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Harvard University – The Organ in the Academy

John Butt

Some of my earliest musical memories associate universities with the organ. My father was a regular churchgoer, so I was quite familiar with the organ as a church instrument, but he was also remarkable in acquiring two doctorates during the first six years of my life. So twice I was taken to the Great Hall of Birmingham University (UK) to see him receive those two degrees and twice I was surprised to hear the organ play a major part in a ceremony that was clearly similar to church, but which seemed more focused on the worship of the group of identically-attired people, to which my father clearly belonged. Only two other memories are clear: first, that the organist on both occasions was female, a fact that seemed to be treated with great amusement by those around me, and secondly, that on both occasions the organist played what I later was able to identify as Bach's Toccata in F. My assumption that organists for church were resolutely male was confirmed around the same time by the fact that my uncle (this time on my mother's side) was appointed University Organist at Oxford. This seemed to be mainly a church appointment, at the University Church of St Mary the Virgin, and I was most impressed by the organ loft and the pile of speaking toys that my uncle had assembled for use during the sermon. I believe he pulled the string on one rather too often, and left the post under something that I later learned to be a cloud. I also later learned that this post had also involved playing for degree ceremonies in Wren's Sheldonian theatre, nearby – the sacred and secular roles of the university organist being split between the

two buildings in the seventeenth century owing to the rowdiness of students' behaviour on degree day. I probably would have been confused that my uncle could undertake the roles of both a male and female organist.

These two associations of organs with universities were undoubtedly influential in inspiring my own early enthusiasm for the organ, and my undergraduate years at King's College Cambridge were dominated by my role as organ scholar in the chapel. This was hardly a scholarly post in the sense that it involved any applied study and tuition in the organ (although this came along as a secondary consideration); it was simply the fact that after a year I became the principal organist for all the services and deputy director of the choir. It was thus a sink-or-swim affair (I generally swam – but occasionally didn't) – and was literally part of an ongoing institution that had little directly to do with my concurrent academic studies or any conservatoire-based study of a specific instrument. Even my career as a musicologist owes something to this extraordinary situation, since, by the time I graduated, I realized I'd spent a minimal amount of time on academic work and simply craved taking this side of things a bit further.

Just to confuse matters, this post was within a college that, like all the others, is part of the University of Cambridge. Yet colleges are in many ways foundations independent of the university, able to appoint whom they wish to posts that are not funded by the university and able to maintain their own traditions, ecclesiastical or otherwise, entirely beyond the remit of the University. The University also exists in its own right as a collection of faculties, a senate and an administrative core. If you're still able to follow all this, you will only wearily be

surprised to learn that Cambridge University also has its own organist. This is not the organist who plays for the graduation ceremonies in the 18th-century Senate House, which, unlike Birmingham's Great Hall or Oxford's Sheldonian Theatre, has never had an organ, nor any graduation music. This is the organist who plays in the University Church (also, like Oxford's, dedicated to St Mary) for the service at which the University Sermon is preached, twice a term. But this is not played on the usual organ at the front of the church, the so-called town organ, but on the University Organ, at the back. When I was an undergraduate I was sometimes asked by the University organist, then George Guest, organist of St John's College, to deputize for him as University organist. Not only did this bring a small fee, which seemed to be fixed at the same level as when the pipework was new in the seventeenth century, but it also brought a small key with which I was to unlock and access the organ. No-one in the church, least of all the 'town' organist, was allowed to have this and I was under strict instructions to keep the key hidden and to send it back at the end of the service. This sort of clash of authority rings strikingly with the dispute in which J.S. Bach was involved at the University Church in Leipzig, by which he claimed his authority to direct music and receive fees for the 'Old Service'. Both situations, Bach's in the 18th century and mine 250 years later, suggest that the relationship between organs and universities is extremely deep, complex, and often contentious.

What about America, then? Well, we know that here in Harvard church music and university connections go back at least to the eighteenth century; and it seems hardly surprising that the first professor of music in the US was also the first university organist of Harvard, from 1862. If Harvard is anything to go by,

the primary association seems to lie in the religious function of the organ. In this same country - but perhaps in a different world - my first long-term appointment was as Professor of Music and University Organist at the University of California, Berkeley. Here was a wonderful collection of thirteen organs, some historic, some historical reconstructions, a fund to maintain and expand the collection, and no official organ duties whatsoever. The university of California is of course a state institution and thus not permitted to promote any religion (of course, a remarkably rich collection of churches and seminaries have grown up on the perimeter of the university – rather like the fine bars one often finds circling alcohol-free neighborhoods). So, the obvious inference might be that we had a very lively programme of organ study and performance. But no, there were no organ students, no-one studying historic instruments and no-one particularly interested in organology. But this was not to stop me making what I willed of the facilities, and all colleagues were very supportive of any organ projects I undertook. But the Berkeley music department, perhaps not unlike Harvard's, had no programme in performance at all at undergraduate or graduate level, just a few performance options within the undergraduate degree.

