

The 23rd Annual Historic Organ Study Tour (HOST)

by Katherine Crosier

From August 29 through September 7, I participated in the 2016 Historic Organ Study Tour (HOST) to Lorraine, France, which was organized and directed by Bruce Stevens and Bill Van Pelt and led by Christophe Mantoux. Since 1996, when I last traveled with this group (at that time under the auspices of the Organ Historical Society) to Denmark, Sweden, and Germany, the tour dates often conflicted with the beginning of the school year. Now that I am retired and no longer bound to the academic and liturgical year, I was eager to explore and play historic organs in Europe once again.

Except, perhaps, for the six Australians in the group, I may have had the longest travel time to join the tour, for it took me 30 hours to travel from Honolulu to the destination of Metz, the meeting point some 205 miles (330 km) northeast of Paris. We were a diverse group of 39 organists and organ enthusiasts from the U.S., Ireland, and Australia, but we were bound together by our common quest and love for historic pipe organs.

The routine for visiting up to three churches each day was to board the chartered tour bus early in the morning and drive out into the rural, less well-traveled countryside, where we would find that the tallest structure in town was the local church. As we entered the church, group members would indulge in a kind of feeding frenzy, snapping photos of the organ, altar, stained glass windows, and other beautiful features.

Soon, Christophe Mantoux would begin to improvise, demonstrating individual stops of the organ, usually starting with the softest flutes and strings, gradually adding more and more stops, and finally ending with full organ—all in all, a grand improvisation lasting about 20 minutes. Each improvisation was different, depending upon the disposition of the organ: sometimes it was in French Classic style, showing off the flutes, cornets, reeds, Plein jeu, and Grands jeux in stylistically convincing movements; other times it was in French Romantic style, using styles suggestive of beloved composers such as Franck, Widor, Vierne, or Duruflé. Occasionally, we were met by a local church organist who would play a 20-minute recital for us instead. In most cases, I preferred hearing Christophe's improvisations because although it was sometimes his first time at the console, he systematically displayed the full range of each organ from softest to loudest. Christophe was absolutely amazing in being able to sit down at any instrument and pull off a brilliant performance regardless of the organ's unusual features.

Then, it was open console time, and the organists among us—about half the group—were each given five minutes to play the instrument. We followed a strict rotation in alphabetical order. Truthfully, my greatest stress at each organ was deciding what would work and what to play. Either Christophe or the local church organist would offer registration help for those who needed or wanted it. My biggest challenge was figuring out which stop knobs belonged to which divisions. Most of the time, the knobs for one division were not grouped together, and it was not readily apparent which knobs corresponded to which manual: in fact, when one found a Montre 8 on one side of the keyboards, the Octave 4 was often to be found on the other side!

I particularly appreciated words of advice from tour director, Bruce Stevens, such as, “find individual stops to play, don't play everything on full organ.” From the tour program book, “There are many players waiting to play each organ, so please be considerate of the others and limit your total time on the bench. Often a small portion of a long piece is quite useful for

experimentation/demonstration. NEVER stand on the pedals—doing so really could break the trackers! Remember that if the tracker action is of the suspended type, it is usually very sensitive; it responds well to a gentle touch, but it tends to rebel at a forceful touch. Be gentle, and love will bloom.” Also, “Leave things as we find them; when we leave a church, only the dust should have been disturbed.”

On the first day, certainly the most unusual instrument was the Spanish-style organ by Alain Faye at Église Saint Urbain in Thionville-Guentrange. Though it was built in 2009, it is modeled after an 18th-century Spanish organ with a brilliantly painted case, small manual keys with a short compass (incomplete bottom manual), bellows covered in music manuscript paper, and short, stubby levers for pedals. A whimsical feature was the “smiley faces” cut into some of the en chamade reed caps. Upon close examination, we discovered two caps with sad faces: when those two pipes are played, they create the interval of the “wolf” fifth in meantone tuning. According to Wikipedia, this is where the “diminished sixth is severely dissonant and seems to howl like a wolf, because of a phenomenon called beating. Since the diminished sixth is meant to be enharmonically equivalent to a perfect fifth, this anomalous interval has come to be called the wolf fifth.”

