

THE INFLUENCE OF THE  
ORGAN IN HISTORY.



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INFLUENCE OF THE ORGAN  
IN HISTORY.

INAUGURAL LECTURE

OF THE

DEPARTMENT OF THE ORGAN IN THE COLLEGE  
OF MUSIC OF BOSTON UNIVERSITY.

BY

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## SECTION I.



LADIES AND GENTLEMEN :—

It having become my duty to deliver this, the inaugural lecture of the organ department attached to this institution, I have found myself considerably embarrassed as to choice of subjects.

The trouble lay in the quantity of material at hand, and not in any lack of it.

The history of the Organ runs back so far into the centuries, that no matter what point one might select for examination, it can scarcely be brought into the scope of a lecture except in a very empty and skeleton form. You will bear with me, then, for the superficial manner in which I shall be forced to treat many important points. As many of those present do not propose to make a study of the organ, I shall avoid treating of the instrument itself in any technical sense, and would offer a few thoughts on the subject of

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with a glance at the "schools of playing" thus created.

The Organ is called the "king of instruments."

This phrase has been used so often that it has become decidedly well worn and trite. None the less, however, is the expression full of significance; and to what an extent (especially in a historical sense) is known to but comparatively few persons, among whom I fear far too few organists would be found.

To bring up some of these neglected facts; to examine them in their historical and theoretical bearing, as well as in practice; to thus create a greater love for and appreciation of the instrument on the part of its students,—to do this, I say, is, if I apprehend it aright, one of the principal objects which the Boston University has had in view in founding this department.

The organ, then, is called the "king of instruments."

If we look at the phrase a little closer, it will be perceived that the simile is a striking one. A king, in the so-called "good old times of yore," if he were a man of any force of character, generally possessed, along with the divine right theoretical, any quantity of the human power practical. The day of more or less ornamental constitutional figure-heads had not yet arrived.

In other words, the live kings of the past, of the feudal time, moulded to their own tastes and characters their age, their people, or only their court, according to the innate ability they might possess. In turn they were themselves affected, to a degree, by their surroundings, but to a far lesser extent than is the case at this day, the balance of influence remaining largely in their favour.

I will endeavour to show that among musical instruments this "kingship," as regards the organ, held good in a parallel

way,—that by its own nature as to construction, by its very faults and weaknesses, by the mission it was called upon to fulfil, it did, in very fact, long reign supreme as king of instruments.

Absolute power, as represented by a monarch, became narrowed down, in the lapse of centuries, by external forces working out their own independence, thus checking and limiting this absolutism. Here, too, I will endeavour to draw a parallel, and show that as years rolled on, the influence of the organ upon music in the abstract diminished. The process became inverted, and music began to affect the organ, rather than the organ *it*. To this we owe the vast improvements in the construction of the instrument, the many additions of new qualities of tone, and numberless new inventions of value still going on in our day, with a rapidity difficult to keep pace with. To fairly appreciate this past or present relation of things, it becomes necessary to take a hasty and necessarily superficial glance backward at the origin of the organ,—its invention and development.

All writers attribute the origin of the organ to that simplest as well as most ancient of musical instruments, called by the Greeks the “pipes of Pan,”—Pan, in the ancient mythology, being the god of the woods and groves. It consisted of a few hollow reeds of various lengths, securely bound together, and blown by the lips. We still occasionally see and hear this instrument in our streets, performed upon by those nomadic “sons of art,” the organ-grinders. The performer being obliged to move his head continually from side to side, an unpleasant and fatiguing operation, soon led to an attempt to blow these tubes artificially. From this resulted the placing of the pipes upon a small wind-chest, and the addition of a primitive bellows, the whole being easily carried and operated

by one performer. Of particular value in the establishment of this historical fact, was the discovery, in Syria, among some ancient ruins, of a sculptured figure playing on such an instrument. Although much mutilated, all the more important parts were still intact. This interesting relic was brought to England about the year 1853.

It should be mentioned here, that the word "organ," not unfrequently found in the Bible, should not be supposed to refer to any such instrument as the name would suggest to our minds. Both with the Greeks and Romans the term translated "organ" simply meant an "instrument,"—and that of any kind, but with usage apparently favouring its application to *musical* instruments.

Upon the application of the bellows to supply wind, instead of the human lungs, the fingers were used to stop the pipes, and thus prevent their sounding all at once, which it is evident they would have done, standing on a simple wind-chest, which was filled by the bellows. As the number of pipes was gradually increased, the difficulty of managing them by hand of course became greater and greater. This in time led to the invention of the pallet, or valve, to control the admission of wind to each pipe, and by the close of the eleventh century we find it chronicled that there existed at Magdeburg an organ with a *key-board* comprising sixteen keys. From this time the name of the instrument begins to correspond with our modern idea of the same; its invention was a realized fact, although but a germ of that development which has since raised organ-building to its artistic importance. It must be borne in mind that the pedal organ, with its keys for the feet, was a much later invention. Meantime, the first keys made use of measured from three to five inches and a half wide. Consequently, the title of the performer on this instrument, in the eleventh



century, was not that of *organ-player*, but *organ-beater*, the keys being struck by the fist, which was protected by a heavy glove. There was, it must be remembered, but one rank of pipes, and these could seldom, if ever, have been in tune, from the fact that they had no means of regulating the wind pressure; while in organs of later date, and at the present day, an even wind is secured principally by weights placed upon the bellows, and the creation of a reservoir of compressed air. At this early time the wind supply was furnished by the common bellows as used by blacksmiths. Thus the supply and consequent pressure of the wind would necessarily be in direct proportion to the muscle or activity of the blowers.