At the other end of the Bay, of course, lies Stanford University, and here my colleague as university organist headed a pair of superb American organs in a memorial chapel, not unlike Harvard's in terms of its religious function and role within the university. However, at that time, Stanford also had a full graduate programme in organ playing and continues to be a leader in the academic study and performance of the instrument in the US. Thus, if Berkeley represents one extreme of the possible role of the organ in an American university – possessing

a major collection representing the historical heritage of the instrument, rather as a library serves academic use – Stanford represents the opposite extreme, using the organ as part of the ongoing spiritual identity of the institution. Until recently, it also prepared doctoral students in the integrated academic and practical study of the instrument. My childhood experience of the organ as straddling the sacred and the secular seems to be substantiated, together with its role of joining the practical with the academic. Another common – and crucial thread – is the role of donors in the past and present, with virtually all university organs reflecting a fascinating fabric of motivations and beliefs, all geared towards the wellbeing of future generations. As my Oxbridge experiences suggest, many of the situations reflect historical accident rather than sustained historical intention. Indeed, the Berkeley collection owes its origins to a generous donation given before World War II to provide a university organ. Given that it was over a quarter of a century before this could be realized, the capital had built up to such an extent that the 1950s Holtkamp organ, now virtually an historical instrument in its own right, was only the first of a whole collection enthusiastically cultivated by Lawrence Moe.

Already it might be evident that the organ can fulfill conflicting, if not contradictory roles within a university. Tradition - and ongoing development of skills, practice and building styles - sometimes clashes with historicism, the imperative to preserve the past in its own particularity and learn from the very specific differences between various genres of music and instrument construction. Even an individual organist might be conflicted within the university environment: on one side lies the imperative to gain historical

knowledge and some of the performance skills that relate to particular periods and area – this is the most ‘academic’ role, perhaps; but on the other side, there is the sense that an organist has his or her own specialist areas of study and expertise, separate from those of other instruments. This is an attitude that was born of the European-American conservatory tradition as it grew from the post-revolutionary French model in the 19th century. This has uncanny analogies to the division of labour so necessary for the process of industrialization – choose your instrument and then work as hard as you can at perfecting your skills in this one field, honing the studies and methodologies that go with it. But there’s also a third attitude, which is perhaps unique to organists, one that comes partly from the organ’s unusual historical role in university and church: this might be described as the notion of the organist as ‘Vollkommener Kapellmeister’, someone with a range of skills well beyond those specific to playing the instrument. This might involve conducting, particularly choral, knowledge of a broad range of musical genres and also technical knowledge of harmony and historical composition.

This third model of the universal, university organist is perhaps the one in which my English upbringing gave me the greatest degree of engagement. There is something unique to the English situation (quite different from the Scottish one, in which I now live), by which ancient choral foundations have survived in most cathedrals and some collegiate institutions, almost against all odds. While one can see the historical association of choir schools, organists and churches across Europe, virtually all have experienced significant historical breaks and most healthy institutions today are the result of relatively recent restorations. Other

than the Commonwealth period in the 17th century, the English choral foundations have somehow persisted. But most importantly, they have brought with them a type of practice that is distinct from the 'modern' conservatory culture and also from the academic-historicist approach to music study and performance. In other words, this sort of practice, however much it must have changed and adapted to circumstances, preserves a link with western music practice from before the time when music became a 'high art'. This latter is that culture of so-called 'classical music' that became a field in its own right, prestigious specifically for its autonomous development away from church, court or 'entertainment' in the frivolous sense. In short, the culture of classical music co-opted many of the traits of religion and is still today perhaps something that rivals religion as much as it might support it. Although many great classical musicians have come through the Anglican choral tradition, there is still a sense in which it preserves a pre-aesthetic, pre-classical conception of music.

