

SPRING MEETING 2014

St AVOLD Lorraine, France

The annual Spring Meeting of the European Chapter of the American Guild of Organists took place from April 21-26, the week after Easter, 2014. Member Fabrice Muller organized an itinerary under the title of "An Enchanted Glimpse of Organs in Alsace & Lorraine, France" and it turned out to be just that. The 36 participants came from 8 countries including Germany (10), USA (10), Holland (6), France (3), England (4), Belgium (1), Finland (1) and Australia (1)! The convention hotel was conveniently located in the quaint town of St. Avold. With the opening dinner on Monday night the quality of this choice was confirmed.

After a good night's sleep (for most to recover from the strains of the Easter celebration and the journey) everyone boarded the bus Tuesday morning for first adventures. Only an hour away in Hayange an historic Dalstein-Haerpfer organ (53/III/P, 1894) awaited the group in St. Martins Church. The titulaire Olivier Schmitt greeted the participants and demonstrated the romantic strengths of the instrument with a rousing reading of excerpts from Vierne's 4th Symphony. As with almost all organs visited, a round of open console followed with equally fitting repertoire: Widor (Joby Bell), Franck Pièce héroïque (Jennifer Chou), Lefebure-Wely (Agnes Goerke) plus a modern twist with the Toccata from the Easter Suite by Patrick Hopper (Johan Hermans). In the neighboring village of Thionville the organ in St. Maximin started out as an instrument by Dondaine in 1792 incorporating elements of earlier instruments. Various changes and rebuilds in the course of time left their marks until Alfred Kern restored it to the 18th century aesthetic in 1969 (44/III/P). Here also the titulaire Raphaële Garreau de Labarre capably demonstrated the organ with a Partita by Joh. Gottfried Walther. The style of the instrument was once again reflected in the choice of literature from the group and included Couperin (Barry Jordan), de Grigny (Christa Rakich), Nivers (Axel Wilberg), Buxtehude (Stefan Pollok), Bach (Jean van Cleef) and even Denis Bédard (J. Hermans). The enormous and spectacular Cathedral of St. Steven (Saint-Etienne) in Metz was the next stop. One can't help but be awed by the splendor of the space with the ceiling a lofty 42 meters above the floor! Not only is the edifice special, it also houses a very special organ. The original swallows nest organ from 1537 underwent so many changes in its long history that Marc Garnier did a complete reconstruction (11/II/P) in 1981 in which the tonal design mirrors that of the Dutch Renaissance, complete with short octave and meantone temperament. It is housed in the original organ case of 1537! Due to construction only 2 members were allowed to play the organ. Wim Riefel demonstrated the organ with period music by Sweelinck (Echo

Fantasie, Ps. 60, Allein Gott), Hans Leo Hassler (Kyrie), Samuel Scheidt (Christe qui lux), and from the Susanne van Soldt Manuscript of 1599 (Psalms and Dances) after which Christa Rakich improvised some Variations on "Was Gott tut, das ist wohl getan". The neighboring church of St. Ségolène housed another historic Dalstein-Haerpfer organ (31/II/P, 1890/1898). With Mendelssohn's 4th Sonata, the Cantilène by Gabriel Pierné and Langlais' Te Deum Barry Jordan proved that French Romantic, German Romantic and even modern music all sound convincing on it. Open console yielded appropriate music by César Franck (Jennifer Chou) and Alexis Chauvet (Alissa Duryee). The closer for the first day was a concert given on a small and unpretentious instrument by Verschneider (10/II/P, 1888) in the village of Zimming. Two members treated the participants and the

townspeople to a unique program showcasing the organ. Jennifer Chou presented the individual stops and combinations with the various movements of Johann Sebastian Bach's Partita on "Sei gegrüßet, Jesu gütig". Johan Hermans followed with the impressionistic second movement of Hoppers afore-mentioned Easter Suite, a Meditation on "Victimae paschali laudes" and, for the grand finale, a performance of Philipp Glass' minimalistic composition "Mad Rush". Their concert experience was evident and the hearty applause well deserved.

