

“GENRE AND GERMANNESSE”
A Music-Critical Survey of the North German Organ
in a Genrified World

by Christopher Dawes, FRCCO
M.A (Music Criticism)

invited by

“THE NORTH GERMAN ORGAN”
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ABSTRACT

The problem of specifying an historical “North German” genre of organ composition, of organ building – even of academic conference such as this one – is well-known. This problem is far from limited to the notions that any significant stylistic development truly begins on a certain date or with a single composer such as Sweelinck or Scheidt; that it ends suddenly with the death of Buxtehude or Bach; that a single nationality can lay claim to so rich a mixture of European influences manifesting in several other countries; or that a movement driven primarily by individual artistic endeavour is indicative of any broader national identity. “The North German Organ” presents the still more significant problem of our 21st century understanding, seen inextricably not directly but through the Orgelbewegung and the assumptions of the Modern era, and to the devastating effects of the 20th century on “Germanness.”

Musical Genre, while an indispensable part of the 21st century musical world, is a highly problematic system, phenomenon or construction charged with the pseudo-zoological classification of a dizzying array of historical, current and emerging music from every corner of the globe. This paper briefly surveys postmodern philosophical thought, theories of musical cognition and cultural context that make “The North German Organ” so difficult a proposition in today’s musical world, and advocates a form of sonic ‘signature’ perhaps more likely to speak to today’s listener.

AUTHOR’S BIOGRAPHY

Christopher Dawes is a Toronto freelance musician, writer, and consultant based at the Church of St. George the Martyr (Anglican), and working principally with the Music and Drama faculties of the University of Toronto. From 1991 to 2003 he was first organist and later Director of Music at Toronto’s St. James’ Cathedral; he currently serves as Director of the Organ Concerts and Academy at Stratford Summer Music and Canada’s Summer Institute of Church Music (Whitby, Ontario). His graduate project in Music Criticism (McMaster University, 2006) encompassed the production and hosting of a 20-episode radio show and a major research paper concerned with postmodern perspectives on genres of music, and may be found along with other continuing work at www.orgalt.com following the link to www.genreimplosion.ca.

INTRODUCTION

In a brief exchange of e-mail just over a month ago when the final schedule of this symposium was being settled by Neil Cockburn and his committee, this presentation was placed first generally “somewhere in” this Friday afternoon grouping, and then moved to Saturday (presumably to align with some of the sessions concerned with the flowering of the North German style). Then, in what Neil described glibly as a “stroke of genius,” it returned to this Friday afternoon, and moreover was placed as the first of this symposium to directly address the “North German Organ.” In offering this spot for this paper he quipped, “It would be nice to shatter our expectations before we begin.” The subtext of course: having committed to a presentation that might challenge the very existence of “The North German Organ”, it would be awkward to risk derailing the proceedings mid-stream, and at least depressing, and at worst, traumatising to consider risking their figurative annulment at the end.

The good news, though? As Neil and his committee no doubt understood, this presentation is not intended to shatter anyone’s expectations about the North German Organ, but rather, to *contextualise* them. We have all come to Calgary this week-end because of a very real, and very significant 17th century “happening” in the organ’s musical history, to which this week and this fine new instrument add another echo in homage. It is the purpose of this paper to locate the North German Organ within the 21st century musical world it has proved more than worthy to inhabit and speak to. I will argue that the contemporary musical genre system poses both significant challenges and significant opportunities to the style of building and composing we join with the University in celebrating this week-end. I would also at this point wish to express my gratitude, and at least a little surprise, to Neil Cockburn and his symposium committee for having chosen to invite this unusual “Music Critical” presentation into so auspicious an academic setting.

THE NORTH GERMAN ORGAN

It will time and time again strike us that correspondences between landscape and instrument are not arbitrary; on the contrary, the austere character of the quiet landscape is symbolically expressed in the clear unsensuous tone of the organ.

-Peter Williams, "North-West Germany and Scandinavia" in *The European Organ*.

The problem of describing a "North German Organ" genre of composition, a genre of organ building – even a genre of *academic conference* such as this one – is well-known to this gathering. It is, of course, problematic to limit "The North German Organ" to any very specific time and place – yet we implicitly do just that in our construction of the idea. Despite the vaguaries of history and geography, and the fact that each of us comes to the subject from a different position, we have a more-or-less shared understanding in this room of what we mean when we use those three words.

