



PIPE ECHOES

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Organ - Hopping in Holland

By Koh Jia Hwei

One of the perks of being an organist, is the pilgrimages one makes to see organs around the world. I undertook such a trip to Holland in December 2016, where I had the privilege of getting up close and personal with a few of these rare beasts, as well as meeting and playing for renowned organist, Pieter van Dijk.

I had a chance to play on the historic Hagebeer-Schnitger (built by Hagebeer in 1645, re-built by Schnitger in 1723), at the Grote Sint Laurenskerk in Alkmaar. It was freezing in the pitch-dark cathedral, and each stop was so heavy, that it needed both hands to pull!

I also had the singular pleasure of a personal tour and performance by Pieter, on the oldest playable organ in Holland, situated within the same church: the Van Covelens, which was built in 1511.

On the flip side, two of my least favourite things about being an organist, are walking across a densely-packed mosaic of graves on the stone floor in a dark, deserted sanctuary. The other contender might be scaling narrow and rickety winding stairs, whilst wearing four layers of woollen clothes - including a trailing winter coat, a large thermos flask, an even larger bag full of books and a pair of organ shoes - in order to access the console!



Photo above: Pipes of the Müller at the Grote Sint Bavokerk

... Continued on page 3

Message From The Dean

The landscape is changing. The pipe organ in Singapore is enjoying renewed interest - perhaps a happy result of a combination of factors, namely the ongoing public concerts in the concert hall, coupled with the restoration (and expansion) of historic instruments venues downtown.

There is also a project in the works that may soon see a new pipe organ installed in a school. One can hope that these developments would one day see the organ and its music accepted into the musical mainstream.

Let us support these efforts ... and also enjoy the process!

With every good wish
Dr Evelyn Lim
Dean, 2016-2018



Historic stops on the JW Walker & Sons (1970) organ at the Freemasons' Hall, photo by Ong Te-Min

Organ joke:

“Why are organists like a broken-winded cab horse? They are always longing for another stop.”

Pulling Out The Stops

By Khong Swee Lin

I fondly remember seeing, as a music student, a cartoon of a hapless organist at the manual of a massive pipe organ that resembled an enormous switchboard. He was totally dwarfed by and at the mercy of the mammoth instrument. That, believe it or not, became rather oddly, my perspective of a pipe organ!

In 1960s Singapore, learning to play the piano was de rigeur and I was fortunately able enough to do well in that other rite of passage, the ABRSM (Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music) examinations. Organ music remained somewhere in the misty background and would surface if I was forced to attend an occasional church wedding or two. “Registration” definitely didn’t register with me as yet! Piano, orchestral and chamber works were the mainstay of my musical diet. Though I must confess, I wasn’t quite so diligent in piano practice.



Photo Credit: Sesame Street's Count Dracula at the organ

Sunday School was fun! But there were no organs or organ music. Except for enduring the often somewhat out of tune pianos, (standard musical instruments), and repeating the singing of hymns which had already been learnt and sung desultorily in school singing lessons, we girls spent useful sessions honing essential life skills, for example, learning what could be done with a simple rubber band but I digress!

“... why did she choose to play that behemoth? It’s certainly unsociable - you couldn’t indulge in a spot of chamber music, and so on. How wrong I was! I have recently enjoyed performances by organists together with string and wind instrumentalists, vocalists, pianists and even a sand artist.”

Later, church and membership classes were also fun as I could enjoy music for free, be it a Bach prelude or anthem by Elgar or Parry. Unfortunately in those days the church was not airconditioned and discomfort added more fuel to an already short attention span. In between the anthems I cultivated the art of “pretending to listen” or made critical decisions on where I could go to spend my pocket money. Usually I ended up at the nearby “mama” shop in the old YMCA building on Stamford Road, demolished in 1981.

So organ music was not on my list of priorities. Besides the piano, a stringed instrument occupied me for some years.

What caused the change?

A stint as church pianist in a tiny “start-up” church caused me to make acquaintance with a girl who played the organ as a second instrument. Uncharitable thoughts began running through my head -why did she choose to play that behemoth? It’s certainly unsociable - you couldn’t indulge in a spot of chamber music, and so on. How wrong I was! I have recently enjoyed performances by organists together with string and wind instrumentalists, vocalists, pianists and even a sand artist.

My epiphany came as I frequented St Andrew’s Cathedral, Singapore, during lunch hours at work. The Cathedral sanctuary was, and remains certainly handy for a spot of reflection in a harried work life and it was ideally suited, being in the neighbourhood.