So, to try and sum up one of my conclusions so far – perhaps the significance of the organ in universities lies not just in its historical antiquity or in the diversity of its traditions, but also in the way it straddles several very different musical traditions, and indeed broader cultural attitudes, in the western world: the old, pre-aesthetic role as a representing a whole collection of musical practices learned through apprenticeship and spilling well beyond the confines of the loft; the more modern, classical tradition of honed instrumental specialization, based on the conservatory model; and the academic attitude by which a variety of artifacts and practices are studied as far as possible in their own historical

context, in order to understand something of the richness and diversity of western cultures.

But let me explore a little more the potentials for conflict between these practices, since they in many ways reflect broader conflicts in a university's role. I've already suggested that a university promotes scholarly study of past and parallel cultures, but – given that the modern scientific model is so dominant – the university is also concerned with increasing and developing knowledge. This is a role that can be explicitly tied to western modernity, the historical beginnings of which are not too distant from the time at which Harvard was founded. Although, as I've argued elsewhere, modernity is essentially a theoretical construct, it is a useful way of describing a world that involves scientific progress, organized labour, the ideal of freedom of education and personal development and, most importantly, the idea that the worldly state can be improved through human endeavor. From this perspective, even the notion of treating the past with precision and scholarly rigor is a form of broadening the understanding, improving our knowledge and experience in a way that both respects and potentially improves upon the past.

But when we think of organ culture in terms of its practical contribution to an ongoing tradition, there are some interesting conflicts. Traditions – almost by tradition - have to change in order to preserve what they value. Moreover, in the modern world they often share something of the culture of progress. Thus to return to the Anglican cathedral/collegiate tradition, organs in England have usually been 'improved' and enlarged to reflect the expansion of the repertory

and to make certain tasks, such as registration, more flexible. Until the advent of the historical organ movement, no-one was particularly concerned with historical accuracy or integrity and there has often been resistance to removing the modernizing layers of an instrument's history. The imperative of progress has played a particularly interesting role in a recent dispute about organs in Oxford. In 1999 a wealthy foundation paid for the installation of a state of the art computer organ in the Sheldonian Theatre, perfectly reproducing the specifications of four historic organs, including St Clotilde in Paris. To many of a scientific, progressivist bent, this organ was the ideal beacon for a world-leading university, surpassing all its predecessors in the sophistication of its technology and the seemingly fool-proof recreation of real organ sound. Others, naturally, were not so sure – surely there was some sort of deception involved? Technology had perhaps created the most insidious of fakes. Much of the argument has centered on the authenticity of sound, about what actually causes the air to vibrate, but in fact just as much must lie in the authenticity of the organist's experience. There is surely a subtle sense of greater engagement in operating an instrument with real wind and pipes, particularly if the action is mechanical. Moreover, there is often a physical resistance or difficulty involved, one that is potentially part of the musical experience for both player and, ultimately, listener.

All this brings up the issue of progress in performance and instrument construction – behind much of this sometimes lies the mistaken belief that the more ease and efficiency involved in the performance medium the more 'natural' and spontaneous will be the performer's expression. As I've argued before, this is

part and parcel of the process of modernization that accelerated during the twentieth century almost to a dizzying degree. Modernization brings untold comforts, efficiencies and abilities, but it also has an obvious inhuman aspect, the type of alienation that has typically accompanied industrialization and the ability to do things on a massive scale. Here the career of Charles Fisk is of signal importance: playing a small part in the Manhattan Project as a physicist, he spent the rest of his life trying to come to terms with his involvement in this ultimate horror of the modern world. Returning to historical principles in organ building was obviously one way in which he tried to compensate for the trend for technological progress at any cost. Yet it is absolutely clear that any historical element in his organ building has nothing to do with a nostalgic antiquarianism that returns to the past because it cannot face the present. It continues with the trend of improving the present, endemic to western modernity, but with a much more nuanced view of both progress and tradition. Typical of this is the fact that the organ celebrated today preserves the so-called tracker action of historic instruments – now believed to be so essential in promoting the direct connection between player and instrument - but made of materials that are much more stable and reliable than the traditional wood or metal. One might hope that this sort of attitude of considered, responsible progress is essential to the health of any university today. The organ can be seen as a microcosm of the larger institution, its tensions and contradictions included, just as early modern musical thinkers such as Athanasius Kircher saw it as analogous to the whole of the cosmos.

