

Benelux Beckons - Visits to the Amsterdam Orgelpark

Last autumn I was able to make two short, but extremely interesting, musical trips to Holland and Belgium.

On the first, I took in a day of events at the Orgelpark in Amsterdam held as part of the city's *Open Monuments* weekend in September.

The Orgelpark is housed in a former church (the Parkkerk) on the edge of the Vondelpark and, amazingly, now has seven pipe organs within the one auditorium, each designed to be particularly appropriate for music from a particular time and region. The church dates from 1918 and was deconsecrated in 1995. Following various uses over the next few years, in 2003 the Utopa Foundation proposed its use to house an Orgelpark. Rather than an organ serving a building, the concept was for an environment where the building serves the organ and its music. It now hosts some 80 extremely diverse activities per year drawn from across the performing arts spectrum, but with many of them incorporating the organs in various contexts. It also serves as a centre for organ-related research projects in conjunction with the charismatic Hans Fidom and the VU University Amsterdam.

The instruments housed in the main auditorium comprise:

- 1) The Utopa Baroque organ – the sound concept of this large instrument of 2 manuals and pedals with mechanical action is modelled on the famous Hildebrandt organ in Naumburg. Hildebrandt's instruments tended to be of a gentler tonal design than Silbermann's. This instrument, magnificent both tonally and visually, was inaugurated to great acclaim in March 2018. (The June 2018 edition of *Organists' Review* contains an associated article.)
- 2) The Sauer organ – this German Romantic style instrument was installed as the Parkkerk's own organ in 1922. The organ was originally spread across 2 manuals and pedals with pneumatic action and the original console (still functioning) is now placed in the former pulpit.
- 3) The Verschueren organ – this large instrument was built in 2009 and is in the Cavaillé-Coll French symphonic tradition. It has 41 registers spread across 3 manuals and pedals and has the ventil systems associated with this type of organ.
- 4) The Cabinet organ – this decorative instrument was built in 1767, almost certainly for a private residence. Opening the doors allows the front pipes to be seen and opening a lower section enables the keyboard to be pulled out. The bellows are operated by the organist using a simple pedal device.
- 5) The Van Straten organ – this is partially a reconstruction and partially a copy of the organ built for the Nicolai Church in Utrecht in 1479. It is a *Blokwerk* style instrument with two manuals (wider keys than usual) and pedals and has beautifully painted shutters. It was inaugurated in 2012.
- 6) The Molzer organ – this Viennese instrument was built in 1925 and, apart from conventional keyboards, it originally had an automaton, now lost. Its softer sounds are very romantic, but its louder stops are brighter than those of the Sauer organ.
- 7) The Chest organ – this has four stops and was built for the Orgelpark in 2006. It is often used in jazz concerts as performers find that it speaks more directly than some of the larger organs in the collection.
- 8) The harmonium – this has two manuals, the upper being a celesta, an orchestral instrument which was invented by Mustel, who also made this harmonium. (Harmoniums have always

had a more distinguished profile in Europe than in England, probably due to these continental instruments having a much bolder tonal quality.)

- 9) The Busy Drone – this barrel organ, acquired in 2009, was built in 1924 to provide dance music for a Belgian cafe. It has had music especially composed for it.
- 10) A pair of grand pianos, one of which is an Erard dating from 1899.

The highlights of the day, for me, were:

- 1) music from the late Middle Ages being played on the Van Straten Organ – this instrument produces a surprisingly gutsy sound for its size. This is probably due to its *Blokwork* construction (a common feature of early organ building) making it a very chorus-based instrument, there being no way of using individual registers on the lower manual. The lowest notes automatically activate 7 pipes when played and this gradually increases across the compass until 18 pipes are activated by each of the highest notes;
- 2) music by Walther and Bach played on the Utopa Baroque Organ. The sound of this instrument was stunningly beautiful, with many smaller combinations of stops being showcased in Walther's partita on *Jesu, meine Freude*;
- 3) Franck's Second Choral being played on the Verschuieren Organ. This gave the opportunity to hear many of the characteristic timbres of the French symphonic organ and proved this instrument capable of being both gently poetic in the quieter moments and truly grand in the massive climaxes;
- 4) transcriptions of Schubert's *Fantasia in F minor* and Grieg's *Holberg Suite* played on the Sauer Organ. Although, personally, I'm often underwhelmed by organ transcriptions, I found these to be entirely convincing. They also proved to be a wonderful showcase for the wide range of Germanic romantic colours this instrument has to offer. The various flute stops struck me as particularly beautiful.

I returned to the Orgelpark a few weeks after my previous visit for an event primarily centred around the evolution of the Utopa Organ and its sound. (This was unfortunately, but not unreasonably(!), held in Dutch, so I had to surmise a fair amount and rely on the demonstrations to try to make sense of the proceedings.) However, one of the interesting things, done for comparison, was the playing of a short piece on the 8' Principal (or its equivalent) on each of the organs - it was fascinating to hear just how different the characteristics of this single stop were across these very varied instruments.

Another innovation with huge potential in the Orgelpark is a free-standing digital console which can be used to play both the Utopa and Sauer organs remotely. This console has no stops and registrations are chosen on touch-screens.



(This appears to be an increasing trend. Some of you may have seen that this system is used to control Ted Sharp's Hauptwerk Organ. Klais are also installing a new General Console with two touch-screens in the chancel of St Peter's in Malmö, Sweden, from which the various organs in the church will be playable – this will be Scandinavia's largest organ system:

<https://www.klais.de/m.php?sid=286>

On this occasion the Orgelpark's mobile console was used to excellent effect in an interestingly 'orchestrated' performance of Rutter's *Toccata in Seven*. In the earlier sections the Sauer and Utopa organs were used either alternately or with a solo line being given to one of them and the accompaniment to the other. However, for the conclusion, both the instruments were 'coupled together' and played simul-taneously. This was an extremely effective deployment of the two very different organs.

Apart from being able to play either of these two organs conventionally from this one mobile console, the allied technology also enables the instruments to be used in various avant-garde and previously unimagined ways. These are too numerous to mention here, but further details of the myriad possibilities and much more information about the organs and all other aspects of this phenomenal project can be found on the Orgelpark's extensive website: <https://www.orgelpark.nl/en/Home>

*Roger Carter
01/03/19*

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