

Les Passions in Strasbourg

Brian Hick

Finding airports evermore frustrating it was a real pleasure to be invited to meet up again with *Les Passions* in Strasbourg, which is easily reached by Eurostar. This was my first visit and the old city centre is a world away from the politicking associated with its status as a European parliamentary hub.

The city's convoluted history is etched into every corner and it is often difficult to tell just which country you are in. Currently French, it has oscillated over the centuries between France and Germany, but has its own special character as Alsace. It was no surprise to find that Sunday morning mass in the Cathedral was given in Latin, French, German and Alsatian.

The Reform Church du Bouclier is celebrating the 35th anniversary of its impressive concert series and this was a return visit by *Les Passions*. The church has two organs, the larger on the west gallery dating from 1790, rebuilt by Thomas in 2007, and a smaller modern chamber instrument also by Thomas.

Under the convivial direction of Jean-Marc Andrieu they presented *De Paris à Versailles*, with works by Charpentier, Marais and Couperin. Given the immediate appeal of this music it is strange that we in England seem to hear so little French baroque music compared to the

large amounts of Italian and German.

The only minor problem with the Strasbourg performance became immediately obvious in the time being taken to tune up. It appeared that the organ and harpsichord were at slightly different pitch, which required all the instruments to re-tune between works. A gentle rearrangement of the programme led to a smoother second half!

They opened with Charpentier's *In circumcissione Domini* H 406. Given the title, the text surprises as it involves the Angel in discussion with the shepherds at the nativity. The short cantata is dramatically positive and draws on dance rhythms which subtly reflect the rusticity of the

Shepherds. The singers made an unusual combination. Three male voices but set at a higher than expected range with a bass, tenor and high-tenor. David Tricou is a genuine high tenor rather than a counter tenor and this gave added virility to the singing. There was nothing

precious about this angel nor the shepherds being addressed.

This was followed by Marais' *Suite pour deux dessus et basse continue*, by turns courtly and improvisational, with a heavy leaning towards formal dance rhythms.

The first half ended with Charpentier's *Litanies de la Vierge a trios voix pareilles avec instruments* H48. Here the blending of baroque violins and recorders was particularly effective against the bass viol and harpsichord.

To smooth the need for re-tuning the second half opened with a suite made up of music from the Third Concert Royal by Couperin. Again the dance rhythms impressed, particularly the muzette with its rustic, almost hurdy-gurdy bass.

The final two works both drew on the chamber organ which speaks well into the vibrant acoustic of the church. Charpentier's short *Salve Regina* was given with recorders and organ but *Les Passions* had left the most delightful work until last. Charpentier's *Magnificat* H73 is set in 6/8 throughout and would make a magnificent accompaniment to liturgical dance. The fluidity of the setting, with melodic lines passed from ▶



While the sound, particularly of the upper work, resonates positively the lower registers can tend to sound muffled or boxed in. A pity, but there is no way round this short of a rebuild which would destroy the historic case, so obviously this is not going to happen.





Triple Bellows

one soloist to another is captivating, and it was quite fitting that they repeated the whole work as an encore.

The 1790 organ in the Reform Church du Bouclier is in the familiar west gallery position but the church has a double gallery at the west end which means that the organ is much higher than usual in a building of this size. As a result the roof of the organ almost touches the roof of the church and the acoustic suffers as a result. While the sound, particularly of the upper work, resonates positively the lower registers can tend to sound muffled or boxed in.

A pity, but there is no way round this short of a rebuild which would destroy the historic case, so obviously this is not going to happen. The specification is below.

The next day, being Sunday, I was able to attend mass in the cathedral. In the end I attended two services, hearing both of the organs, though the main one only briefly. The 9.30 mass was accompanied by an all male Gregorian choir and the chancel organ. This is a very romantic instrument which has surprising clarity given the five second reverberation and the fact that the choral sound rolled impressively even if the words were incomprehensible. The organist played part of Handel's Op.6 No.4 during the offertory though the French Trompette sounded at odds with the music to English ears. The organist ended with a brief piece by Rinck. However, unlike some well behaved Paris churches, this congregation made no effort to listen to the postlude.

The second mass of the morning used the main, swallow's nest organ, and I caught the end of the service with



Console

a blaze of sound which comfortably filled the building. It would be good to hear this instrument under concert conditions. While in the cathedral we had time to visit the astrological clock and hear its famous cockerel crow three times for us, along with the procession of saints and martyrs.

Unfortunately I had no time to visit the Silbermann organ in St Thomas. Maybe another time?! ■

Details of the cathedral's nave organ are opposite.

