

ORGAN REVIVAL: MUSIC OLD AND NEW

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THE place of the organ in the musical scheme of today, and especially its possibilities and uses in composition, are a puzzle to many composers. In the eighteenth century and before, Bach, Handel and the host of contrapuntists of the baroque period expressed themselves most readily and freely through this instrument. Styles of composition have changed, but the organ has remained – as it must always – an ensemble that is best suited to long contrapuntal lines of melody. Berlioz summed up the feeling of the nineteenth century romanticists rather neatly by remarking that the orchestra was the King of Instruments, the organ the Pope. And (to mix up Berlioz' metaphor a bit) presumably never the twain shall meet. Perhaps it was just as well that Berlioz was of this opinion, for any organ composition of his would have been pretty frightful. Fortunately the unfolding century, with the music of Liszt, Reubke, Mendelssohn, Brahms, and Franck, disproved Berlioz' limited estimate.

Moreover, against this nineteenth century view, I should like to set that of the eminent American conductor, well known for his transcriptions from organ, who credits the instrument with a literature that is second only to that of the orchestra. Not all this literature is well known, nor is it valued even by organists or played by them with the pride it deserves. We need hardly enlarge on the magnificent music of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which found its superb culmination in Bach and Handel. Their compositions for organ are cornerstones in the foundations of music. The famous composers of the nineteenth century contributed many excellent works, and at least one masterpiece, although the essential nature of the organ unfits it for the chordal and percussive style of romantic composition. (One might add, incidentally, that the impossibility of being engagingly trivial with the instrument may have prevented its more extensive use by composers of that day.)

There are the *Chorale Preludes* of Brahms, his last opus, which he seems to have written as a passport to heaven, the great Franck works, the splendid sonatas of Mendelssohn, the contributions of Schumann,

the fireworks of Liszt, and perhaps greatest of all – the prodigious *Sonata in C Minor* on the Ninety-fourth Psalm, by Julius Reubke, a favorite pupil of Liszt, who lived only twenty-four years, long enough, however, to produce one work assuring his place in musical history. Here indeed the pupil excels his teacher. The sonata is splendidly woven from one dramatic theme, used in a variety of shapes and rhythms for the different sections of the composition. With consummate technic and imagination, Reubke unites the fire of the romantics with the classical contrapuntal tradition. The work is a worthy successor to Bach's own *Passacaglia*.

But like other great pieces in our organ literature, it is less known than it should be. The reason for this, apart from difficulties of execution, is the limited number of organs on which such music may be adequately realized. It is not a question of size, but rather of excellent and clear voicing of the instrument. It has taken time to perfect recording microphones that can encompass, rather than be engulfed by, organ tone. Fortunately today many large organ works, old and new, may become widely known and enjoyed through records. A recording of a fine organ may be more illuminating than an actual performance on an indifferent instrument. Why, it is even possible that the Bach *Passacaglia* will eventually be returned to the organists!

The radio too affords a unique opportunity for bringing the finest organ literature to many thousands. During the past two years it has been my rare privilege to play much of this music for a national, sometimes even international, audience in a series of broadcasts sponsored by Mrs. Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge.* These programs are given on the beautifully voiced organ housed so perfectly in the Germanic Museum of Harvard University. The instrument is designed tonally on classic, or baroque lines, though it takes advantage of modern electric action. Baroque is, of course, a misleading adjective as applied to the voicing of this instrument, for, if a parallel may be drawn between design and sound, the tone of the organ is severely simple rather than ornate. Organs attained great perfection in the eighteenth century, and the Germanic Museum instrument represents a return to this conception of a fine chorus ensemble of tone as the first essential characteristic. All pipes stand in the open, unmuffled by even partial enclosure. The pedal and the two manuals each consist of fully developed choruses of fundamental and harmonic steps, and – perhaps most important of all – the

*Mr. Biggs' well known programs are presented every Sunday morning over C.B.S. with the cooperation of the music department of Harvard University. The organ here discussed was built by Donald Harrison of the Aeolian-Skinner Organ Company.

wind pressure is low (two-and-a-half inches) giving the speech of the pipes an easy, unforced and transparent quality. All these strictly musical essentials, the simple, direct, tonal design, enable the organ to face a microphone with ease, though it was not specifically designed for that purpose.