While the various discoveries and improvements in organs of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were slowly progressing, almost the only vocal music the world knew were the Gregorian tones, or plain song of the Early Church. Harmony was entirely unknown, and indeed remained so for many a long year in anything like our modern significance. It is not my purpose here to enter into even a partial examination of the parallel progress of melody and harmony at this age of the world. You have already heard it treated by an abler pen than mine ; nor does it properly belong to this department, except in so far as it becomes necessary to note any decided influence exerted by the one upon the other. This influence, as exerted by the organ upon Church music, did not begin as early as might be supposed. Rimbault, in his work on the "History of the Organ" (which I shall have occasion frequently to quote), states that "even in the thirteenth century, the priests of both the Greek and Roman Churches thought the use of organs in divine service scandalous and profane. They preferred rendering divine worship as simple as possible, in order to distinguish it from that of the Jews and Pagans. Even to this day the Greek Church does not tolerate the use of organs in

their public services. Notwithstanding these opinions, the use of organs, and even other instruments, gradually became almost universal, not only in great churches, but in those of monasteries, convents, and small towns. The historians of this era celebrate several monks distinguished for the art of playing on the organ. For some time, however, organs were not used in the ordinary celebration of the offices, but only on great feasts and solemn occasions. These first monastic and conventual organs were very small, being only used to play the melody of the plain song in unison with the voices."

In spite of the disrepute into which the whole monastic system fell, there is no question but that the monks and friars were the great conservators and preservers of all the fine arts, and even mechanics, during the troubled times of the Middle Ages. As the prejudice against the employment of instrumental music in the church services began to disappear, nothing was more natural than that the monks, having both the leisure and pecuniary means, and containing among their number the best educated men of the day, should turn their attention to organ-building, animated by the same spirit which led them to decorate and ornament their churches and monasteries. Thus we find that it is to them we owe the improvement of the hitherto clumsy key-board, extending its compass both upward and downward to the extent of some three octaves, and so reduced both fall and breadth of the keys that they could be pressed down by the fingers, instead of struck by the fist; certainly no small improvement. The first organ possessing keys to give the chromatic tones or semitones was built by a priest—Nicholas Faber by name—about 1360.

It now behoves us to glance for a moment at the influence which the organ already began to exert upon music, or the art of composition, and to show how the instrument became to

show proofs of that right to the title, "king of instruments," in the sense I have adopted. It must be kept in mind that the earliest twilight dawn of the knowledge of harmony had scarcely begun. Yet what can be conceived more natural, than that the organist of that day, even, should stumble on the fact that different tones in conjunction were more agreeable to the ear than the bare unison, which was at first the only accompaniment of the choral song? This being noted, the next logical step was to try and produce the same approved effect with the voices themselves. In the "*History of the Modern Music of Western Europe*," by *Kiesewetter*, the following passage occurs. He is not speaking of the organ, but of the origin and development of the science of harmony.

He says: "The union of different human voices which now occurred to their thoughts (the early harmonists), was an imitation not altogether happy, perhaps, of that which in various instances *they had discovered with the organ!*" Here the fact that the organ was even then beginning to assert itself, to mould the minds of the early writers, in fact, to claim its royal dues, is pretty conclusively shown.

Time would altogether fail me in the scope that this lecture must necessarily occupy, to trace down this influence, once established, through the long cycle of years that followed; the theoretic science and practical application keeping pace with the mechanical development, until it found its full culmination and glory in the new-born science of Counterpoint. This science, which has given polish to the mightiest thoughts of the greatest masters of our art (and in totally different departments than mere organ-playing),—a science, without a satisfactory knowledge of which no man can call himself a thoroughly educated musician,—sprang from just this source.

How often we hear the remark that contrapuntal treatment is best suited to the organ ! True ; but how many reflect that the organ, so to speak, first *dictated* counterpoint to the world ? An influence, which (the free forms being derived from the stricter) is carried clear down into the realm of Italian opera, *i.e.*, when it is good of its kind. Is not, then, this influence, which the organ has indisputably exerted upon not merely its own literature, but the musical literature at large, an all-sufficient proof of its right to the royal title ? It must be borne in mind that this absolutism, as in matters political (to carry out the simile), was possible at this stage of the world in matters musical, because not even the harpsichord, clavichord, spinet, or any of those presentiments of the modern pianoforte, by whatever name they were called, had as yet made their appearance. The organ was, for the time, the sole keyed instrument.

In view of these facts, it seems to me that it may be justly claimed that the title "king of instruments" should be based on far nobler and more historic grounds than is usually done, and that we should not content ourselves with explaining this phrase as arising from the circumstances that it is the instrument which can, of its own resources, make the loudest noise !