Specification 2008

Strasbourg, Eglise réformée du Bouclier

Dominique Thomas, 2007

Buffet classé Monument Historique en 2003

Hauptwerk

Quintadena	16'
Principal	8'
Viola di Gamba	8'
Gemshorn	8'
Rohrflöte	8'
Octava	4'
Spitzflöte	4'
Quinta	3'
Octava	2'
Sesquialtera 1 rg	1 ³ / ₅ '
Mixtur IV	
Cymbeln III	
Fagot	16'
Trompette	8'

Hinterwerk

Quintadena	8'
Bordun	8'
Salicional	8'
Traversflöte	8'
Octava	4'
Flöte douce (double)	4'
Spitzquinta	3'
Octava	2'
Waldflöte	2'
Tertia	1 ³ / ₅ '
Quinta	1 ¹ / ₃ '
Mixtur III	
Vox Humana	8'
Principal	8'
Rohrflöte	4'

Pedal

Princpal (en bois)	16'
Violonbass	16'
Subbass	16'
Viola di Gamba (G.O.)	8'
Gemshorn (G.O.)	8'
Rohrflöte (G.O.)	8'
Octavbass	8'
Octava (G.O.)	4'
Posaune	16'
Fagot* (G.O.)	16'
Trompette* (G.O.)	8'



The Nave Organ in Strasbourg Cathedral

Adapted from the French by Brian Hick

The history of the organs of Strasbourg Cathedral is long, often obscure, and subject to the whims of political, aesthetic, religious and cultural influence.

It is difficult to realise, looking at the present swallow's nest organ that there has been an instrument in the Cathedral since 1260, and that what we see today is the most recent rebuild undertaken by Alred Kern in 1980. Surprisingly, the earliest instrument was installed before the nave was fully completed in order to enhance worship.

The central case, within which Kern undertook his re-build, dates from the fifteenth century, with its famous statues of Héraut and Bretzelmann. The side towers however are eighteenth century, though in the style of the earlier sections.

The following list gives an indication of the complexity of the history of organ installations within the Cathedral:

- Original organ – unknown builder
- Organ by Guncelin de Francfort (1292).
- Organ by Claus Karle (1327).
- Organ of the Trois Rois (1354).
- Organ by Gerlach & Gereis (1434).
- Organ by Krebs (1491).
- Organ by Suss (1511) and Neuknecht (1608).
- Organ by Tretzscher (1660).

- Organ by Silbermann à Koulen
- Organ by Silbermann (1716).
- Rebuild by Koulen (1897).
- Organ by Roethinger (1935).
- Organ by Kern actuel (1981).

Legend attributes the construction of the first organ in 1260 to the Dominican Ulrich Engelbrecht, but this appears to be a confusion between the friar, Ulrich Engelbrecht, and a knight by the name of Engelbrecht, who financed the instrument.

In 1292 Guncelin of Frankfurt constructed a larger instrument, costing 500 livre. Unfortunately on 15 August 1298 just as duke Albrecht of Austria was leaving, a fire broke out in the cathedral. It was the fifth time in its short history that the building had caught fire and it severely damaged the cathedral and 355 houses in the area.

After this devastation the cathedral was without an organ for thirty years, but when the new organ was installed, by Karlé in 1327, it was placed in the current swallow's nest position. Though the organ itself was superseded, the

decoration on the case of that period has survived in the form of the statues, including the lion whose mouth opens mechanically!

But soon, it was necessary to build a new organ. It was decided to maintain the case but entrust the new pipework and action to Michel Gerlach of Leiptzig and Rock Generis of St Hippolyte, Austria. The work was finished for Christmas 1434. Rock Generis remained as organist at the cathedral, dying at the console on 20 February 1480.

The organ by Frédéric Krebs of Ansbach built in 1491 included the current main casework. Krebs was born in Schalkhausen, and had a good reputation. He had repaired the organ of the hospital of Nuremberg (1477) and in Strasbourg, had rebuilt the organ of the chapel of the St Sépulcre (1478). He preserved some elements of the 1385 organ but greatly enlarged the instrument. An engraving of Isaac Brunn (1630), shows the nave with the Krebs Case, which at that time had full painted shutters.

We know a little of the disposition of this instrument. There were three manuals (Rückpositiv, Hauptwerk, Brustwerk), of which the first two could be coupled. It is unclear however as to ▶



the distribution of ranks across the manuals, though sources indicate that there were 1234 pipes on the Great, 574 on the Pedal and 328 on the Positive. It is possible that some of the pipework in the present organ dates back to Krebs but tests on the solder have found nothing earlier than Silbermann.

The Krebs organ was scarcely 15 years old when it was modified as a result of a change in musical taste. The cathedral accepted the advice of the blind organist Arnold Schlick, of Heidelberg, and brought in Hans Süss, of Cologne to clarify the voicing of individual ranks. By the mid 1520s the cathedral had also undergone significant alteration to meet the standards of the Reformation. Two smaller organs were destroyed and the nave organ was left unused for many years, but by 1542 there was a desire to hear and use the organ again and Hans Schentzer, of Stuttgart and subsequently in 1564 Sigmund Peistle of Freiburg-im-Brigau were brought in to restore the organ. Coddle Kreiss was the first Protestant organist of the cathedral. At the end of the century Antoine Neuknecht, of Ravensburg, modified the instrument to meet with changing taste,

increasing the range of the manuals to four octaves, and the pedal to two. The case was preserved and the work completed by January 1609.

