

## The meaning of arrangements in modern organ culture

(based on a lecture given at the Haarlem Organ Festival in 2018)

### Introduction

All music can be played on organ.

Just leave out the doubling in orchestra or piano scores, put the parts in the best octave, simplify a few runs and broken chords, and almost no score can resist the reduction into playable notes for two hands and two feet.

But should we play everything on organ?

It is of course a challenge to choose well known pieces like the *Four Seasons* of Vivaldi or *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* of Mozart. But shouldn't we be more selective, at least avoid to be worse than the original, to have the good taste to add something to the repertoire that sounds like real organ music. We should resist to choose music just to please the listeners with well-known notes, or use arrangements to make a better show (making the *Prokofiev's piano Toccata* even more difficult for the organ, like Guillou), or to use the original music to even re-compose it (like Widor in *Bach's Memento* on 'Wachet auf'):

The image shows a musical score for an organ arrangement. It consists of two systems of staves. The first system has a right-hand staff (treble clef) and a left-hand staff (bass clef). The right-hand staff is marked 'Rit.' and 'a Tempo'. The left-hand staff is marked 'P.R.'. The second system also has a right-hand staff and a left-hand staff, with the right-hand staff marked 'P.R.'. The music is in 3/4 time and features a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some rests and dynamic markings like 'f'.

*This arrangement is more like a paraphrase, meant as a tribute to Bach and maybe common in Widor's days, but far away from the original composer's intention.*

In the past there was a reason to make arrangements.

In the nineteenth century they were mainly made to be able to play favorite music from the concert-hall at home. Arrangements of famous symphonies for piano four hands are still to be found in second hand music shops.

But probably even Bach's concerto-arrangements were made to be able to play Vivaldi's music at the castle in Weimar, not to be dependent of an orchestra, that wasn't always available or lacking the proper skills.

But then all changed with the rise of recorded music. It was no longer necessary to play arrangements. All music became available, often in several interpretations.

This had a big impact on performers of music. In early recordings we hear still a natural, direct way of communicating music, as if people are listening. Mistakes were normal, the interpretation could be different every time.

Nowadays performers in concert have to compete with a perfect version on cd, often of their own playing. And, alas, the live performance is never as perfect as the recording.

In the recording sessions numerous similar versions are mixed into a 'final' version that never really existed. It changed the attitude towards performance, with the performers as well as with the listeners.

The best version of music became possible: the greatest performers, the most beautiful instruments, the last edition, the most recent state of musicological research. The search for the real 'original' version was stimulated by the recording industry. It probably was an important condition for the development of Old Music in historical informed interpretations. It became a worldwide phenomenon. Everywhere the new sound of old music, played by specialists on original instruments was available. Meantime organs played with old fingerings could be heard at home in places without any organ culture.

Making arrangements was no longer necessary, worse: playing arrangements meant a lack of interest in the original intention of the composer. For a long time, arrangements were out of the question, a sign of bad taste.

### ***Arrangements today***

What about playing and making arrangements in our time, don't we see an increasing number of new arrangements for organ? The most important reason is probably that the organ culture of today needs innovation. Audience is changing, music culture is changing. Who is waiting for a new integral recording of Bach or Franck, in a time where the CD-market is collapsing? It's part of the question how to renew organ culture. There is no quick solution to this problem, but arrangements can form a part of the answer.

The easy answer would be to popularize. Arrangements offer all the possibilities. Play well known music, that everybody can sing along. YouTube is full of it, with great success. It's an attractive road to personal fame, and raises attention for the organ as instrument.

But this kind of audience would be very disappointed when it would hear 'real' organ music, if it isn't Bach famous Toccata in d. It doesn't support a positive attention for the organ in general.

Yet, a first encounter with the organ in this 'popular' setting can open interest to a more serious repertoire. Many successful attempts in classical music scene are made, like Andre Rieu, one of the best-selling musicians in the world, who inspired a lot of young people to start to play the violin. We really could use such an ambassador in organ culture, someone who knows how to use an organ

from the most elementary to the virtuoso way, with knowledge and good taste for music and instrument.