In the majority of our programs we have presented music of all periods for solo organ. But we have also had the good fortune to include the extensive literature for organ and orchestra. With the Fiedler Sinfonietta (of Boston Symphony players) under the direction of Arthur Fiedler, we have given many of the Handel organ concertos, so magnificent in their swaggering directness and antiphonal effects, and similar works by Pergolesi and others, the charming sonatas for strings and organ of Mozart, forgotten concertos of Rheinberger, and many sonatas, canzoni and other works for organ and instrumental combinations of brass or woodwind.

An outstanding new development has been the activity of leading American composers who have seized an opportunity to re-create today something of the golden age of organ composition. We have broadcast the premieres of the following works: Walter Piston, *Prelude and Allegro for Organ and String Orchestra*; Howard Hanson, *Concerto for Organ and String Orchestra with Harp*; Roy Harris, *Chorale for Organ and Brasses*; Leo Sowerby, second movement from the *Concerto in C Major for Organ and Full Orchestra*; Quincy Porter, *Fantasy on a Pastoral Theme for Organ and String Orchestra*; Emil Kornsand, *Fantasia for Organ and String Orchestra*; Leo Sowerby, "Classic" *Concerto for Organ and String Orchestra*. To this list should be added Sowerby's *Poem for Viola and Organ* played on another network with William Primrose. Also the first radio performance of Marcel Dupré's *Heroic Poem for Organ and Brasses*, and Poulenc's *Organ Concerto with String Orchestra and Kettle Drums*. Not since the spacious days of Bach and Handel has there been such an outpouring of new music for the instrument.

Appropriately enough, the beautifully expressive *Prelude* to the Piston work is in the form of a three-part canon for the organ with melodic development in the orchestra. This leads to an *Allegro* of Mozartean grace and vigor, developing in variation form a theme first set forth by the lower strings, with the organ part in classic toccata style.

In contrast, Hanson's music is harmonic in style and highly dramatic. It fits the organ very well, however, while the harp contributes a wonder-

ful sheen to the tonal texture; interestingly enough, this is not at all lost in the combination of the strings and organ.

New sonorities are explored in Harris' *Chorale*, quite on the lines, if not the idiom, of the Gabrieli canzoni. The work calls for three trumpets, two horns and three trombones playing in cantando style, and the brass makes a final noble sound against the organ tone. This *Chorale* is to be followed later by a *Toccata*.

Sowerby's magnificent *Concerto in C for Organ and Full Orchestra* was written in 1937. Koussevitzky gave the complete work its first hearing in 1938; performances followed in Chicago and Cincinnati. The slow movement, scored chiefly for strings, was played over C.B.S. The recording is awaited impatiently. It is only by such means that large scale works can become widely known and enjoyed. Actual performances are limited by various factors – in this case the difficulty of finding a fine orchestra and organ under the same roof. Critics agree this is Sowerby's best work, and as a concerto, without equal.

Porter has written most unconventionally for organ, but the resulting effect with orchestra is highly imaginative and successful. Instead of placing the pitch of the string tone over that of the organ, frequently and conventionally done, the positions are often reversed with excellent effect. It is splendid to have composers approach such a composition with a fresh musical point of view, without a set of technical patterns up their sleeves, in the manner of the French. The results are creatively important.

Kornsand turned out and conducted a striking work, harmonically unusual, and with a rather special recitative freedom. In rondo form, his fantasia makes use of the whole tone scale.

Sowerby's "*Classic*" *Concerto for Organ and Strings*, performed Easter Sunday, April 9th, with Richard Burgin as conductor, is made up of two buoyant and vigorous allegro movements, separated by one of wistful haunting beauty. Here is the very essence of Anglo-Saxon romanticism elsewhere found only in Delius. A fine clanging coda brings the last movement to its end.

These compositions represent an enrichment and rejuvenation of the repertory that may have far-reaching effects. Composer and public are experiencing a renaissance of interest in the organ. Instead of being an instrument removed – the Pope in isolation – the organ may be once again restored as a medium of expression for all creative spirits and a joy to all people as it once was in the days of Bach and Handel.