Briefly, **where is this "North German Organ"?** Historically it and its music are found in northern regions of Germany, the Netherlands and Scandinavia. But perhaps even more significantly, it has influenced, and pervades much of 20th and 21st century organ construction around the globe. Somewhat authentically North German instruments may be found throughout the world, and as I noted recently on a concert tour in regions once understood to be decidedly *southern* (Hungary, Slovakia and Austria) its influence upon instruments in other regions is unmistakable. "North German Organ" content (stops, design, voicing and specification) in the world's eclectic organs suggests not just the influence of "The North German Organ" on later organ building, but of later organ building on the meaning of "The North German Organ", to which this new Ahrend instrument in Calgary is the heir.

When is its historical period? Well, *perhaps* it commenced on the succession of Bernard Hüß by his pupil Arp Schnitger in 1676, or perhaps next door in Holland with Sweelinck and associated builders and pupils like Scheidt in the late 16th century. Although we took until well into the 20th century to coin

a name for the structural genre of organbuilding known as *Werkprinzip*, perhaps this strongly associated design concept marks and signifies the “North German Organ” ... and yet, no, the characteristic visual elements of *Werkprinzip* (the pedal towers, the single main case and Chair Organ) were well-known by the 15th century and much of the tonal conception was well-established in the mid-16th. No, this cannot determine the North German organ.

When did this period “end”, or did it? Perhaps it concluded with the death of the last great composer associated with this era, Vincent Lübeck in 1740 or for those that like to stretch a bit further, with the great Bach himself in 1750. Perhaps it was when the legacy of Buxtehude’s students (including Georg Böhm) ran its course, or when rococo and classicism unceremoniously eclipsed the baroque counterpoint and chorales which reached their height in Bach (even, poignantly, in the music of his own sons). Yet again, because the North German period, *whenever* it was, saw the neat national divisions between organbuilding styles beginning to crumble (we think of Casparini and Hermanns working in Italy, of Riepp working in Southern Germany, and of course most famously, the Silbermanns in France), we are tempted to try locate the North German Organ period in terms of the art’s constructed ethnic purity – a concept chillingly familiar to us from the Second World War – but also unsatisfactory to this purpose.

Now, the existence of a new organ we are calling “North German” in... where? Calgary, Canada? 250 years later must surely make us re-evaluate how we apply the term: an organ of North Germany may be built far from its historical home and context. The Göteborg “North German Organ Research” project alleges about Schnitger’s art,

In certain circles, this tradition lasted until the beginning of the 20th century. And because of the newly-found interest in classical organbuilding after World War I, Arp Schnitger has become one of the most influential organbuilders in the 20th century.

Yet the notion of a building style somehow completely uninfluenced by 250 years of musical history and its builder's modern ears and sensibilities seems improbable, and to current proponents of musicology, impossible. Even North America's continuing love affair with the eclectic organ can be kept only so far away from new instruments in historical style, as Hellmuth Wolff's optional AGO pedalboard for the 1981 French Classic instrument in McGill's Redpath Hall reminds us. As Charles Fisk admitted in the landmark conference "L'Orgue à notre Époque" that celebrated that organ's installation,

...I have to confess that in my recent studies and imitations of... the French Classic and the North German Organ of the 17th century... I have never given up the notion that I might be led to a better understanding of how better eclectic organs might be built.

Perhaps still more than all this, we understand "Germanness" firmly through the blood-red-coloured and techno-centric glasses of Modernity, of the tortured early 20th century, and of course, of the *Orgelbewegung*. This is by no means to undermine the real period in history or the scholarship which has revealed so much about it, but rather to say that even where primary sources are concerned, much of what we know has come through the subjective positions of 20th century scholars. One of the rare silver linings to emerge from the clouds of the World Wars has been the widespread destruction of historic organs giving rise to a movement devoted to their restoration and replacement, in many cases to more authentically historic states than those that were lost... but they are still in every sense 20th century instruments.

Qualifiers aside, we may generally agree that during the latter half of the 17th century some combination of German pragmatism, baroque sensibility and artistry and Lutheran practice came together in "The North German Organ." Individual composers like Sweelinck and his pupil Scheidt, and builders like Schnitger contributed their own ideas, preferences, gifts and shortcomings. Perhaps Williams'

fanciful North German landscape factor is involved; perhaps Fisk's styling of the "essential paradox of North German baroque," and likening its organs to "a plain faced girl in a dirndl who jumps up and asks you to dance." Still more intriguingly, and just as impossible to prove, is Krumbach's theory of the spoken North German dialect's influence on timbre and voicing.