The events on Wednesday didn't entail bus rides, as they were all directly in St. Avold. Some used the undeclared time in the forenoon to visit the Lorraine American Cemetery and Memorial just outside of town. It covers 113.5 acres and contains 10,849 graves, the largest number of any American World War II cemetery in Europe. Others became acquainted with the French classical organ in the former Abbey Church of Saint Nabor. The beautiful organ case situated in the back of the church was sculptured in the 18th Century. The instrument it now contains is a reconstruction (39/IV/P) by Koenig from 1987. While the bottom 2 Manuals (Pos., G.O) have a compass of 51 notes, the top 2 (Réc., Echo) have only 32, the pedal only 29. After a lunch of choice in the local establishments the afternoon was reserved for a workshop held on classical French music moderated by Fabrice Muller. Participants played works by de Grigny, Couperin, Clérambault and one setting from Bach's "Orgelbüchlein". Tempo, registration, touch and articulation were all topics of discussion. A very special treat was then an introduction to the clavichord which took place in the restored 16th Century Chapel located in the hotel. Member Alissa Duryee demonstrated her very own practice and travel instrument (which she built herself) with works by J.C. Bach, W.A. Mozart and a set of Variations by Josef Haydn. The presentation was as enjoyable as it was informative. Another luscious dinner in the hotel was followed by an evening concert in St. Nabor featuring Rémi Muller, Baritone, accompanied by his brother Fabrice Muller performing works by Händel, Charpentier and Bach. The program also included Clérambault performed by Agnes Goerke and de Grigny performed by Christa Rakich. Two highlights of the program were Muller's performance of the "Cradle Song" for organ composed by member Bernard Sanders and Christa Rakich's impelling interpretation of Bach's Chorale fantasy "Komm, Heiliger Geist" (BWV 651).

Thursday began with the venerable Andreas Silbermann (40/III/P) organ from 1710 in the abbey church of Marmoutier, where he was given the opportunity to build a "large 8-foot" Parisian-styled instrument. It is the sole surviving example of Silbermann's first creative period when he was still very much influenced by his stay in the workshop of Francois Thierry "King's organbuilder" in Paris. According to the contract the organ was not entirely completed (2 manuals and 20 stops), toeboards were left free to accommodate additional stops. The instrument was completed in 1746 by his son Johann Andreas, who added 4 new stops in the pedal, a Cromorne in the Positif and a 5-stop windchest in the Echo. Due to a relative poverty in the area, the organ was only maintained and no significant changes were made. In 1955 it was restored by Kern and Mühleisen. Christa Rakich demonstrated the individual stops with brief improvisations and then played Bach's "Dies sind die heil'gen 10 Gebot" from the "Clavierübung". Other members followed suit with "O Mensch beweine" (Christian Michel), "Ich ruf zu Dir" (Barbara McKelway), "Liebster Jesu, wir sind hier" (Barbara Gulick) and "Christ lag in Todesbanden" (Jean van Cleef). Others chose to probe the French style with pieces by Clérambault (Barry Jordan) and Couperin (Axel Wilberg). The next stop at the baroque priory church of St. Quirin held yet another but much smaller J.A. Silbermann organ in store. With only 15 stops on 2 manuals and pedal it proved a match for a variety of literature. Agnes Goerke demonstrated the stops with Böhm's Partita "Wer nur den lieben Gott lässt walten". Next to more Couperin (Meredith Baker), Clérambault (Barry Jordan) and de Grigny (Alissa Duryee) appeared Chaumont

