the restoration of the actual organ) reminds us of the significance of civic pride in such instruments. In fact, the diarist John Evelyn (writing in 1641) says that hardly any use of the previous organ was made in "Divine Service": the town councils often owned such instruments and their role tended towards the secular. Perhaps more than any other celebrated organ, Haarlem's clear vertical disposition and logical geography of divisions inspired many organs built after World War II under the influence of the *Orgelbewegung* (Organ Reform Movement). Some claim that its bold but singing tones were emaciated somewhat in a controversial "restoration" by Marcussen in 1959-1961, who also replaced the action with a modern, lighter mechanical one. The instrument had however already been altered tonally and mechanically during the nineteenth century. More recent tonal work by Flentrop has reversed some of the 1959 changes. For historical significance alone, this organ is well worth the visit.

3 Freiberg Dom, Germany (G. Silbermann, 1714)

This organ may well have been known by J.S Bach and was made by his friend and esteemed colleague Gottfried Silbermann. This has led to claims that such an organ is "ideal" for Bach's music. Although the truth is probably more complicated (no one specific German organ type of the time is "ideal" for his music), such repertoire does come alive on such instruments. The sound is within the same parameters as the major Dutch organs, but brighter and perhaps more energetic. The actions were lighter

and Silbermann himself claimed they were as light "as a clavichord". Unlike Haarlem *et al*, Silbermann's organs did not have *Rückpositiv* divisions behind the player's back, and the pedal pipes are at the rear of the case, as opposed to Haarlem's imposing pedal pipe towers on either side. As with Haarlem, this organ has been used extensively in commercial recordings, which has also helped to spread its fame.

2 Sint-Laurenskerk, Alkmaar, The Netherlands (van Hagerbeer 1639–1646, F.C. Schnitger 1722–1725)
The Netherlands is blessed with many great organs. The Alkmaar organ stands as one of the pinnacles of the organ maker's art. The case alone is a national treasure, designed by the famous painter and architect van Campen. Although the organ has its roots in a Dutch late 17th-century instrument, the sound owes arguably more to the work of the North German maker Frans Caspar Schnitger. Unlike Groningen (see below), Alkmaar was fortunate that lack of money prevented unsympathetic proposals to be executed in the 1920s. In fact, lack of money has saved many a fine organ from well-meaning but ultimately disastrous "improvements"! Thorough restorations in the 1940s and, more notably, the 1980s by Flentrop have kept the instrument in a wonderful playing state. However, it was the re-plastering of the church in the 1990s which made the organ sound more direct and clear in the building! The church also has a famous 1511 van Covelens "koororgel" (a one manual organ housed above the choir stalls), the oldest surviving playable organ in The Netherlands. Its beautiful tones in a fine acoustic have fooled some visitors into believing they were hearing the main organ!

1 Martinikerk, Groningen, The Netherlands (A. Schnitger, 1691/92)
Many of these 10 instruments could have headed the list, and the choice is certainly arbitrary when it comes to these spell-binding Northern European organs. Groningen is a city and region awash with beautiful and historically important organs, as documented so interestingly in a new DVD and CD set release.[1] The organ in the oldest church, the Martinikerk, has a long history dating back to 1450. Most of the present instrument is by the great Arp Schnitger, another maker (as with G. Silbermann) synonymous with the Bach school. As late as 1938/39, the Martinikerk organ suffered "modernisation" as the action was electrified and some re-voicing was undertaken. The restoration back to mechanical action and reversal of these tonal changes was undertaken by Jürgen Ahrend (1976–1984), whose firm has gained an excellent reputation in such areas. This organ's combination of stunning, bold but never oppressive choruses and plentiful, colourful solo sounds has captured the hearts and minds of many organists throughout the world.

So there you have it! Arguably more than any other musical medium, the organ needs to be experienced in its setting. This will not often be practical for you, I realise, but I believe that all these organs would justify the effort. Whether you hear these instruments "in the flesh" or online, enjoy the voyage of discovery!

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1 "Martinikerk Rondeau" / "Pronkjuwelen in Stad en Ommeland" set, available from www.fuguestatefilms.co.uk