All of these variables mean that each of us may construct the idea of "The North German Organ" a bit differently – but nevertheless construct it we do. Because, even post-Göteborg, of the impossibility of any rigorously scientific "North German Organ," we each create it for ourselves. This is the essence of musical genre in the 21st century: we like categories, and so we arbitrarily form them. Why do we subdivide the German organ in this particular way, and not subdivide it further by, say, the countries of Germany, Holland and Scandinavia, or even the individual builders that developed and propagated individual styles? No reason: we do it the way we do it – because that's how we do it.

THE GENRE PROBLEM

Musical Genre at the beginning of the 21st century is an arbitrarily-formed, highly problematic and little-understood system, phenomenon and/or construction of the musical world – but it has undeniable connotative power which often exceeds that of the very compositions it seeks to help us locate in sound, in history, and in a host of other properties.

I can hear the objection arising already: “the North German Organ, a *genre*?” True, in the classical conception ‘genres’ in this weekend’s concern are designations like “Choral Prelude”, “Ricercare”, “Fuga” and “Fantasia”; in the realm of building, genres might be understood to be things like “Werkprinzip”, “Apfelregal” and “Rückpositiv.” But it is not the classical conception of genre which holds sway in the musical world today – genre across the arts and media took on a new meaning in the late 20th century in which traditional classifiers give way to new ones.

In his excellent *Introduction to Genre Theory*, Daniel Chandler of the University of Aberystwyth quotes television scholar Robert Allen in summary of the core problem of “genreal” definition:

“...for most of its 2,000 years, genre study has been primarily nominological and typological in function. That is to say, it has taken as its principal task the division of the world of literature into types and the naming of those types - much as the botanist divides the realm of flora into varieties of plants”. As will be seen, however, the analogy with biological classification into genus and species misleadingly suggests a ‘scientific’ process.

While Dr. Allen invokes the graphocentric term ‘literature’ as the commodity classified by the typologically-based system of genre, the passage above relates clearly and easily to all sorts of art, including music and instrument building. Genre classification in any discipline is a process superficially

resembling an objectified science, but which is highly arbitrary and controversial, replete with problems of language and subjectivity, and straining under a recent paradigm shift.

The scope of 'genre' applied to the baroque and classical music of the 18th century is narrower than when we apply it to the music of the 20th: it is purely based on a piece's formal, instrumental or applicational properties. As the 19th century progressed, artistic freedom and experimentation caused music to strain against established categories, and the designation became less and less useful. The decline of classical genre's usefulness as we consider progressively the art music of the middle and latter-19th century predicts its subsidiary role to that of 'schools' and other lines of influence in the study of 20th century art music. This shift is further compounded by the rise in profile and acceptance in commercial musicological circles of 20th century popular styles and world musics with formal and other paradigms that break completely with those foundational to the earlier genre system.

In the 'Genre' article in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Jim Samson describes the old and new as complementary approaches to the understanding of musical genre, the older definition stressing classical typology, and the newer (dating from the 1960s) stressing aesthetic experience. Under this latter view, genre refers more generally to the conventions and expectations affecting a piece of music, drawing context and consumer into an equation that previously had involved only the composer, the composition, and their forebears.

As we seek in the 21st century to define those conventions and expectations in respect to the North German Organ, particularly as it may be understood by the general public, we run into trouble. One needs to spend very little time in the contemporary record store, Internet music download site, or music section of a book or magazine shop to realise not only that the organ world in general is relatively unknown, but also that the genre system by which it is defined is most unhelpful. It seems little wonder

that Wikipedia's exhaustive (albeit anarchical but socially indicative) online listing of musical genres contains some 1500 categories: Crunk (a southern U.S. brand of hip-hop), Crust Punk (a fusion of British metal and punk), and Csárdás (a Hungarian folk dance) appear consecutively in the alphabetic listing, immediately following Crossover Music, a 'genre' whose only defining characteristic appears to be that it is not one (but rather two or more).