(Alex Wilberg), Buxtehude (John Falkingham), Bach's "Wenn wir in höchsten Nöten" (Tom Bailey) and "Jesu gütig, sei begrüßet" (Jean van Cleef). Another comparatively small organ (22/II/P) was built in the St. Rémy church in Deneuvre by Claude Legros in 1704. Jennifer Chou emphasized the classical side of the instrument with a Suite by Jacques Boyvin. The last organ of the day was also the largest. In 1751 Nicolas Dupont built an organ with 56 stops on 4 manuals and pedal in the church of St. Jacques in Lunéville. It was adapted to the modern taste by Jeanpierre in 1852 including the installation of Barker levers. The restoration in 2003 by Cattiaux strove to revive the work of Dupont but to keep the legacy of Jeanpierre. The sheer size of the organ allows the interpretation of a wide scope of literature. Jennifer Chou once again demonstrated the instrument but this time with a Suite by Guy Bovet. Participants followed up with Boëllmann's "Prière á Notre Dame" (John Falkingham), Widor's "Adagio" from the 4th Symphony (Barbara McKelway), Franck's "Prélude" from Prélude, Fugue and Variation (Alissa Duryee), but also the 2nd movement of Bach's e-minor Trio Sonata (Agnes Goerke), Bach's arrangement of the Concerto G-Major by Ernst (Joby Bell), and excerpts from his Prelude in b-minor and from Alain's "Litanies" (Tom Bailey). The fact that this organ sounded a whole tone lower than a'=440, as were many of the instruments we visited, didn't do the music any harm but did bother some of the players. A fulfilled day closed with a group dinner and ride back to the hotel.

The final day started with the beautiful warm Spring weather accompanying the group all week. The wonderful Alsatian city of Strasburg with its canals and bridges ("Little Venice") was the target. The historic Temple Neuf (New Church) served as a warm-up for the excursion. This historic building bears witness to the many upheavals in this geographic region. First established as a Dominican church around 1260, it became Reformed in 1524 before it was abandoned when the Protestants moved into the Cathedral. In 1681 Louis XIV insisted that the Cathedral be Catholic and the Protestants moved back into the old Dominican Church after considerable reconstruction due to its advanced state of deterioration. Only 100 years later the edifice is subjected to repeated artillery attacks in the Franco-Prussian war leaving virtually only the walls standing and destroying the Silbermann organ and also the library with the city's archives as well as 400,000 books, among them 24,000 manuscripts and 9,000 incunabula. Strasburg became a German city and the structure was rebuilt in a neo-Romanesque style covered with pink sandstone. The new organ (40/III/P) was built by Joseph Merklin and inaugurated in 1877 by Alexandre Guilmant. The 20th Century saw various modifications including electrification but a thorough restoration (including mechanical action with Barker levers and the 32' Soubasse) by Toussaint was completed in 2008. The organ now has 45 stops (21 of these at 8' pitch!) on 3 manuals and pedal. The titulaire Gilles Oltz demonstrated the organ with an improvisation and some members had time to try it out before progressing to the next stop. The short walk over to the nearby Cathedral allowed an appreciative view of one of the most beautiful gothic cathedrals in Europe. Cathedral organist Pascal Reber met the group in the transept and shared information about the history of the present organ. The swallows nest Organ case dates from 1385/1491 but the instrument itself was built by Alfred Kern in 1981. Reber asked for a theme from the group and proceeded to improvise a Fantasy on the requested Easter theme of Victimae paschali laudes which left no desires unfulfilled. Only 3 participants were allowed up to the organ and they delivered fine performances as well: "Menuet Gothique" by Boëllmann (Agnes Goerke), Tièrce an taille by Couperin (Axel Wilberg) and finally the Toccata from Boëllmann's "Suite Gothique" marvellously interpreted by Joby Bell. For contrast the next stop was at the Church of St. Madeleine with a small Silbermann positive organ from 1719 maintained by the nearby Museum. The afternoon was more loosely organized allowing time for lunch and visiting the Thomas Church, the Bouclier Reformed Church, St. Guillaume, and St. Pauls. The (partially) Silbermann organ (39/III) in the