Between the easy success of 'popular' music and the traditional organ repertoire, there is a vast body of great music that can form a bridge that is interesting for a larger audience. Apart from giants as Bach or Messiaen, don't we feel the lack of great 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century music of composers that neglected the organ? Organists like Bruckner and Fauré didn't consider their instrument as a serious musical medium. Beethoven started his career as an organist, but as a composer he neglected it. Only Mendelssohn wrote some nice organ pieces, though as organists we become easily jealous of his more brilliant piano- and orchestra-music.

But nowadays we have a secular organ culture that could have inspired earlier composers if they had lived in a time where the organ is more than a liturgical attribute.

Using their music by playing it in different circumstances and arranging it for a different instrument is not far from their own habits. Playing the Bach Passions in a concert hall puts the music in a more different ambiance and affects the meaning maybe stronger than playing the "Variations Serieuses" by Mendelssohn on organ. Which was by the way already done by a Dutch colleague of Mendelssohn at the time, before I made my own arrangement that appeared to be an attractive contribution to the organ repertoire.

In the renewal of organ culture arrangements can be a part of the answer: they help to enlarge our repertoire, to bring creativity in our concert-programs, to let the organs sound unexpected, even new.

### ***The question of choice of instrument***

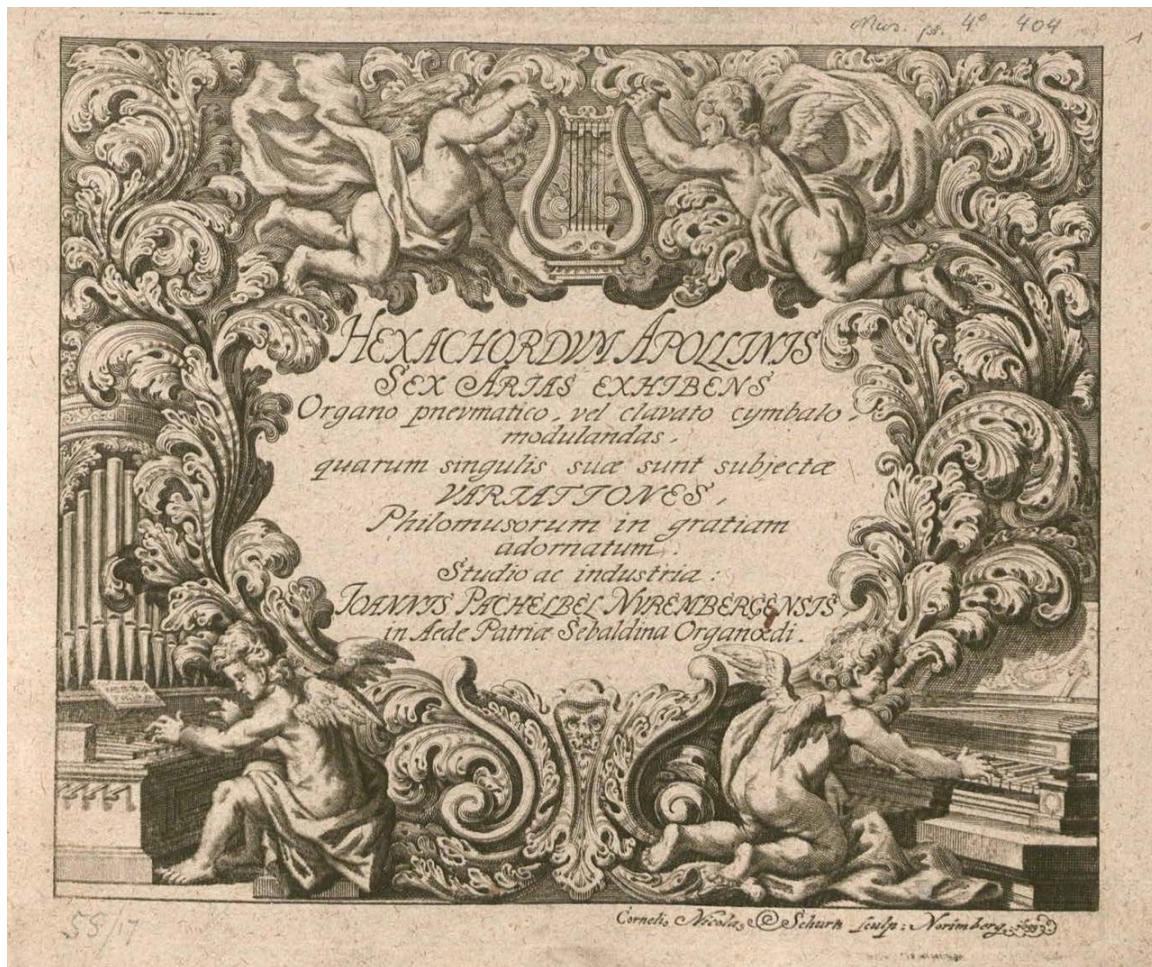
An inevitable part of an arrangement is the change of instrument, which can make a big difference for the music. Great music like Bach can stand this transformation without losing its value. Even on accordion his Goldberg Variations sound beautiful. And, for some still painful to admit: but is Bach on the piano not an arrangement as well?