In my recent graduate work on musical genre I coined a term "über-genreal" to refer to genre titles hopelessly unable to encompass the music we are asked to lump into them. "World Music" and "Classical Music" are obvious and widely-accepted examples of ranges of music far too diverse to be responsibly collected under such simple titles. "Popular Music" and "Nostalgic Music" are also widely-accepted, and still more problematic. Popular to whom? Nostalgic to whom; starting when and for how long? On the opposite end of the continuum many tiny genreal categories as abound in Wikipedia's listing... Because the "North German Organ" is so specific a case within organ music, it inevitably ends up as what I have called elsewhere, in honour of a popular current model of mp3 player, a "nano-genreal." For most people, the North German Organ lies deeply buried within such über-genreals as "Classical" and "Organ Music", the latter of which embraces everything from the Hydraulus to the present-day pipe organ, with the theatre-, the barrel-, and the electronic- (especially the Hammond)... thrown in for good measure.

The difference between the historical and contemporary conceptions of musical genre is a subtle but important one. At its core nothing has changed... it remains a system for classifying based on properties. But two factors have altered that process of classification forever: the amount and diversity of music being accommodated, and the properties being considered. In 1950 most North Americans knew about classical and jazz music, and that they were different: but no one would have used the word

'genre' to say what was different. For even those who may have resisted the entrenched social structures which placed classical and jazz in racially, economically and intellectually polarised areas of discourse, 'genre' could be used to distinguish a jazz ballad from a jazz waltz, a piano sonata from a piano concerto, possibly even a jazz ballad from a piano "Ballade"... - but in no way did the term refer to the larger musical, cultural and connotive identities which together defined each, as they do today.

Crucially, genre has become preoccupied with stylistically proposed content rather than analytically demonstrable content. While it is irrefutable that there exist pieces in a genre called "jazz waltz", the 21st century popular 'genre system' will likely assign pieces in that formal category to the broad "jazz" genre, or if specified further it will be by type of jazz – "classic jazz", "cool jazz", "fusion jazz" and so on – rather than, as in genre's earlier tendency, by the formal/metrical content which originated in the waltz dance form and gave it its name. While the term 'genre' can be argued to fulfill basically the same function in music today as it always has, what has changed seems to be the nature of the question it seeks to answer, "What kind of piece is it?" gives way to "What kind of music is it?"

21st CENTURY MUSICAL GENRE AND THE NORTH GERMAN ORGAN

In his recent and already-acclaimed book *This is Your Brain on Music*, Daniel J. Levitin of McGill University's Laboratory for Music Cognition, Perception and Experience writes,

Knowing a genre or style is to effectively have a category built around it, and to be able to categorise new songs [pieces] as being either members or non-members of that category – or in some other cases, as “partial” or “fuzzy” members of the category, members subject to certain exceptions... Questions of membership are a matter of debate and there can be differences of opinion: Is white a colour? Is hip-hop really music? If the surviving members of Queen perform without Freddie Mercury am I still seeing Queen (and is it worth \$150 a ticket?)

It's not hard to find questions like these within the realm of the North German Organ and its music. Is a “North German” organ built by a non-German builder or builders really one? Is a genre of piece like Choral Partita inherently North German when it fully evolved only after the North German period (and indeed, under considerable French influence in Bach and Böhm)? Can an organ be built today “as a baroque North German builder might have built it today” (one of the stated objectives of Göteborg)? Even if faithful attention to scholarship allows us to build an organ or write a piece of music that generates identical sounds to those of the turn of the 18th century, are these sounds in any sense authentic when they enter our 21st century ears, with all they have heard since 1750?

Several weeks ago with this presentation in mind I made an experimental trip to the downtown HMV store in Toronto. The classical department (along with jazz) is given the exalted location of the top floor of three – but I chose to start my visit on the main floor, which is devoted mainly to mega-pop artists, to DVD and other video, and to a large customer service department. I entered the store with the purpose of seeking first German music, then North German music, then North German Organ music.

HMV 1: Hi!

CD: Hi. I'm looking for German music.
HMV 1: German music! Okay, what kind?
CD: (pause) What *kind*? I don't know... what kinds of German music do you have?
HMV 1: (pause) Well, we have lots of kinds... what are you interested in?
CD: I'm interested in all kinds of music, but today, I'm particularly interested in North German music.
HMV 1: *North* German music. Hmm. Do you mean classical?
CD: No, not classical. But is that how you organise German music? By history, not geography?
HMV 1: (pause) We organise music by genre, not history or geography.
CD: By genre? What do you mean?
HMV 1: You know, rock, alternative, jazz, classical... there's all kinds of German music out there: are there any bands you're interested in?
CD: Not really – but the cities I'm interested in are Hamburg, Bremen, Lübeck and Berlin.

