

Reflections on the Philosophical, Metaphysical and Practical Aspects of Dual Temperament in the Pasi Organ at St. Cecilia's Cathedral, Omaha, Nebraska  
Symposia held April 7–9 by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and the Westfield Center

Herbert L. Huestis

In 1993, over 30 organ builders met in Tempe, Arizona to discuss the significance of "The Historical Organ in America" and to ponder the future of historically informed organ building. Twelve years later, a new Martin Pasi organ in Omaha's St. Cecilia Cathedral is the realization of a future that could only be a matter of conjecture a decade ago. Pasi's Opus 14 is a magnificent achievement—musical, spiritual and architectural.

In 2005, from April 7–9, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln School of Music and the Westfield Center held a symposium entitled "The Organ as Mirror of Religion and Culture—Temperament, Sound and Symbolism." This symposium was also sponsored by the Schola Cantorum of St. Cecilia Cathedral in Omaha, Nebraska. The new Pasi dual temperament organ made these far-reaching discussions possible in a way one could only dream of a decade ago.

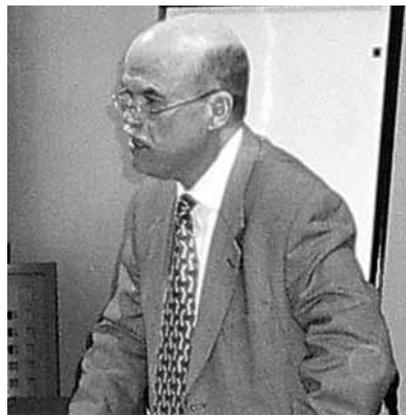
I must admit that since dual temperament is a rare undertaking in organ building, I thought of it as an experimental and possibly excessive luxury. After a thorough acquaintance with this fine instrument, its setting and its players, I find that dual temperament is extremely practical in its application to church music, both old and new. This was a big surprise. After attending the symposium, I felt that it was possible to reflect on three aspects as they relate to the new Martin Pasi organ: philosophical, metaphysical and practical.

My first impressions in this magnificent cathedral were hardly philosophical. I marveled at the sound of the organ, the splendid acoustic and the phenomenal artistic decoration and design of the church. This is truly an extraordinary space, where the celebration of both sonic and visual art is evident throughout the building. Once my ears were filled with the vocal sound of the organ, I felt purity and harmony beyond expectations. The effect of meantone tuning is visceral. It calms the nerves and soothes the soul! Whatever understanding of "temperaments" I carried into this space evaporated in a sense of sheer sound and harmony. So much for reading about temperaments in the context of western civilization and pouring over comparative charts. Pure sound is pure sound!

The rather complex symposium entitled "The Organ as Mirror of Religion and Culture" opened April 7 with a recital by Kevin Vogt, director of St. Cecilia Cathedral Schola Cantorum. Interspersed between organ selections was a reading of John Dryden's "Ode to Saint Cecilia" given by Marie Rubis Bauer, also an organist of the cathedral. The immediacy and impact of the music and spoken word set the stage for discussions of philosophy and culture



Kevin Vogt



Calvin Bower

which followed. A presentation called "The Organized Cosmos" was made by Quentin Faulkner (University of Nebraska-Lincoln), followed by discussions of philosophy and organ music. Calvin Bower (Notre Dame University) gave a talk entitled "Sign, Reference, and the Communion of Saints: First Steps Toward an Aesthetic of Sacred Music," which emphasized the "transcendent" nature of church music. Music, at the moment of its inception in the church, "transcends" for a brief moment the worlds of temporal and spiritual reality, residing for a transient period of time in both spheres. This is the "communion" or the magic of the moment—pretty heady stuff for a lowly organist and scribe.

That evening, we repaired to a concert by Hans Davidsson (Eastman School of Music), David Dahl (Pacific Lutheran University, emeritus), and



Martin Pasi Opus 14



St. Cecilia Cathedral



Hans Davidsson

combination of beautiful vocal tone and purity of tuning in the organ had a complex physiological and psychological effect. One's attention was drawn so forcibly to the organ that time was forgotten. The music of Matthias Weckmann came to life as if it had been composed yesterday. Bach's works took on a whole new meaning.

Kevin Vogt, which featured works by Matthias Weckmann, J. S. Bach and David Dahl. The ancient philosophers believed in the melding of the mind and body, and I had no doubt that the com-



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Hellmuth Wolff, John Brombaugh, Hal Gober, Ibo Ortgies



Charles Brown



Martin Pasi and John Brombaugh

Friday, April 8, Hans Davidsson offered several presentations on the subject of "The Harmony of the Spheres," which explored what he called "sacred geometry" or the patterns of construction that organ builders knew throughout the ages. He explained that these "building blocks" enabled the building of cathedrals and organs in times past, much like cow barns in our own time, built by common folk without the aid of drawings or architects. Organ building had a practical, intuitive nature that made it possible for builders to construct monumental organs without the aid of drawings or architects, just like the cathedrals that housed them and the stained glass that adorned them.

