

REFORM
IN
ORGAN BUILDING

BY
THOMAS CASSON

A LECTURE DELIVERED TO THE
BIRMINGHAM AND MIDLAND MUSICAL GUILD

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S. S. STRATTON, Esq., presiding.

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REFORM IN ORGAN BUILDING

BY

THOMAS CASSON, ESQ.

I am particularly glad to bring my ideas before your Guild because it is not one primarily concerned in the building or playing of organs. The question of reform in the organ is not primarily one for the organ-builder, and is only secondarily for the organ-player. First and foremost it is for the all round musician. This idea is very clearly recognised, so far as the playing is concerned, by that useful body the College of Organists, whose aim is far higher than that of turning out organists and organists only, viz., to paraphrase a well-known saying—to make the organist a better musician, the musician a better organist. In this endeavour the College must have the sympathy of us all. I have endeavoured to emphasise this point also in the terms of the dedication to Mr. Best of my first work.

It is then primarily in your quality as a Guild of Musicians that I invite your attention to the following remarks: premising that I do not wish to lay down the law except so far as it has been done by recognised authorities, and that I shall be glad at the close of the lecture to answer any intelligent criticism or to give any explanations that may be demanded.

The modern English organ-builder looks complacently upon his typical instrument, and it is difficult to persuade him that it is imperfect. I will, however, quote two eminent authorities whose consensus is most significant, viz., Mr. W. T. Best and Mr. E. H. Turpin—significant because it is well known that on several

points the great Liverpool organist does not hold the same opinions as the accomplished musician whom we all regard as the personification of the College of Organists. What says Mr. Best?

“Unfortunately, when organ-builders shortened the keyboard compass in the important region of the ‘bass,’ they have constantly neglected to supply the indispensable equivalent of an adequate pedal organ. Even in the largest instruments, where an attempt is made in this direction, it will be at once remarked that the pedal-bass is only suitable for the stops comprising the great or most powerful clavier; the varieties of delicate tone in the bass (to combine with the more frequently used ‘choir’ and ‘swell’ claviers) being almost invariably absent. A never-ending obstacle, also, in the act of playing, is a want of ready means to control the use, or vice versa, of the different pedal couplers when absolutely necessary. As a case in point I may name an organ piece highly popular some years ago, viz., the Concerto in F major, with flute solo, by Rinck. I know of no instrument where it is possible to perform this work with a suitable pedal-bass in the sudden entries of the ‘Tutti’ on the loud clavier, opposed to the soft bass tone required instantly after in accompanying the solo passages, involving in addition the co-operation of the pedal couplers.”¹

This is a sufficiently strong condemnation of the instrument generally from the musician’s point of view, and shows that as an executant the writer, in all his wide experience, knows of no instrument in which the basses are sufficiently appropriate and controllable to perform Rinck’s flute concerto!

I may remark *en passant* that in some recent correspondence, our friend Mr. Heywood mentioned this particular piece of music in relation to the impossibility of sufficiently controlling the *manual* tone.

¹ Mr. Best’s letter proceeds to except Mr. Casson’s organs, but could hardly be quoted in a lecture without suspicion of advertising.

Mr. Turpin's opinion is more sweeping. He condemns the modern organ as clumsy and unreasonable in its general design, and as not having a word to be said in its favour, but to be merely what the builders give to organists to make the most of.

Let me quote one more authority, that of one whose name must ever be held in respect in this town, and whom I am proud to remember as one of the earliest supporters of my system. I omit his complaints about his own special hindrances, for I have no wish to condemn any organ or to blame any builder in particular, or to hurt the feelings of anyone.

“September, 1884.

“MY DEAR SIR,—Accept my best thanks for your book and kind letter. My experience leads me to value your immense improvements.... If I had your patent applied to—organ, you may guess how much I should appreciate it. A year or two ago I gave a recital at the and there found an ingenious (?) arrangement; the whole pedal organ was thrown out at the same time as the Full Great Organ; but if you wanted a soft pedal organ immediately, your hand must make the necessary alteration in the pedal organ. The great draw-back to any improvements in organs has been the unwillingness of builders to listen to any suggestions, or to move out of their groove.... Personally, I thank you with all my heart, and beg to assure you that it shall not be my fault if your improvements are not more widely known and more generally adopted. Believe me, faithfully yours, J. STIMPSON.—THOS. CASSON, ESQ.”

Without going further, I think that I have quoted authorities sufficient to start with the following axioms:

1. That the modern English organ is unsatisfactory as a whole.
2. That its basses are especially so.
3. That it is difficult to stir up organ-builders to the appreciation of progressive or thoroughgoing ideas.

The last axiom laid down with full knowledge and appreciation of various beautiful *details* of construction for which we have to thank modern builders.

