The Cambridge Companion to the Organ

This Companion is an essential guide to all aspects of the organ and its music. It examines in turn the instrument, the player and the repertoire. The early chapters tell of the instrument's history and construction, identify the scientific basis of its sounds and the development of its pitch and tuning, examine the history of the organ case, and consider the current trends and conflicts within the world of organ building. Central chapters investigate the practical art of learning and playing the organ, introduce the complex area of performance practice, and outline the connection between organ playing and the liturgy of the church. The final section explores the vast repertoire of organ music in relation to the instruments for which it was written, focusing on a selection of the most important traditions. The essays, all newly commissioned, are written by experts in their field, making this the most authoritative reference book currently available.

Nicholas Thistlethwaite is author of *The Making of the Victorian Organ* (1990).

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Preface

But oh! what art can teach,
What human voice can reach,
The sacred organ's praise?
Notes inspiring holy love,
Notes that wing their heavenly ways
To mend the choirs above.
JOHN DRYDEN ('A SONG FOR ST CECILIA'S DAY', 1687)

For Dryden there was no doubt: the organ had no equal in the exercise of music. Indeed, throughout the ages the organ has been granted an elevated status in the minds of both writers and musicians. Its most lofty eminence has been in association with the patron saint of music, St Cecilia, who, in W. H. Auden's description, 'constructed an organ to enlarge her prayer'. Medieval writers appealed to the Book of Psalms, or to Psalm commentaries by the Church Fathers, arguing that there was no more worthy instrument for the praise of God. Later writers saw other opportunities for relating the instrument to things monumental or even elemental. The seventeenth-century polymath Athanasius Kircher represented the six days of creation as an organ, illustrating each as a stop on an instrument which as an ensemble depicted the *Harmonia nascentis mundi* (the harmony of the world's creation). Such noble metaphors are only rarely balanced by more temporal references, though the earliest printed book on the organ, Arnolt Schlick's *Spiegel der Orgel-macher und Organisten* (Mirror of Organ-builders and Organists) of 1511 refers not just to its role in praising God and assisting singing, but also to its capacity to provide refreshment for the human spirit and its woes. But in general, the organ rests unimpeachable as the King of Instruments, an epithet enunciated by Praetorius, Mozart and many others.

But there is also a negative side to this stereotype of the organ as that 'wond'rous machine' (to use another description by Dryden). For the instrument placed above all others and reflecting the harmony of whole creation may perhaps have little to say at the mundane level of human feelings and emotions. In the vocabulary of many a writer through the ages the organ simply thunders, swells, peals or throbs, echoing only a limited field of human experience. At best, this manner of description is complimentary, but at times the sentiment seems less positive, as when Tennyson wrote that 'the great organ almost burst his pipes, groaning for power', or as in the following couplet by the eighteenth-century poet John Wolcot: 'Loud groaned the organ through his hundred pipes, / As if the

poor machine had got the gripes.' But players of most musical instruments hope to appeal to a varied palette of human emotions, and there can be little reason for the organist to be satisfied with a lesser challenge. To make music on the organ, to communicate effectively through music rather than merely to provide an ecclesiastical atmosphere, carries great responsibilities for both the organ builder and the performer. The builder must ensure that the instrument functions properly and that the wind supply matches the demands of the player (as J. S. Bach was so keen to do when he examined new instruments), whilst the organist must ensure that the music is given shape and form, not degenerating into a seamless stream of sound. This latter difficulty lies behind perhaps the most famous criticism of the organ uttered this century – Igor Stravinsky's comment that 'the monster never breathes'. In this regard it is salutary to recall that in only a fraction of the instrument's history has the wind supply been provided by mechanical means. Perhaps when one person or indeed several people were required to pump the wind into the pipes, organists may have perceived more keenly their machine as a living musical instrument. In his brief poem 'On the Musique of Organs', the early seventeenth-century poet Francis Quarles portrays organ music as a partnership between blower and player: 'They both concurre: Each acts his severall part, / Th'one gives it *Breath*; the other lends it *Art*.' Today that breath is available at the end of an electric switch, but players do well to remember the ultimate source of their music-making, as they work to breathe life into the music forming in their minds or in the musical notes laid out before them.

