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The New Organ of Basel Cathedral

In 1938 because of the increasing mechanical difficulties with the existing instrument and influenced by the Orgelbewegung (Organ Revival), the newly appointed organist Fritz Morel requested a new organ that would correspond to the tonal ideals of the time. His efforts produced results only 16 years later: In 1955 the Kuhn company built a new organ with four manuals, pedal and 74 stops. Because of the adverse previous experience with the heat of sun rays and with the acoustics, the new organ was placed in the middle of the organ loft, thereby completely closing off the west window.

Felix Pachlatko, succeeding Eduard Müller as cathedral organist in 1982, and the organ expert Rudolf Scheidegger commented on the organ of 1955:

“In retrospect it is clear that the problems of the time had been well understood, but that the solution was unsatisfactory. There are a number of architectural, acoustical and technical deficiencies that led to the decision to build a new organ in 2003 after less than fifty years:

- By concealing the west window the interior of the church was lacking the axial flow of light from the west. The organ front transversed the entire west side resulting in an optically shortened west nave.
- The organ case - that already from its consecration was disparagingly likened to a 'kitchen cupboard with an ice box (the Rückpositiv) in front' was no more than a façade with wooden screens on either side hiding the larger Pedal pipes. In reality there was only one real case for the two swell divisions Oberwerk and Brustwerk. The lacking closed case greatly impeded the distribution of sound. The front display feigned a situation that did not exist.
- The position under the apex of the vault created reverberations that hindered and weakened the direct projection of organ sound into the church.
- The scaling of the pipes in the middle range was too narrow, so that in combination with the deficiencies mentioned above the sound quality was diluted. In general Kuhn's metal pipes were too thin-walled, which led to numerous deformities over the decades.
- The instrument had three different actions with greatly different tone delays: An excellent Barker Machine was used for only three divisions and some of the couplers. Choir and Rückpositiv were accessed mechanically and all front pipes electrically. A precise performance technique was either very difficult or impossible.
- During a general overhaul in 1975 the instrument was revoiced according to the wishes of the cathedral organist Eduard Müller. The organ sound now had more power but was at the same time top-heavy. The disparity between the weak middle range and the much stronger bass and descant range grew. On whole the augmentation was gained at the cost of homogeneity.

During the preparations for a more thorough overhaul of the organ at the beginning of the nineties acute damage was found in the vaults of the Cathedral. To conduct the required repairs it would be necessary to dismantle and rebuild almost the entire organ. A team of

experts comprised of Lhôte, Flentrop, Doerr und Scheidegger decided that there was no justification for such an undertaking. Therefore the Council of the Reformed Protestant Church of Basel resolved in December of 1995 that it would be best to remove the Kuhn organ, to finish the restoration of the vaults and to build a completely new organ. Both in the interest of the Austrian Heritage Body and following the wishes of the Cathedral Building Commission the new organ was to leave the west window unobscured. It was also decided that the new organ case without a Rückpositiv disfiguring the delicate filigree stone work of the historic jube should be modern and speak its own architectural language without deference to historic precedent.

“With these decisions it was clear that the tonal concept of the new organ would not adhere to any historic precedent. Nevertheless the art of organ building, probably more than any other art, stems from a well defined cultural tradition. Nor can it be denied that today’s musical life is strongly influenced by the music of the past. A modern instrument should therefore also incorporate elements of the different periods of organ building. There are those who might disqualify such an approach as insipid eclecticism and certainly such an objection would be valid if the goal were the simple combination of different styles. This was however never an option. The aim was to transform the past by a creative approach to what has been to produce something new and unique.” (Felix Pachlatko)

“In May of 1996 sixteen organ building companies from the area and abroad were notified of the intention to build a four manual organ with around 70 stops and called to submit bids. At the end of 1998 Mathis Orgelbau in collaboration with the building manager of the Basel Reformed Church, Peter Hanhart, was assigned to verify if there would be sufficient space in the west choir loft to build a free-standing 78 stop organ leaving the view to the west window and to the side walls of the loft free. Through concentrated cooperation between Hanhart and Mathis a proposal was developed that convinced the organ commission: “The technical concept met the requirements. The plan demonstrated that the entire instrument would be well situated on the organ loft and would convincingly fit the room. Thus the way was free to progress from planning to carrying out the project.” (Andreas C. Albrecht)

On 17. January, 2000, the Council of the Reformed-Protestant Church Basel-Stadt awarded Mathis Orgelbau the contract to build the new organ.

Primary attention now turned to the final optical design of the new instrument. Some benefactors wanted further development of the accepted Hanhart/Mathis draft proposal. To accomplish this objective a competition was conducted in which four well-known architects were invited to participate: the Belgian Maarten van Severen, two Zurich architects, Christian Kerez and Peter Märkli, and the Basel architecture studio Osolin & Plüss. Taking into consideration the draft proposal of Hanhart/Mathis and the prerequisites of the organ builder each participant in the competition worked out a model of his own.

The models submitted by the participants in the competition from l. to r.: The proposal of the Belgian designer Maarten van Severen, the draft of the Basel architecture studio Osolin & Plüss, the proposals of the Zurich architect Peter Märkli as well as of the architect Christian Kerez.