I propose to contrast the English and German instruments of two hundred years ago, to examine their respective advantages and defects as bearing upon broad principles, to trace briefly the evolution of the present form of English organ, and to show that by falling back upon a combination of sound English and German principles we may obtain more satisfactory instruments. It is by this means only, and not by commencing with the adoption of details, however ingenious, of piecemeal and makeshift character, that progress is to be made and efficiency and comfort are to be secured.

It is here that the College of Organists made in their celebrated conference their great mistake. I think that you will agree with me that a great conference should again be held by them, at which important principles, almost entirely neglected by the builders, should be laid down. That this was not done is not only regrettable in itself, but has given rise to a report that the College "feared the wrath of the builders" forsooth, if they should venture to treat of anything but the "outer timbers" of the organ! The absurdity of the report is obvious to anyone who knows the College; but not too absurd for adoption by some builders, who complacently regard it as evidence of their superior wisdom. That is as if the soldier, musician, or workman were to be dictated to by the maker of the weapon, instrument, or tool!

I speak of the builders generally; but I am bound to admit that in the case of a few I have found some symptoms of "divine discontent." It is of such men and such only that there is hope. The artist who is content is ever on the down grade.

The case then that I would present to you is that by falling back on broad principles, we may blend the organ into one homogenous, sympathetic, controllable entity, and entirely get rid of the present objectionable features and defects. That is my

case, but I propose to show not only this but that by adopting this course we may secure greater economy in money and room, and gain enormously in simplicity of build and manipulation. It will be for you to decide whether or not I shall have proved this also.

It may appear to be like "flogging a dead horse" to discuss the G organ, but it is necessary in investigating these principles.

We must remember that our great-grandfathers were satisfied with a thin harmony which, to our ears, is ludicrous; consequently the desertion of the middle of the clavier to enable the deep basses to be touched by hand was scarcely noticed. The great English principle was adapted to the end in view and was reasonably carried out. If a change had to be made from "full" to "verse," the hands were transferred to the clavier of an organ having bass and treble instantly ready, appropriate, sympathetic, musical. In spite, therefore, of the irreconcilability of the details of this class of instrument with modern requirements, I draw your particular attention to the underlying principle, great and important. *Each division of the organ was complete as a musical en entity.* We will presently consider whether this noble principle is irreconcilable with the CC compass. The G organ, characteristic of two hundred years ago, retained its general features until some fifty years since, when not only had the partial introduction of the pedal led to appreciation of a fuller harmony, but the music of Bach began to attract attention. This led to the battle between the "G men" and the "C men," a contest of the bitterness of which few, of the present generation have any idea.

In Germany the pedal organ had long been known and esteemed. The organ was always regarded as of 16 ft. compass, but the relegation of the deeper notes to the pedal was found to be the most convenient method of playing them. Thus we find that the pedal organ was the place for the basses of the chief manual stops, which in England would have been cut short at GG and left on the manual. The German organ was therefore also a complete musical entity, theoretically more complete than the English. No adequate mechanical appliances existed, however,

for shifting the pedal basses with appropriateness and speed sufficient to sympathise and synchronise with the manual changes. The stops could be only "set" beforehand, and as the pedal bass could be dispensed with more readily in the soft than the loud passages, the pedal organ became in the main (as may be seen in the music of Rinck and even more recent writers) a bass for the great organ only. It is obvious that for instantaneous provision of appropriate basses the English *principle* was far better. The absence of pedals made the harmony thin, the pedal *obbligato* was of course unappreciated; but the pure, deep, sympathetic basses of old English organs—so ruthlessly destroyed by modern builders—are still remembered with regret when contrasted with what Mr. A. J. Hipkins truly calls our "senseless pedal basses."

I trust that I have now made clear the two great principles of the English and German methods respectively. The English, that each department of the organ must be complete; the German, that the pedal organ must contain representative basses for the chief manual stops.

It will have been perceived that these two principles are alike excellent in theory and defective in practice. Leaving the Germans to amend their own defects, as they have recently done to a great extent, we will for a moment glance at the development of the pedal in England to see how both principles were deserted in its case. The first pedals introduced merely dragged down the lower notes of the great organ, but were afterwards reinforced by a few "pedal pipes" in unison or "repetition." Increasing appreciation of the pedal *obbligato* enforced a demand for 16 ft. compass, and after a few grand efforts to maintain the English principle in connection with it, the manual compass was shortened to the C of 8 ft.

Here occurred a most serious error. The English builder, ignorant of the theory of the pedal bass and unaccustomed to regard the pedal stop as anything beyond a mere reinforcement, looked upon the alteration as a shortening of the manual compass and not as he should have done, as a lengthening of the compass