

The Organs of J. S. Bach: A Handbook, Christoph Wolff & Markus Zepf
(University of Illinois Press, 2012)

A Short, Critical Review by Thomas Braatz © 2012

This is the first translation into English of a book originally published in German as *Die Orgeln J. S. Bachs: Ein Handbuch*, Christoph Wolff & Markus Zepf (Leipzig, 2006). It was revised and expanded for its second edition in 2008. Its English translation in this new version, along with the inclusion of some updated material, was provided by Lynn Edwards Butler. As George B. Stauffer, General Editor of the American Bach Society, which has supported this project, explains in his foreword, it was hoped that this volume would address “one of the most important aspects of Bach’s musical life in a comprehensive yet accessible manner”, thus placing “a German publication of great interest before a new, English-speaking audience.”¹ Stauffer’s goal for this book is stated this way:

It is the hope of the American Bach Society that *The Organs of J. S. Bach* will serve as a useful reference book for organists, Bach scholars and devotees, and general music enthusiasts. Containing a great deal of information in a portable form, it is envisioned not only as a *vade mecum* for the personal library, but as a travel companion for the suitcase, as well – a guidebook whose stop lists and color photographs, especially, whet one’s appetite to observe, hear, and play the extant instruments described therein.²

There is no doubt that great care was taken to ensure excellent design and printing results. Most of the photographs of the organs are relatively recent (within the past decade) and many are in color with sharp resolution and reveal the great care taken in the printing process. They are truly magnificent representations of the beautiful *Prospekte* (the visible organ pipes and the wooden casings/cabinets that hold them) that can still be viewed and possibly heard when these locations are visited.

The organization of the book is laudable as it presents up-to-date material on various points of interest in clear reference forms that place key points at the readers’ fingertips. These are facts that would be difficult to assemble from various sources (most of them in German and only available at very select libraries).

¹ p. ix.

² p. x.

The largest, middle section of the book, divided into two parts, is devoted to the organs associated with J. S. Bach and categorized by location (city or town) and then the name of the church or chapel to be found at any given location. This is definitely advantageous for a tourist or traveler who may be visiting or planning to visit a certain region and who may want not to miss seeing or experiencing one of these organs. Each section begins with a short history of the location and Bach's connection with it. Following this there is also a short history and description of the church or chapel. There is a contemporary listing of all the organ stops of a particular organ, the disposition as it is called. This disposition extracted from historical sources is frequently from the span of Bach's life with a few exceptions coming from an earlier or later time. Other categories that may be covered for any specific organ are **Organ** (names and dates of the organ builders and {re}construction), **Particulars** (unusual aspects of the registration), **Accessories** (tremulant, cymbelstern, etc.), **Inscriptions**, **Couplers** (which manuals and/or pedal are coupled and the means used for coupling), **Compass** (range of the key- and pedalboards), **Wind Supply** (number of bellows), **Wind Pressure**, **Pitch** (Chorton/Kammerton), **Temperament** (mean-tone, well-tempered, etc.), **Literature** (list of sources consulted).

The first part of the above list, Section A, includes only those organs that Bach encountered directly (organs having a proven connection to Bach with a caveat explained as follows:

Organ descriptions are specific to their condition at the time the organ was encountered by Johann Sebastian Bach. Dates of construction of earlier and later instruments are mentioned only when they have direct relevance -- the state in which the instrument was known to Bach.³

The Second Part, Section B (reference organs from Bach's world), includes organs for which there is no evidence that Bach knew and played the organs cited, but for the majority of them there is a high probability that he might have. They are particularly important in the history of organ building and as such can provide a guide to understanding Bach's instruments.

Other interesting sections in this book are an overview with an inventory of the organs and their parts, including their state of preservation. At a glance the reader can find 1. which organs have been preserved and maintained in their original state; 2. which have

³ p. 1.

been partially preserved; and 3. which have not been preserved. Another section not only lists all of Bach's organ examinations and reports but also provides the English translations which attempt to improve on the translations given in the *New Bach Reader*.