But history shows us many examples. In fact the earliest organ music was vocal music transcribed -'intavolated' - for keyboard. The development of organ repertoire started with imitations of those pieces, using quick notes - 'diminutions' - to make it more interesting for virtuoso players on whatever keyboard instrument.

There is repertoire, still in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, that can be played on organ as well as on harpsichord, as the notes can be realized perfectly on any keyboard.

The recent argumentation towards a clearer division of the repertoire in music intended for either organ or harpsichord however has consequences we shouldn't ignore. It divides Sweelinck's works or Frescobaldi's Toccatas in separate categories for either organ or harpsichord.

But even with a more severe assignation, there will be still pieces that can be played on organ as well as on harpsichord. Or did the writers of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century keyboard collections (like My Ladye Nevells Booke or Susanne van Soldt manuscript) never bring their albums to the church to play a Voluntary or a Psalm on organ, whereas the next piece on the next page often was a popular dance, that apparently also was played on organ sometimes, regarding the clerical advice not to play those pieces in the service?



The front page of Pachelbel's *Hexachordum Appolinis*, for organ or harpsichord.

Hearing a Canzona by Froberger, that I had played on harpsichord before, being played on organ, I could hardly recognize it. It sounds familiar, but the different instrument really makes it another kind of music. Or try the manualiter Toccata's (BWV 910-916) by Bach on organ. We know them as harpsichord music, but there are good arguments to consider them as organ-music (because of the indication 'manualiter' which points to the organ, though many passages at first sight seem more

harpsichord-like). It will give a new musical experience to play them on organ.

Playing piano-music on organ has the same implications.

But Liszt gave the example, in editing his famous organ pieces in different versions, for organ as well as for the piano. As well as Franck, who transformed the original version of his *Prélude, Fugue et Variation* for harmonium into an organ piece. All truly secular concert music, that can be found in the works of other composers as well, that just needs a bit of our help to make it playable on organ.

Composers were not indifferent to instrumentation, but at the same time liberal and even creative: Bach's popular harpsichord concertos are almost all arrangements from older movements for violin, hobo, or even organ; Ravel turned many piano pieces into orchestral master pieces or vice versa for piano quatre mains.

So let's take up this habit, respect the tradition and the style of the period the music was made in, choosing the right pieces, in which the texture is not too pianistic (long broken triads and scales) and the orchestration or the dynamic demands of the music is not frustrated by the more static organ sound. If the adaption to the organ is respectfully following the composers intentions, we can create new repertoire that sounds like real organ music.

For the sake of a lasting organ culture, let's embrace this possibility.