... Continued on page 3

... Continued from page 2

One day I chanced upon a wedding rehearsal. The groom was apparently a member of the Armed Forces, with a typically military bearing. Appropriately the order of service had been planned to the nth degree!

As the organist on duty “shifted into gear”, so to speak, my ears perked up. Ah, now I could enjoy some free music!

His choice for the Processional was a work by César Franck which I took to like a duck to water, Franck’s Violin & Piano Sonata in A being a firm favourite of mine. As the rehearsal progressed, I wondered at the non- appearance of the bride. Then it dawned on me that the groom was a perfectionist and this was HIS rehearsal, the Processional had been solely selected by him and was being timed for precisely 3 minutes. He actually marched down the aisle solo as a “Test March”, in true military manner! I wondered what the bride thought.

That unforgettable wedding rehearsal opened my ears to a veritable cornucopia of composers and a wider repertoire. Pachelbel, Buxtehude, Widor, Messiaen, Vierne, Couperin, Saint-Saëns, Karg-Elert all contributed and continue to contribute to a wonderful musical journey which I hope you too will undertake !

About the Writer

"A yen for music, history and heritage led the writer to recently join the AGO, not only to appreciate fine music and musicianship but also to acquaint herself with Singapore's other national treasures - her early pipe organs !"

- Khong Swee Lin

However, a private recital by one of the world’s most outstanding organists - on a 500 year-old organ in a moonlit, cavernous cathedral - made it all indescribably worthwhile, and is an experience I will always remember.

Just when I thought it impossible to top this adventure, less than 18 hours later, I was seated at the behemoth Müller at the Grote Sint Bavokerk in Haarlem. Built in 1735, this was the largest organ in the world at the time of its completion. No wonder Handel, Mendelssohn, and even the ten year-old Mozart (in 1766) themselves, made similar pilgrimages to play on it.



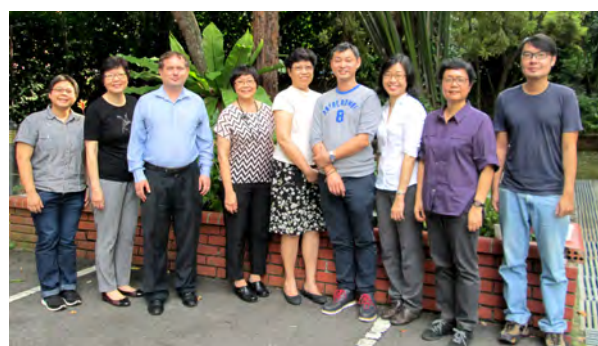
Above: Jia Hwei at the Müller at the Grote Sint Bavokerk, Haarlem

It was truly an unforgettable trip!



Just back from organ-hopping/attended a summer course or organ convention? Or if you simply wish to share your insights about things ‘organ-ic’ (about the organ or organ music)? Share with the Singapore AGO community - write to us at <enquire@singaporeago.org>.

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2016 - 2018**



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Full House At Singapore AGO Concert

By Suzanne Lau

On 17 September 2016, members of the Singapore AGO and friends had the pleasure of performing to a full house on the JW Walker & Sons (1970) organ at the Freemasons' Hall. The concert featured works for solo organ as well as chamber music with organ. Bringing the afternoon to a close was a buffet dinner, where performers and concert-goers could interact with each other.

Here are some of the moments captured at the concert:



Performing to a full house:

Top Left: Joanna Paul (voice), acknowledging her accompanists Diana Kostova (organ) & Peter Crossley (cello)

Top Right: Dr Evelyn Lim (right) presenting the performers of the concert

Bottom left: Guest performer, oboist Joost Flach accompanied by Yap Wai Hoong (organ)

Bottom Right: Vivien Goh & Wong Sher Maine (violin) with Peter Crossley (cello) & Joanna Paul at the organ

Coming Soon...

Hymn-playing and improvisation workshop by Michael Burkhardt (USA)

- 13 March 2017, 7:30pm; Wesley Methodist Church

Pipe Works: Michael Burkhardt (USA)

- 14 March 2017, 8pm; Orchard Road Presbyterian Church

VCH Organ Series: Pavel Kohout

- 10 April 2017, 12:30pm; Victoria Concert Hall



Pavel Kohout
(Czech Republic)

Visit To Pipe Organ at Cathedral of the Good Shepherd

- May 2017; TBC

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