After the War of Thirty Years, Mathias Tretzscher of Culmbach, reinstated the organ. Assisted of Tobias Dressel, he worked in the cathedral between 1624 and 1660. He may have increased the range of the manuals, if they were not at four octaves across all ranks and he lowered the pitch, which had probably been raised by Süss. The case and the facade were preserved, but the shutters were removed, as is clear from an engraving of Rock Aubry, dating to 1673. The shutters were replaced by statues of musical angels.

In 1681, Louis XIV returned the cathedral to the Catholic church.

Finding the organ in a very poor state in 1713, André Silbermann wanted to start from scratch, as he felt that nothing in it was saveable. However the cathedral had suffered storm damage and so funds were limited and a compromise agreed. Silbermann was to build a new organ but do so within the existing case to save money.

The design for a three manual, 39

rank organ with 2242 pipes, was to be the largest organ Silbermann built in Alsace. The gothic case was saved with the shutters now replaced by sculptured sides. The feet of the Positive pipes were also embellished at this time.

In 1717, Silbermann invited the Parisian organist Louis Merchant to play. At first he refused as people had gathered to listen but on the second day he was persuaded to do so and demonstrated the full range of the instrument for over three hours. Members of the Rauch family provided a succession of organists for the cathedral until the Revolution.

Following that upheaval, in May 1796, Conrad Sauer, a former assistant to Silbermann offered to restore the instrument, and to alter the pitch. Though there is little evidence for substantive work at this time, Sauer continued to have a working relationship with the cathedral for some years.

Little was done during the early nineteenth century until the Brothers Wetzel carried out some effective if minor repairs in 1873 and again in 1876. During the same period the case was repainted and gilded.

A choir organ was introduced by

Joseph Merklin in 1878. It was intended to replace the nave organ. However an idea arose that the two organs should be linked to form one instrument, though this would have required considerable alteration to the Silbermann. Wetzel, Merklin and Cavaillé-Coll all provided estimates. While heated exchanges continued, with Merklin insisting the joining of the two organs was a possibility – including the addition of an electric console! – his own choir organ broke down during the winter of 1879-80. Faced with an enormous cost whatever they did the cathedral eventually, in 1889 set up a commission to decide upon the fate of the organs. It had become seriously confused by the strident and often extreme plans being put forward which ranged from giving to whole instrument pneumatic action, to reducing the Silbermann to 24 ranks.

Eventually Koulen was invited to undertake the work and the organ was finished in May 1897. Based on the Silbermann, the new organ added 7 ranks to the Positive, 4 to the Great Organ, 9 to the Narrative/Echo and 4 to the Pedal. This necessarily altered the sound of the Silbermann to the extent that many claimed it was now a totally different instrument. With its 42 ranks, the Koulen was subject to criticism even before it was completed, and many considered he had ruined a masterpiece.

At the start of the twentieth century a crack appeared in one of the north side pillars. It rapidly became obvious that there was substantive damage to the side of the cathedral and it was necessary to dismantle the organ. With the coming of hostilities at the opening of the First World War, tin was requisitioned and many organs melted down

for the war effort. The nave organ suffered substantial loss at this time though the case pipes were retained.

After the armistice, Charles-Marie Widor took the presidency of the Commission in charge of organising a competition to rebuild the organ. After much debate it was hoped to restore the instrument to the state it was in under Silbermann. A short list of tenders was eventually reduced to two – Cavaillé-Coll and Roethinger, – and the local builder was invited to undertake the work.

Edmond Alexander Roethinger had learned his trade with Koulen, but also worked in Germany, principally with Meurtz in Munich. The main difficulty he faced was a lack of experience in constructing mechanical organs. Thankfully he had the good sense of employ Salmon, a specialist in mechanical action who had worked with Cavaillé-Coll. ▶

Specification 2008

The chart below indicates the range of pipework included in the Kern organ.