Thomas Church was made famous by Albert Schweitzer and still commands the room. The new organ in the Bouclier church was built by D. Thomas in 2007 (34/II/P). It is in the style of Central Germany in the first half of the 18th Century (modelled after Trost). The titulaire Jérôme Mondésert presented a veritable concert as demonstration and delivered admirable readings of Kaufmann's "Variations on Ein feste Burg" (one of the few pieces from the period with precise registrations – which all could be realized here), Krebs Trio in C-Major, J.S. Bach Chorale Trio on "O Gott, du frommer Gott", Adagio (from Toccata, Adagio and Fugue), Prelude in D-Major, and a setting of "Ein feste Burg" entailing Bach's own registration suggestion of a Fagott 16' in the left hand. Many of the participants had already visited the Dresden area at the Spring Meeting several years earlier and could testify that the style copy was very convincing! Due to a long series of modifications and changes by at least 5 different organ builders there was virtually nothing left of the original Silbermann organ in St. Guillaume. Thus it was decided in 1987 that Yves Koenig should build a new organ (58/IV) in the style of Gottfried Silbermann in order to enrich the organ scene in Strasburg and to have an organ suitable for playing the works of J.S. Bach. Although the original casework of the Silbermann organ was reused, the Rückpositiv was left empty. Last but by far not least are the 2 organs in the church of St. Pauls: the biggest Walcker organ in Alsace and the Neo-Renaissance organ by Garnier. The 3-manual Walcker organ from 1897 boasts 75 stops including a Gross-Sesquialter (5 1/3' + 3 1/5') and a Tierce-Septime on the Great as well as a 32' in the Pedal. The other instrument is perhaps one of the most original to appear in the last quarter of the 20th Century. The ideas of Marc Garnier, Harald Vogel and Gustav Leonhardt led to the construction of a 2-manual organ in meantone temperament. The manual compass is 45 notes with 9 stops on the Great, only a Regal 8' on the Positiv, and 4 stops on the 25-note Pedal. The city truly had something for everyone! Traditionally the Spring Meeting closes with a final dinner and the obligatory thank yous. The last evening this time had a special twist. Before the meal one had the opportunity to discover the new Aubertin organ (30/II/P, 1995) in the small village of Saessolsheim. It stands firmly in the French tradition complete with Cornets and Reeds however it is tuned after Young, giving it a particular flavor. The church also has a 5-stop positive organ from 1992 also by Aubertin. The fine traditional Alsatian meal in a rustic locality was welcomed after a long day of organs in the city but after only an hour repast the group returned to the church for a special concert. In arrangements for 2 organs, 3 organists and percussion the participants and townspeople were treated to music by Dowland (Lachrimae), Viadana (La Mantovana) and Bach (from 2nd Brandenburg). The originality and creativity however came in the second half with transcriptions from Prokofiev's Romeo and Juliet (the Knife Dance), Saint-Saën's Carnival of the Animals (The Aquarium), Borodin's Prince Igor (Polovitsian Dance), and – to take the house down – Ravel's Bolero. This could only be topped by the Alsatian dessert with coffee back at the local restaurant before boarding the bus for the last trip back to the hotel.

The success of this Spring Meeting was almost guaranteed by the circumspect preparation done by Fabrice Muller. He did have much support and assistance especially in advance by Dean Judy Riefel-Lindel but also during the whole week with colleague participants taking over demonstrations and concerts. A constant companion through the week was the event booklet put together by Bram Stoutmeijer with detailed information about the venues and instruments and schedule. Most noteworthy and admirable was the camaraderie of all participants. Whether professional, non-professional, full-time, parttime, hobby, or even non-organist, whether from the US, Europe or Australia, everyone – bar none – got along with everyone! Apparently not only is music an international language, organ is too! To say that "a good time was had by all" can only be an understatement.

Bernard Sanders