With these thoughts fresh in our minds, we attended Solemn Vespers with improvisation by Susan Ferré in alternation with Gregorian chant. Again, inspiration came from well-established patterns and style (like "barn building"). There was an uncanny ease with which the improvised musical examples fleshed out the philosophical discussions we had just heard. It seemed that the Westfield Center folks were on the same wavelength as the academics.

Metaphysical aspects of the organ were further explored by Fr. Anthony Ruff of St. John's Abbey. Along these lines, a unique presentation on "The Organ as Symbol" was made by Charles S. Brown. Curiously, he also took up the metaphor of barns, and took the participants on a "Pilgrimage through Round Barns." This rather far-reaching discussion of the symbology of the organ touched on discussions of eschatology, folk religion and masks in aboriginal cultures. All this did not lose sight of the organ as a unique instrument, embedded in a very long history of western civilization. Panel discussions gave the opportunity for much storytelling. Many participants were able to give an account of their own unique experiences of "organ encounters," some rather touching.

Temperament was a significant subject of formal presentations. On April 9, Ibo Ortgies gave a synopsis of his study of tuning as it pertains to the works of Dietrich Buxtehude and his contemporaries. He presented a picture of 17th- and 18th-century performance practice that was extremely compatible with

meantone tuning and did not at all support the idea that "well-tempered" tuning was necessary for the performance of this music. In fact, a central part of his thesis seemed to refute the notion that Buxtehude had the Marienkirche organ retuned in well-temperament. In his words, that seemed not to be the case, despite the fact that it was widely assumed to be true.

Along these same lines, Hans Davidsson made presentations on the new four-manual 17th-century North German organ at Göteborg University, Göteborg, Sweden. This is now the largest meantone organ on the continent, and goes a long way to support Ortgies' thesis that meantone tuning was far and away the most common tuning clear through the 18th century. Along with these insights, Bruce Shull of Taylor & Boody Organbuilders gave a presentation on the newly discovered Bach/Lehmann temperament, which opens up new avenues for the appreciation of Bach's music. This audience, already committed to early music, was able to appreciate such information and insight and see its application in the daily recitals and musical examples of the symposium.

These presentations stretched the mind of every listener in preparation for a concert of new music for the organ by Robert Bates. I confess that I was apprehensive about modern music performed on a meantone organ. How could contemporary music work on an organ that captured the tuning of the 17th and 18th centuries? Bates presented works by Arvo Pärt, György Ligeti, Joan Tower, Naji Hakim, and his own *Chromatic Fantasy* and *Charon's Oar*. Would he explore the dark, dissonant side of meantone tuning? With this question in mind, I discovered the genius of an artist committed to beauty and yes, the "metaphysical" properties of this organ in our time. The concert was followed by a reception and listeners could regain their poise. This was a not-to-be-forgotten experience!

There was still an unanswered question: Was a dual temperament organ a luxury in the worship service? A number of participants stayed an extra day to find out. St. Cecilia Cathedral is a very large church, and the two services were filled with many families, young children, a seeing-eye dog, and, fortunately, a group



John Brombaugh and Hellmuth Wolff



Pasi keydesk

of nuns from the entire community. The music was simple, straightforward and traditional. Kevin Vogt played the service, and I marvelled at his ability to shift effortlessly between the meantone and well-tempered divisions of the organ, depending on the nature of the music. Modal compositions came to life in meantone tuning—not surprising, but what a rare opportunity to hear "ordinary" church music with such an "authentic" flavor. The simplest psalms and congregational responses jumped off the page with fresh meaning and inspiration. In this sense, it underscored the absolute practicality of dual temperament. Tuning that makes ordinary church music appeal to hardened traditionalists surely deserves to be called a practical application.

So there it was: philosophy, metaphysics and practical application—all explored through in-depth lectures and discussions, elegant performances and appealing church services in less than a week. These events came together smoothly through the efforts of all the individuals who contributed so mightily

to this fine symposium. They included Quentin Faulkner, George Ritchie, Susan Ferré, Hans and Ulrika Davidsson, David Dahl, John Koster, Bruce Shull, Roger Sherman, Ibo Ortgies, Kevin Vogt, Marie Rubis-Bauer, Charles Brown, Calvin Bower, John Koster, Gene Bedient, John Brombaugh, Fr. Anthony Ruff, Robert Bates and of course, Martin Pasi, organbuilder. ■

*Herbert L. Huestis is a graduate of the Eastman School of Music, where he studied organ with David Craighead 40 years ago. After a stint as a full-time church organist, he studied psychology and education at the University of Idaho, where he obtained his Ph.D. in 1971. He spent time as a school psychologist, and was subsequently lured back into the organ world and took up pipe organ maintenance with his wife Marianne and son Warren. For some years he has specialized in reed voicing, and as he approaches retirement spends more and more time tuning pianos. Ironically, his interest in temperaments comes from developments in piano tuning, where 19th-century tuning styles have been recovered in the manner of a lost art.*

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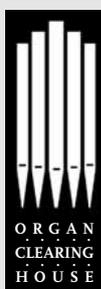
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