

8-18-87

answered  
8/24/87

Dear Jim,

I was happy to get to know you better at our recent meetings. I appreciate your spirit and energy and suspect they are just what Sem needs.

I decided to get my thoughts to you in print rather than over the phone. We could still talk sometime if either wants.

The essence of my concern is that the Sem organ committee not rule out a priori some of the building techniques that produce a Schnitger sound: flexible winding, the characteristic Schnitger Fagott (or is it a Posaune?), and a modified tuning system. There are other factors, such as high lead content, but I don't know enough about building organs to comment on them.

Two or three years ago I would not have made such recommendations for a parish setting. I felt that colleges (seminaries) might benefit from such an instrument but that they were impractical for a parish. Now I feel that even a parish's music program can benefit from such a unique instrument. I say this after playing perhaps 30 tracker organs in the last seven years. But the most convincing evidence to me was experiencing a modified Kirnberger III temperament in eight worship services at the recent convention of the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians. (I experienced them in proper observer status from the balcony!) Instead of hearing something that came across odd, eccentric or esoteric, I heard something very musical.

The standard objection, of course, is that such an instrument is limiting. But how much of the French romantic music and some other 20th century literature do we need to be able to play at Sem. (Play it in the gym...) I've found that the limitations of a Schnitger-style north German organ are the very factors that make the most "useable" music for our worship sound more interesting, musical and exciting. The Friday before our meetings an organist in Berkeley expressed the same view - that so much of the pre-Bach music which sounds boring on some organs comes to life on his Brombaugh. At dinner one evening in Milwaukee, Frank Zabell said the same thing about the Jaeckel in Wausau. And I didn't prime him for the opinion, honest! He became positively animated as he described playing some pieces in Wausau and then playing the same pieces at Northwestern - where, he said, they again sounded rather dull. He also pointed out that Mendelssohn sounds good on the Wausau organ. (The Berkeley organist had pointed out to me that a theoretician in England at the time Mendelssohn's Sonatas [Voluntaries] were published in England described a tuning system somewhere between Kirnberger and even-tempered. He (Berkeley) also mentioned evidence that some organs as late as Mendelssohn weren't likely retuned in even-temperament anyway.) What about Manz? I've started taking along some of his lush settings (e.g. "O Welt, ich muss dich lasen") when I audition organs. I feel they work fine. An 8' Principal, which is so much gentler on some of these organs, can produce a good effect where Manz calls for strings. (Of course there's no reason to exclude strings from the design if they are desired.) What about other instruments? Since they tune to what they hear, they should have no trouble. Handbells playing with organ might be a problem; I don't know.

I'm not advocating some of the features found on the real "purist" designs, e.g. no swell, no pistons, pedalboard and keyboard dimensions quite different from AGO standard. I would shy away from extremes not because they produce a less musical instrument, but because some occasional Sem organists might not have the patience to adjust their technique - and the worshipers might not have the patience for the increased number of mistakes from those who don't adjust.

So where is the ideal instrument which incorporates some of these concerns? I don't know. John Panning told me that the Dobson at St Paul's (LCA?) in Neenah is tuned in Kirnberger III. I've heard that Brombaugh has built one instrument with swell shutters - "under duress." A Noack in Glen Ellyn, IL has a different tuning system, but I feel its Rueckpositiv is too aggressive.

Flexible wind: too often I've heard only shaky wind. Two organs in Seattle by Paul Fritts, builder in Tacoma, WA, both have a very sensitive and musical flexible wind. Both organs also have a draw knob which stabilizes the wind - for those times when more solid wind is desired.

Schnitger pedal reed: I've played organs of 40 and more ranks with only a 16' reed and 16' flute in the pedal. That struck me as inadequate. Why no 16' prinzipal? The Schnitger style reed has so much harmonic fundamental that you don't even need the 16' flute for a pedal registration which balances a full plenum in the manuals. I've experienced this on at least four organs.

8' Prinzipal but no 8' Flute in pedal: the Schnitger (?) style principal is often so gentle that you don't need a soft flute.

If you don't have access to recordings of these older tunings, I can recommend some. Better yet, go to Wausau or Neenah, if you haven't yet. And did you see the interview with Fritz Noack in the latest "American Organist"? The article lists all his organs; some are in St Paul, Grand Rapids, Reedsburg WI (St John's Lutheran), St Peter MN, and some in IL.

I hope you don't find all this presumptuous. I know that whatever instrument you choose will greatly enhance the worship life of the Sem community. Let me know if you want any more input.

Yours in Christ,



Bryan Gerlach