The organ's credentials as a versatile musical instrument have thus continually been under threat. But in recent times the organ has faced an even greater challenge with the rise of devices (in the shape of an organ console) that electronically reproduce recorded sound. In these the breath that gives life to the music has been extinguished altogether; the wind supply, portrayed by Michael Praetorius as the 'soul of the organ', has been cut off. Seduced by a cheaper initial outlay, many committees have embraced an electronic instrument that becomes obsolete against a newer and better model almost as soon as it arrives. But although such instruments have their particular role to play, it is a testament to the value of the traditional instrument that so few organ firms have been forced out of business by the rise of electronic substitutes. New organs are still being built in large numbers across the world, either in churches or in concert halls or private residences. But if the general future of the traditional pipe organ seems for the moment secure, its future lines of development are far from clear. Both the instrument and its music face many questions about style and function which have no simple or single answer. The history of

organ building and playing is one of more or less continuous parallel progression with the occasional crossing of boundaries between the principal schools, but after the watershed of the early part of this century when the organ could get no larger without repeating itself, and when the organist had come to imitate all the orchestra had to offer, this continuity collapsed. The restoration of old instruments and the building of new instruments according to old principles has become commonplace, reflecting the wider interest in historically aware musical performance, and the natural symbiotic relationship between the instrument and its music has thus largely broken down. There is no current prevailing single style of organ building, and there is no current prevailing single style of organ composition. As a natural component of the current climate of cultural eclecticism this need not signal a major crisis for the organ, but it certainly raises challenging questions regarding the way the organ and its music will develop in the next century.

This Companion is designed as a general guide for all those who share Dryden's enthusiasm for the organ. The early chapters tell of the instrument's history and construction, identify the scientific basis of its sounds and the development of its pitch and tuning, examine the history of the organ case and consider current trends and conflicts within the world of organ building. In the central chapters the focus changes to the player: here the practical art of learning the organ is considered, encompassing both elementary and advanced problems, the complex area of performance practice is introduced, and the relationship between organ playing and the liturgy of the church is outlined. In the final section of the book, the emphasis turns to the vast repertoire of organ music, highlighting a selection of the most important traditions. Every chapter in the book should be read as an introduction to the subject it treats, and it is hoped that the bibliography will encourage readers to pursue their own particular interests. Other books in this series published by Cambridge University Press have dealt with instruments considerably younger and less multifarious than the organ, and the reader is encouraged to accept the limitations of the book's scope with understanding. In particular, certain areas of repertoire have been omitted entirely or barely mentioned, as is the case with the music of the late medieval and early renaissance periods and of the contemporary sphere. Moreover, the desire to treat certain areas in reasonable detail has inevitably led to the exclusion of important areas of the repertoire within the principal period covered between *c*1550 and 1950, such as the Italian school after Frescobaldi or the romantic and modern Scandinavian repertoire. But the specific intention of the repertoire chapters, however restricted in scope, is to consider the

development of organ music within each school in relation to the development of the instrument itself. Many books and articles have been written which concentrate principally on the developments of either organ building or of organ music in isolation. In reality the two aspects have developed in tandem, and at times the ambitions of organ players may have dictated changes in organ design, whilst at others the technological advances of the designers have presented new challenges and possibilities to composers and players. This book attempts to respect the mutual dependency of organ builder and organ player, so that even if the modern player is unable to play a particular piece on the most appropriate type of organ, he or she will be able to understand to a fair extent the music as it was conceived for a particular school of organ design and thus be able to re-interpret it as required on the instrument available. Similarly, the examination of the role of organ playing in the liturgy helps to explain the development of particular organ schools where understanding the function of the organist as improviser illuminates the nature of the written-down, composed repertoire.

The editors offer their thanks to all the contributors who so willingly parted with their time and expertise, but owe a particular debt to Stephen Bicknell, who – besides contributing three chapters – undertook the arduous and protracted task of assembling the illustrations. Our thanks also go to our respective Tessas, and to all others who have helped or encouraged the project, including Joseph Alcantara, Gavin Alexander, Robin Goodall, Lynda Stratford and Pierre Vallotton. To Penny Souster, Lucy Carolan and other members of staff at Cambridge University Press we must extend our grateful thanks for much helpful advice and a great deal of patience.