On the same day, we also visited a French romantic organ at the Église Saint Martin in Hayange. It was remarkable to have registration help from the church’s organist, Olivier Schmitt, on one side and Christophe Mantoux on the other side. We must have been quite a sight with three people on the organ bench, and it was much fun to play Franck’s *Cantabile* with these two capable gentlemen helping by pushing and pulling stops and operating the swell pedal. Several people complimented me on my Franck performance, which is all the amazing because it has been years since I’ve played this piece in public and have not touched it ever since.

To access most of the organs required climbing an extremely cramped, steep, and uneven spiral staircase—not for the faint of heart. By far the most memorable experience was climbing up to the swallow’s nest organ at the Metz Cathedral of Saint-Étienne. We were divided into groups of six people to climb up the ancient stairway to a narrow catwalk running along the length of the nave until we finally reached the organ. It was only 60 steps up to the catwalk level, but, of course, it seemed like a lot more when no end was in sight. An additional “authentic” experience was that our hands turned black from touching the walls laden with centuries of soot!

Another remarkable organ was the Italian-style instrument at the Église Jésus-Ouvrier in Talange. In 2006, rather than restoring the big organ in the back gallery, the city of Talange decided to purchase a new organ in historic Italian style from Belgium organ builder Rudi Jacques. The single-manual instrument has very short keys in addition to a small manual compass, and the extremely small pedals made playing any pieces with a pedal part very challenging. I chose to play a piece for manuals only.

It was not until the fifth day of our tour that we visited our first French Classic organ, located in Église Saint-Barthélémy in Sarrebourg. The organs up to this point had been primarily Romantic instruments, and playing French Baroque music on them had not been “just right.” I waited until our visit to this organ to play François Couperin’s “Tierce en taille,” a favorite piece of mine that I played at my wedding in 1975. Original French Classic organs are rare because many of them underwent radical changes and additions during the 19th century, particularly in

churches that had adequate funds to pay for a transformation to a Romantic organ aesthetic. Such changes often included changing the key action from tracker to pneumatic, adding many more foundation stops (corresponding to the rise of the symphony orchestra), and revoicing pipework to adhere to Romantic tonal ideals favoring smooth, fundamental tone.

At the organ in Sarrebourg, built in 1741 by Franz Joseph Beyer and restored to its original form by Jean-Georges Koenig in 1969, French Classic music really came alive as we heard the characteristic sounds of an authentic French Classic Cornet, Cromorne, Trompette, Grands jeux, and Plein jeu. I could easily have spent the whole day here but had to content myself with hearing this organ for only the two hours of our visit. The colorful French Classic music played on this instrument sounded absolutely vibrant and gorgeous. I realized for the first time what my ear had been missing all these years while trying to play French classic music on inauthentic instruments.

On the sixth day of the tour, we heard an in-tune organ for the first time! Now, I don't want to disparage at all the 15 beautiful organs we had heard up to that point, but let's just say that they had been "charming," "quaint," or "so French," in their out-of-tune-ness, meantone or other historic tunings notwithstanding. Truthfully, some of them had been *wildly* out of tune: one could even have called them comically funny or painfully sour.

The in-tune organ was located in the Église Saint-Jacques in Lunéville. The 1751 Nicolas Dupont instrument is unusual because it is said to be the only Baroque organ in Europe that has no visible pipes. According to our tour booklet, "the unique feature of this instrument, the absence of visible pipework, is achieved by hiding the instrument behind the substructure, the balustrades, the sculpted oak porticos, and the openwork pilasters formed by a collection of vertical slats through which sound emanates." Eighteenth-century artist André Joly painted a *trompe l'oeil* (optical illusion) painting on the wall behind the organ, and the whole design is a collaborative work between organbuilder and architect. Apparently, this 18th-century innovative visual design sparked a lot of criticism from organ purists, but today, it looks truly incredible.