But does any of this mean that the association between the organ and university should continue? There has been considerable diversification of religious practice since most universities were founded and the organ is only at home in particular corners of Judeo-Christian religions. And many newer universities do perfectly well without organs, or indeed any systematic study of music. To come up with a plausible justification for retaining and promoting the instrument we perhaps need to look for ways in which the organ relates to the past, present and future in a particular fashion that is not obviously duplicated in other ways. First, the antiquity and historical endurance of the organ is surely significant: it is an instrument with a history of over two millennia and there are many allegorical interpretations of its magnificence in early Christian writings. As a combination of sounds, some akin to other instruments, it is relatively easily related to the instrumental praise of God which is an obvious part of Old Testament practice; sometimes it is an allegory of the soul, owing to its wonderfully rich variety of disembodied sounds that fill the body of a building without necessarily disclosing the source of the sound. Other writers linked the instrument, with its increasing quantity of pipes, to the whole church with its multitude of faithful, sweet-sounding individuals. The organ became especially associated with St Cecilia, patron saint of music (something that may have contributed to its later censure by some of the Protestant churches).

Not only did the pre-modern organ provide an analogy to the whole of creation, but it also exemplifies the ingenuity of humankind, and especially the instrumental rationalism of the West. For it allows one to do something at one remove, it is a vast mechanical extension of the principle of the human voice. It is

this ability to abstract from one situation to another, to learn a principle in one environment and transpose it to another, that is central to the human condition and that has been particularly developed in the west. Moreover, the organ, if winded by a relatively simple system of bellows, can have limitless breath in a way impossible for the human individual. There's almost a sense that the instrument gives us a potent token of immortality. Like so much pertaining to the human condition, progress is effected through the unintended consequences of an earlier invention. In this regard, the organ was crucial in the study of the nature of sound, early builders duplicating the harmonic series long before this was actually discovered in the eighteenth century. The organ also contributed immensely to the development of traditional industries, not just in terms of its subtle and complex mechanisms but also in the refinement of the astonishingly wide range of materials required: metals, together with various types of alloys, wood, leather, bone and glue.

Not only did the instrument extend the human reach in terms of sound, but it also took on a strong mimetic role: by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, many sounds on the organ were specifically designed to imitate other instruments: the trumpet, trombone, oboe, flute, violin, viola da gamba, birdsong, even the human voice itself. Again this shows the benefits of empirical experimentation into the nature of sound and the interconnectedness of timbre through permutations of the harmonic series. But it also evidences the importance of imitation within the human world. Imitation is successful if it allows you to do something that you could not have done before, also on a scale that was not previously available. While we might often have a sneaking feeling

that an imitation can never be as good as an 'original' we don't necessarily always need everything that the original can offer and thus should more efficiently duplicate those characteristics that are essential for our purposes. The organ seeks to encompass the whole world of music, a microcosm of our desire to encompass the whole world in general.

All this goes to suggest that the organ has as much significance in the secular world as it does in the sacred. This point is most pointedly demonstrated by the history of the organ in the Netherlands. Here, after the 1570s, organs were no longer used in worship, in line with strict Calvinist practice, yet the churches of Holland were filled with the most beautiful organs of their age, many of which still stand and still dominate the organ world in terms of their enduring quality. In short, the Dutch wanted to show to their own citizens and visitors alike their material and technological wealth together with the beauty of their art; the churches were essentially secularized, the organs played on a weekly or even daily basis as an ongoing celebration of the nation's refinement and progress. On Sunday the buildings were rented back for church worship, scripturally-based and entirely devoid of any interference from art. Such a rigid compartmentalization of life might seem overly rationalized from our perspective where we tend to assume a holistic desire integrating our activities, but this ability to discriminate and adapt cultural practice to different circumstances has also been a crucial tool in the success of western modernity..

But the organ also stands for the span between arts and sciences, craft and technology. Like a University it is testimony to a rich and complex human

history, but it is also adapted to the life of the present in taking advantage of new developments and enabling a renewed creative culture of worship, musical composition and performance. It is surely not inappropriate to adapt some of those early allegorical views of the organ as encompassing an enormous community – the organ here today is thus a very living symbol of the community of a great university, a testimony to the interplay of arts and sciences, history and progress, to education, inspiration and our pride in what we can achieve if we work towards a common purpose.

Uniquely, perhaps, the organ reminds us of how we got to where we are while still operating and providing real musical experience in the present. The organ is virtually part of the architecture to which it necessarily belongs, and remains a more solid and permanent fixture than virtually any other instrument. But it also periodically comes to sounding experience, literally breathing life into the corporate and physical body to which it belongs.