

Schnitger Tour 23 – 27 October 2023, Norfolk Association of Organists

The recent tour of notable organs in North Netherlands and Germany was organized by our events secretary Michael Flatman and the eleven participants met on a misty morning outside the vast town church at Edam. No written word can convey the true excellence of the organs and as so many already feature on the internet either as photos or videos of concerts I will convey a little only of the context. Stoplists are readily available on their respective church websites and need not be repeated here.

As the week progressed, we saw, heard, and played twelve instruments, the earliest having been built in the middle of the sixteenth century, the latest in 2017. Our host for the week was Sietze de Vries a well-known concert organist, consultant, teacher and walking encyclopedia of organology. Although on the map this area of north Europe is tiny the extremely flat terrain has required excavation of miles of ditches, dykes, canals, and sluices, mostly in straight lines so the roads are narrow, and the corners sharp. You might picture the scene: autumnal mist, extensive flat fields, occasional higher ground where settlements have evolved with the brick village church in the highest part. As stone and timber were unavailable to the builders most of the churches are of brick, that part of Europe unique in medieval brickmaking arts. Huge fortified towers are separate from the churches, those in towns containing carillons which sang usually at midday, but their main purpose was to offer look out positions for piracy as the North Sea is still visible miles inland.

So why these magnificent and expensive organs? It was the custom for each community to be funded by a landowning lordship which provided schools, roads, and community welfare, including the church. To demonstrate their wealth these donors commissioned wonderful organs in the attempt to burnish their images. Organs were the most ingenious and expensive artefacts of the age.

This part of Northern Europe was blessed with the organ building dynasty founded by Arp Schnitger, continued by his son Caspar and his associate Albertus Hinsz. Arp's organs are many and widely known but draw their inspiration from a pre-Bach era, for instance the bass octaves have short compass, omitting C sharp and D sharp, the tuning was sometimes meantone, that is favouring perfect thirds rather than fifths, oak construction, the second manual usually a Ruckpostive, and the only way of projecting a full organ chorus was by providing multi rank mixtures and pedals with reeds.

Our host Sietze has specialised in period-specific improvisation and gave us several hours of inspired "new" Buxtehude, Bruhns, Lubeck, and Sweelink. The chorale partita form was wonderfully exploited, showing off every stop especially Sietze's favourite pedal cantus firmus on 4ft reeds.

So, to the organ themselves. They are stand-alone instruments whose sole job was to lead and support hearty Lutheran congregational singing. Any other uses would have relied on the improvisational expertise of the organist themselves. The main full organ sound therefore is even, bass to treble, with a slight bias to line out the great Geneva psalm tunes, sung very slowly.

We were advised this was probably quite chaotic in practice. It might be queried how congregations worshipping in the strict Protestant tradition allowed organs after the clear-out of church art during the reformation, but after a few years of silent worship people longed for and missed the song of the church itself, organs.

Organ builders exploited the opportunities to excel in producing a variety of solo effects: Vox Humanas, Dulzianans, a plethora of flutes and the all-important signature stops the Quintadena and Sesquialtera. After a hundred years of neglect, pitch changes, pneumaticisation, scrapping of mixtures a new dawn rose with the organ builder Jurgen Ahrend, a native of the locality. He has restored the true artistic worth of many of the organs here, putting back tracker action, beautiful keyboards, tin front pipes, lost mixtures, and reeds, re-decorated the casework and generally made each organ a festival of music and art.

Every organ we visited had easy-to-play delightful key touch but although the stop knobs appear quite distant in photos, in practice they are handy to operate because the keyboards compass extends only to C not our usual G56. The consoles are decorated pieces of cabinet work, inlaid marquetry on the music desks and carved scrolls on the keyframes, arcaded fronts to the naturals sometimes with ivory inlaid with ebony dots, hand turned stopknobs of ebony and scripted labels. Polished yellow boxwood keys were common. Like harpsichord the actual octave dimension was narrower than say a Steinway piano.

Fear of flat pedals was overcome and our members must be congratulated on performances of Bach's A minor fugue, Christmas Oratorio Symphony, Sweelinck's Mein junges Leben, Bach's Dorian toccata and his toccata in F, chorale preludes on Liebster Jesu, Nun komm der heiden Heiland, preludes by Buxtehude and Bruhns and some John Stanley. As a kind gesture to us Sietze concluded one of his chorale fantasias with an English hymn tune followed by the wedding march in honour of the wedding anniversary of our events secretary and his wife.

The organs visited were: Edam by Smidt (Bernard Smith); Oosthuizen, 16th century; Luthersekerk, Groningen, a modern Schnitger copy by Edskes; Martinikerk Groningen, restored from several eras by Ahrends; Reformierte Kirche Westerhusen, containing oldest known trumpet pipes; Reformierte Kirche Uttum, restored by Ahrends; Ludgerikirche Norden, by Schnitger; Stapelmoor, modern copy of Clicquot at Houdan; Georgskirche Weener, Schnitger restored by Ahrends; Grossen Kirche Leer, Hinsz remodelled by Ahrends; Petruskerk Leens, Hinsz restored by Reil; Bolsward, Hinsz.

A description of a single Schnitger organ will suffice to portray the manner of his art, so let us look at Ludgerikirche, Norden. High above on the south wall over the join between the chancel and nave Schnitger had a difficult task to enable the organ to sound well in a large building with two long congregation spaces. The main organ is on its own gallery with the usual ruck positive but the pedal pipes are in a separate organ case to the west, looking towards the south transept therefore they speak very clearly. The arrival of organists in the previous generation who could play well upon the pedals encouraged the addition of pedal towers which became standard features of Schnitger and his contemporaries. The main organ is slightly angled away from the wall allowing an additional soundboard to project into the chancel, providing an echo effect to the main portion.

As is customary a section of the organ just above the keyboards contains a few small ranks of pipes and one of the famous short reeds stops which can cheerfully snarl its way through renaissance music. The three keyboards are covered with boxwood, with moulded fronts. The plain stopknobs have hand lettered labels above in neat rows. Arp Schnitger produced tailor-made designs for every occasion overcoming challenging acoustic environments. He could have merely produced a standard design but chose the difficult but best route for his clients.

All too soon our tour was over and we dispersed towards ferries, the Channel tunnel and a few stop-overs. All who participated are most grateful to Michael Flatman, supported by Pamela, Martin Cottam, Bert Veening and Sietze de Vries. The excellent hotel meals added to our team spirit with many insightful conversations to keep us going.

Roger Pulham. 31 October 2023