(I chose arbitrarily the main centres where Schnitger built his larger instruments)

HMV 1: (longer pause) You don't know any bands?
CD: No.
HMV 1: I think you need to go up to the second floor to our Indie department.
CD: Okay – thanks.

(I ascend to the second floor, containing independent, electronic, heavy metal, world and folk musics)

HMV 2: Hey!
CD: Hey. I'm looking for German music.
HMV 2: Cool. What band?
CD: I don't know bands... I'm interested in Northern cities, though.
HMV 2: Cool. What cities?
CD: Hamburg, Bremen, Lübeck and Berlin.
HMV 2: Cool. (pause, as he confers with a colleague)... we totally have bands from Hamburg and Berlin... I'm not sure about the others.
CD: Okay, great. But what I really want is organ music.
HMV 2: (longer pause) ... *Organ* music?
CD: Yes, organ music from North Germany.
HMV 2: (confers again with colleague) Have you been over to the world music section?
CD: No. Is that where I should go?
HMV 2: There, or upstairs to classical.
CD: Okay – Thanks.

(I didn't visit HMV's excellent world music section that day, but ascended one more floor to where I knew my search must inevitably lead.)

HWV 3: Hello.
CD: Hi. I'm looking for North German organ music.
HMV 3: *North* German organ music... (pause)... well, most of our organ music is over there. Do you have any composers or performers in mind?
CD: No... but I'm particularly interested in music from Hamburg, Bremen, Lübeck and Berlin.
HMV 3: (pause) Oh. We have lots of organ music, including many German composers and performers, but I'm not sure of exactly what comes from which cities.

CD: Do you have a section for German *baroque* organ music?
HMV 3: Not a section, but we have lots of German baroque music, and certainly some of our organ music is German baroque. Are you *sure* you don't know any composers or performers?
CD: It's not that I don't know them... I'm just trying to figure out what "North German Organ Music" is.
HMV 3: Oh. Well, good luck!
CD: Okay – Thanks.

This account serves as a metaphor for the "North German Organ", as well as many other sorts of music, in today's world – music of great potential appeal and unquestionable power, but almost hopelessly crowded to the margins of the genre system. While we need a fair amount of technical and historical knowledge to understand what it is (even if that is, as we have said earlier, undecideable), one needs no knowledge to enjoy and appreciate it.

The notes to the Göteborg "North German Organ Research Project" which culminated in the 1999 instrument for the Örgryte Nya kyrka give a clue to the significance of organs to the North German culture of the 17th century.

...the organ became a central symbol for a city's new prosperity and an inspiration for ongoing creativity with new expressions and rich decorations. Through its complex construction and nature, the organ attracted foreign craftsmen and scientists at a level of quality that has rarely been surpassed since that time. In every case, the zenith of architecture, music, mechanics, mathematics, art, handcraft, and techniques of their time. Therefore, everyone regardless of rank or class could enjoy sonorous artwork. They all listened to organ music, but only a few knew what went on behind the mighty façade.

O! That more cities in our own time would subscribe to this model of signifying prosperity!
Indeed, this remarkable and historically supportable view of the organ gave rise both to the substantial renovation of the Örgryte Nya kyrka which had faced uncontrolled deterioration by the early 1990s, and to the promising "Organ as a Symbol of European Vision" (ORSEV), which sought to cast the organ in

the culturally significant role of representing European history, diversity and unity in a way that is uniquely European.

The future of the North German organ is secure, if only because of its wide proliferation thanks to the *Orgelbewegung*. As we watched the highly symbolic threat to the Neuenfeld Schnitger organ in the builder's hometown church on the doorstep of the Hamburg airport a few years ago, we came to understand that some of the historical importance of the North German organ as symbol persists. Insomuch as the readers of newspapers, the staff of HMV stores and the public in general may be introduced to the sights and the sounds of this remarkable genre of organ and its music, they too may construct a category for themselves that transcends the familiar discourse of mere historical preservation, and the challenges and questions faced by the Church with which that preservation is inextricably entwined.

For Schnitger, Buxtehude and the others we monument in this week's celebration "The North German Organ" probably didn't exist as a type... but if it did it was never about history – it was about music. May it ever be thus, and may it be known and enjoyed ever more widely, rather than kept to we, allowed into an arbitrary genre only by our fairly detailed knowledge of it. And may its landscape no more be limited to the quiet landscape of Williams' North Germany, but rather let it be the landscape of our world.