Another section includes a translation of a spurious document purportedly ascribed ["the attribution to Silbermann remains doubtful"⁴] to Gottfried Silbermann on instructions for examining organs. Perhaps a quotation from one of Andreas Werckmeister's treatises would have been a more reliable source as already admitted by the authors:

In formulating his written reports, Bach – and also Kuhnau, the primary author of the Halle report from 1716 – relied on Andreas Werckmeister's *Erweiterte und verbesserte Orgel-Probe* (Quedlinburg, 1698) for the arrangement of the material and for terminology (Williams 1982). It can be assumed, though, that Bach also knew Werckmeister's previous volume, *Orgelprobe, oder kurze Beschreibung, wie...man die Orgelwerke...annehmen, probiren, untersuchen...solle* (Frankfurt/Leipzig, 1681). In any case, Werckmeister, whose term 'well-tempered' he also adopted, decisively influenced Bach's theoretical knowledge.⁵

Part Three gives short biographies of organ builders to whom Bach had a personal connection or whose organs he came into contact with.

At the beginning of the book there is a short introductory sketch on Bach as organist, composer of organ music and as an organ expert. This is followed by a timeline of organ-related dates in Bach's life. The introductory sketch has little to say about Bach's use of the organ in various situations. There is the obvious recital function where the organ is the supreme solo instrument, but as part of Lutheran church services it even loses its application as a support instrument for congregational singing (at least this was the case in Leipzig and throughout Saxony during Bach's tenure) and was used as a 'preluding' instrument to introduce the chorale to be sung by the congregation or by the choristers in a cantata which would follow the organ chorale prelude. The prelude also served as a time for instrumentalists to quietly tune their instruments to the pitch of the organ before beginning a cantata. "On the other hand, the participation of the large, west-end organ in the continuo group of the cantata orchestra, although self-evident, is worth stressing".⁶ The authors see the use of organ obbligato in the series of cantatas from 1726-27 (BWV 49, BWV 146, BWV 169, BWV 188) as an outgrowth of this continuo practice.

⁴ p. 149.

⁵ pp. 140-141.

⁶ p. xvii. 'self-evident' and 'undoubtedly' are the key words representing the attitude of these German experts.

In summary, the reader who treats and appreciates this book as the ‘last word’ in travel guides for any Bach expert or simply a connoisseur of his organ music, will find here an attractive portrayal with excellent photographs of the instruments which Bach did or may have played. These illustrations are accompanied by reliable, historical descriptions with technical details presented in such a way that they can easily be located for purposes of comparison with other instruments.

Perhaps the title of this book is somewhat misleading and should have read “The larger church and chapel organs of J. S. Bach”, thus removing from consideration any positive (portable, chair or chamber) organs or *Regale* that also were part of Bach’s organ-performance environment. There is at least a clear illustration of such an organ as the frontispiece to Johann Gottfried Walther’s *Musicalisches Lexicon...* (Leipzig, 1732). This is in no way a ‘chest’ organ with its muffled pipes not even visible, but rather this type clearly stands at least 12 to 15 feet high and clearly displays openly the metal pipes in front of and over the player’s head.

While the authors of this book clearly distinguish between the “Large Organ” and “Small Organ” located in the *Thomaskirche*⁷, they do not do the same for the *Nikolaikirche* where only one organ is listed and treated. Arnold Schering identifies a second “Small Organ” listed as “Positiff” in the latter church’s records.⁸ Although it was dismantled with its metal pipes used elsewhere as early as 1693, it would still deserve mention in this guide book as it had a similar placement within the church to the “Small Organ” in the *Thomaskirche*. Schering also describes two *Regale* and two *Positive* that belonged to the *Thomasschule* and three of which Bach would have frequently experienced. One portable positive with 4 handles attached to the side (probably in appearance like a chest) had no pedal and included an 8’ and 4’ *Gedackt* and a 2’ *Principal*. The other was substantial in that it reached above the player’s head much like Walther’s engraving and had 4 stops (very likely with metal pipes and a tremulant). This was then a rather immovable small organ which remained in the school.

Perhaps also the short introductory sketch might have been extended somewhat to include just a little more specific information on how Bach would have used the (or an) organ as a continuo instrument, particularly in the accompaniment of arias and recitatives in his church music.

⁷ pp. 52-53.

⁸ *Johann Sebastian Bachs Leipziger Kirchenmusik* (Leipzig, 1936), pp. 57-58.