What better way to present the organ but through a series of variations? The church's brilliant organist, Aude Schumacher, performed a French suite by J-F Dandrieu (multiple versets for the Magnificat), Sweelinck's six variations on "Mein junges Leben hat ein End," Jehan Alain's *Variations sur un thème de Clément Jannequin*, and Guilmant's *Offertoire sur "O Filii,"* op. 49, no. 2. All of these works showed off the organ beautifully, and in tune! We were told that in addition to her church job and virtuosity at the organ, Aude Schumacher teaches Baroque bassoon at the Conservatory in Nancy.

The next church we visited, Saint Marien in Vic-sur-Seilles, was a last-minute substitute arranged by Christophe Mantoux because the organs at the Basilique Saint Epvre in Nancy, where a visit had been planned, were unexpectedly not available (for somewhat intriguing reasons involving *un scandale*). Fortunately for us, the young organist of Saint Marien in Vic-sur-Seilles, Emilien Roess, welcomed us with great hospitality. He put together a special English-language brochure for us about the organ, for which he had obviously used Google Translate; the result was some hilarious vocabulary, such as "bedstead" for organ case, "big organ" for the Great, "narrative" for the Récit, and "bumblebee" for Bourdon! Mr. Roess also generously baked three different types of cakes for us and served them still warm from the oven with coffee and tea. The beautiful 1998 Gaston Kern organ here has a *pédalier à la française*. This was the first time I had seen such a pedalboard, which looks like short slats of wood

projecting out of the floor. One cannot use modern heel-toe pedal technique on it, and it would seem impossible to play music with anything but simple bass lines. Nonetheless, Bruce Stevens informed us that on a previous tour in the South of France, Christophe Mantoux had miraculously performed a Bach Trio Sonata on such a pedalboard!

The city of Nancy is the home of two monumental organs: the 1881 organ at Église Saint-Sebastien, which is the largest mechanical action organ built by Dalstein & Haerpfer and is preserved intact; and the massive 1763/1861 Dupont/Cavaillé-Coll organ at the Cathedrale Notre-Dame-de-l'Annonciation. In addition to our scheduled two-hour visit to hear and play the cathedral organ, many of the tour participants attended a special Mass for St. Fiacre, the patron saint of gardening, which was a spectacle the likes of which I've never seen! We were simply blown away by the enormous displays of plants, including trees and flowers, fruits, and vegetables that had been used to decorate the place. With about a thousand people in attendance, you could certainly say this was a *big deal* in Nancy, an annual event celebrating the death of Irish St. Fiacre, who died on August 30, 670 AD. Jean Bizot's organ playing was certainly the model of what French service playing is all about, with improvisation throughout the service except for the postlude, which was the famous Widor "Toccata" from his Fifth Symphony.

We visited the medieval village of Domgermain to hear an exemplary example of a French Classic organ that has been more or less preserved from its 1720 beginning due to lack of funds during the 19th and early 20th centuries to make extensive changes. A sentence in the tour booklet regarding the Charles Cachet organ caught my eye: "By 1990, the organ was in a 'sorry state' and was unplayable; nonetheless it had been well protected from the typical deforming revisions through the years thanks to the modest means of the parish." Although the churches in the towns of Vézelize and Deneuvre had more resources and made significant changes to their beautiful French Classic organs, recent informed restorations have brought the instruments back to their 1779 and 1704 states with great success.

A remarkable occurrence was the attention our tour group's presence caused in this rural region. Everywhere we went, local news media wanted to take our picture, we were met by several town mayors, and people generously gave us refreshments. In fact, several neighborhood children seemed quite excited as they watched our bus pull up—a sight that must be a rarity in these parts.