Positif de dos

Montre	8'	A.Silbermann (sauf 2 tuyaux E.A.Roethinger)
Bourdon	8'	Wegmann, E.A.Roethinger
Prestant	4'	A.Silbermann, A.Kern
Flûte à cheminée	4'	E.A.Roethinger
Nasard	2 ² / ₃ '	Wegmann, E.A.Roethinger
Doublette	2'	A.Silbermann, A.Kern
Tierce	1 ³ / ₅ '	Stiehr, E.A.Roethinger
Larigot	1 ¹ / ₃ '	A.Kern
Fourniture 3 rgs	(1 ¹ / ₃)'	M.Roethinger
Cymbale 3 rgs	(2 ² / ₃)'	M.Roethinger
Trompette	8'	A.Kern
Cromorne	8'	E.A.Roethinger
Clairon	4'	A.Kern

Grand-orgue

Bourdon	16'	A.Silbermann, E.A.Roethinger
Montre	8'	A.Silbermann, A.Kern
Bourdon	8'	A.Silbermann, E.A.Roethinger, A.Kern
Prestant	4'	A.Silbermann, A.Kern
Nasard	2 ² / ₃ '	Koulen
Quarte de nasard	2'	A.Silbermann, A.Kern
Tierce	1 ³ / ₅ '	M.Roethinger
Cornet	5 rgs	E.A.Roethinger, sauf 8'
Grande fourniture 2 rgs		M.Roethinger, A.Kern

Petite fourniture 4 rgs		M.Roethinger
Cymbale 3 rgs		A.Kern
Première Trompette 8'		E.A.Roethinger, A.Kern
Seconde Trompette 8'		E.A.Roethinger, A.Kern
Voix humaine 8'		A.Kern
Clairon 4'		E.A.Roethinger

Récit

Bourdon	8'	E.A.Roethinger
Salicional	8'	Dalstein/Haerpfer
Prestant	4'	E.A.Roethinger
Doublette	2'	E.A.Roethinger
Sifflet	1'	E.A.Roethinger, A.Kern
Cornet	3 rgs	E.A.Roethinger, A.Kern
Cymbale	3 rgs	A.Kern
Trompette	8'	E.A.Roethinger
Voix humaine	8'	E.A.Roethinger
Hautbois	4'	E.A.Roethinger

Pédale

Montre	16'	A.Silbermann?, E.A.Roethinger
Soubasse	16'	Koulen?
Quinte	10 ² / ₃ '	Koulen
Flûte	8'	Koulen
Flûte	4'	A.Silbermann, A.Kern
Contre-basson	32'	A.Kern
Bombarde	16'	A.Silbermann, A.Kern
Trompette	8'	A.Kern
Clairon	4'	A.Kern



But even here there was a problem as neither had experience of constructing a mechanical Ruckpositif.

The compromise was a mechanical main organ but a pneumatic Ruckpositif!

The new organ included 250 pipes from the Silbermann. It was inaugurat-

ed the 7 July 1935 by Charles Tournemire, but all was not well. The pneumatic action was continually at the behest of the changes in temperature and humidity, and the organ never spoke with authority into the building. By 1959 another committee under Joan Demessieux had been organised to see what could be done.

While discussion continued, on 5 August 1974 the organ was declared a national monument which had even strong implications for its eventual rebuild. After length debates it was decided that the new instrument should be built by Alfred Kern. He was given a free hand with the understanding that he would work within the original case and have a view to balancing what original pipework remained with the requirements of a modern working



Chancel Organ

cathedral, which needed both a liturgical instrument and a fine concert organ.

The Kern organ was inaugurated on Whit Sunday 1981 when Gaston Litaize, played works by Titelouze, Messiaen and Litaize.

The present organ is tuned to 440 Hz at equal temperament. ■

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Specification

Strasbourg, Cathédrale Notre-Dame, nave organ

Alfred KERN, 1981

Positif de dos 56 notes		Grand-orgue 56 notes		Récit 56 notes		Pédale 30 notes	
Montre	8'	Bourdon	16'	Bourdon	8'	Montre	16'
Bourdon	8'	Montre	8'	Salicional	8'	Soubasse	16'
Prestant	4'	Bourdon	8'	Prestant	4'	Quinte	10 ² / ₃ '
Flûte à cheminée	4'	Prestant	4'	Doublette	2'	Flûte	8'
Nasard	2 ² / ₃ '	Nasard	2 ² / ₃ '	Sifflet	1'	Flûte	4'
Doublette	2'	Quarte de nasard	2'	Cornet	3 rgs	Contre-basson	32'
Tierce	1 ³ / ₅ '	Tierce	1 ³ / ₅ '	Cymbale	3 rgs	Bombarde	16'
Larigot	1 ¹ / ₃ '	Cornet	5 rgs	Trompette	8'	Trompette	8'
Fourniture	3 rgs (1 ¹ / ₃)'	Grande fourniture	2 rgs	Voix humaine	8'	Clairon	4'
Cymbale	3 rgs (2 ² / ₃)'	Petite fourniture	4 rgs	Hautbois	4'	I/P	
Trompette	8'	Cymbale	3 rgs		II/P		
Cromorne	8'	Première Trompette	8'		III/P		
Clairon	4'	Seconde Trompette	8'				
		Voix humaine	8'				
		Clairon	4'				
		I/II					
		III/II					