A jury of prominent experts, chaired by the well-known Basel architect Prof. Dr. h.c. Pierre de Meuron, awarded Peter Märkli from Zurich the first prize. With Märkli's concept it was now possible to finalize the process of determining the inner and outer form of the new organ. His expressive and sophisticated draft not only opens the view to the west window

it also moves the instrument away from the walls without a conventional Rückpositiv case towards the balustrade, lending grace to the front towers and enabling greater presence of the organ sound emanating from flat cases.

Peter Märkli, independent architect and professor at the State University of Technology in Zurich, reflects on the form of the new organ:

“The new organ is approximately the size of a three-storey apartment house. In building this instrument it is important that in spite of its great volume neither the light from the west window nor the view of the west wall from the nave are blocked. Equally important is to maintain the optical impression of the full length of the nave.

“In order to free the view of the west window we divided the mass of the organ in the middle. The divisions of the organ occupy box-like cases which are staggered on either side of the west-window. They are separated from each other and set apart from the walls of the nave. Nevertheless they form a unity by a common lower case extending across the entire area of the organ. Thus, the assemblage enables a view of the west window's full height.

“This concept defines the appearance of the organ's front display. The two foremost cases display the front pipes in a pleasing triangular form. The Positive (Unterwerk) with its own front pipes is placed at floor level on either side of the console which is slightly raised and set back between the front towers. The massive wooden pipes of the former Haas organ - the tallest with a height of almost 30ft. - are in the back in quiver-like holders and define the rear view of the instrument.

“The volume of the cases corresponds to the length of the pipes and are therefore of slightly different heights. These small deviations from symmetry, which are not immediately discernable from the nave floor, are intended and enhance the overall impression of harmony.

“Because there are no convincing contemporary forms of ornamentation there are no pipe shades in the front of the new organ. Because permeable cases are important for acoustical reasons long narrow slits were bored into the solid oak cases which together with the front pipes arranged in bold relief in a zig-zag pattern create a modern form of decoration and visual interest.

Also forming part of the design is the delicate wooden framework suspended a few feet in front of the organ. It consists of a horizontal bar over the gallery rail linked to the vault above by four vertical members enhanced with reliefs by the sculptor Josephsohn. They are colored to match the surrounding reddish sandstone and together with the jube form an 'inner façade' giving the organ-case added spatial definition without separating it from the nave.

The architect and organ builder began detailed planning in 2001 and as of January 2002 the dismantling of the old organ began, which owing to generous donations was relocated to Moscow. The organ will be employed there in a cathedral that was once used by the party machinery of the Soviet Union as an office building and which was restored to its status as house of worship in 1989.

After three months of renovating the jube, the organ loft walls, and the vaults, the installation of the new organ began. Upon completion of construction Hermann Mathis voiced the instrument from January until the end of May.

"The unique acoustics of the Basel Cathedral were a challenge to the voicer. The outline of the basic Romanesque building concept is still evident. A feature of many Romanesque churches is relatively short reverberation times: Numerous small aisles - needed because of the construction restraints of the times - offer few surfaces for reflection and therefore absorb sound dynamics. In addition high frequencies dominate the acoustics because of the Gothic architecture with large window surfaces and rigid archways.

A further challenge was the search for a modern concept of organ sound. Organ builders have always been influenced by prevailing fashions. The neighboring Elsass region with its famous Silbermann organs is an excellent example of this phenomenon as it is possible here not only to perform the French classical repertoire but also middle German organ pieces. This phenomenon has left an imprint on our expectations of sound quality. Because every organ is unique the organist must acquaint himself with the particular characteristics of the instrument concerned and therefore develop new and different interpretations. For this reason the new organ of the Basel Cathedral has no copies of historic stops or tone textures. Rather the organist disposes here of a colorful tonal palette, enabling him to perform music from a wide range of styles.

The award winning concept of the architect Peter Märkli affords optimal technical conditions for the organ. All of the mechanical actions between the performer and the pipe valves or the sliders are very short, rendering a light and sensitive touch. At the console, set back between the front towers, the organist is seated, as it were, within the organ where the suspended key action affords him unimpeded contact with the valves. All individual divisions of the organ are arranged to enable best possible distribution of sound. The shallow depth of the cases (over 400 cubic feet of solid oak) offers ideal reflections so that the sound of all divisions is manifest throughout the cathedral."

Cathedral organist Felix Pachlatko made the following observation: "No matter how well the project is planned and all tonal factors evaluated there is always an element of chance. Certain risks cannot be calculated. It was all the more satisfying therefore to realize from the outset that the proper decisions had been made to improve the acoustical situation. The new organ sounds much more sonorous, clearer and also more powerful. That the secondary divisions (Swell-)Positive and Swell would be so sonorous in comparison to the Great and that the Unterwerk was more subtle than expected was surprising. Given that the Swell divisions blend very well with the Great this was a welcome result.

The dedication of the new Basel Cathedral organ took place at Pentecost, 2003.