In the city of Saint-Dié-des-Vosges, we were greeted by city officials at a special reception put on for us in the City Hall. It was in this city that the first map of the world showing the name "America" was produced in 1509, and Saint-Dié-des-Vosges is honored today with the title of "godmother of America"—the city that named America. Here we visited the Cathedral Saint Dié, a building that was almost completely destroyed by a devastating bomb attack on November 9, 1944. The rebuilt church remained without an organ for 60 years, for it was not until 2008 that Pascal Quoirin replaced the lost organ with a gorgeous modern one. It has the most up-to-date, and in my opinion, easiest to play pedalboard we encountered. I could have spent hours playing and exploring this organ. What was most unusual for a modern organ, though, were the different colors used for the engraved stop knob names: red ink was used for the Récit, blue for the Great, black for the Positif, and green for the Pedal. I've never ever seen this system before, and it would take some getting used to.

It would be impossible to describe in detail all 28 organs we visited, but I came away

with several new insights.

Not all French classic music is playable on every French classic organ. I learned this in a hurry when I wanted to play a piece like a “Tierce en taille” and discovered that either there was no tierce available, or it was only in the upper part of the keyboard (*dessus*) and not in the bass. So, I ended up playing a piece for one manual, rather than a tenor solo and accompaniment. The dilemma at each organ was, “Well, what piece will work here?”

Pedalboards vary widely from organ to organ. All of us U.S. organists who are used to a standard pedalboard, such as the AGO standard, discovered right away how difficult it is to find the notes when there is no uniformity in size, width, distance between pedals, or placement in relation to the keyboards. One pedalboard even had five extra notes in the bass, and there were some with a “short octave,”—an incomplete bottom octave in order to save space in the organ case. Organists pride themselves on being able to play the pedals without looking—I couldn’t do it when the keys are not where you think they should be. I was especially blown away by the *pédalier à la française* of the French Classic organs. Extensive practice would be needed to get comfortable with it.

A number of organist brought François Couperin’s organ Masses and Louis-Nicolas Clérambault’s Suites to play. However, these works were considered concert works and not typical Sunday Mass fare: they contain much longer pieces than the average French organist would have played in alternation with the chant. Christophe Mantoux informed us that very short pieces—four to eight bars in length—would have been more typical fare for the average French parish in the 17th and 18th centuries.

The acoustics in most all of these churches were fantastic due to the all-stone construction, the extremely high ceilings, and the lack of acoustic-absorbing materials such as carpeting or padded pews. I became acutely aware of how uncomfortable the pews were, especially since the width of almost all of them was extremely narrow—not more than nine inches in depth. Even though I am a small person, this was too narrow to be seated comfortably on what is basically a thin slat.

In order to get to the organ, one must climb narrow spiral stairways, and you can’t have claustrophobia or a fear of heights. It seemed almost endless, going round and round to climb the 70 spiral steps up to the organ at the Nancy Cathedral. In many of the churches, the steps were far from even, and in fact, quite worn down with a big dip in the middle of each one. As someone said, “This would never be allowed in the U.S. OSHA would shut them down.”

On the next to last night there was a delightful group dinner with a lavish French menu. The room was noisy with conversation and laughter over the fine food and drink. It meant that the 10-day tour was about to come to a close, but we were not the same. We had bonded through falling in love with the historic organs and churches of France and being mesmerized by the architecture, stained glass windows, picturesque waterways, beautiful flower displays, and fine cuisine we had experienced together.

Thank you to Christophe Mantoux, Bruce Stevens, and Bill Van Pelt for a fantastic, beautifully organized, and unforgettable sojourn. Next year, HOST will visit Italy, beginning in Venice and traveling to Treviso and then up into the Dolomite Mountains to explore “The Venetian Organbuilding School” as well as some outstanding historic organs from other schools. The dates are August 21 through 29, 2017, inclusive. Contact Bruce Stevens at

bbstevens@erols.com for more information.

Katherine Crosier has recently retired after 35 years as Organist of the Lutheran Church of Honolulu and 20 years as Chapel Organist of Iolani School in Honolulu, Hawaii.