

Westfield

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*A National Resource for the Advancement of Keyboard music,
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November 2009

Warm greetings from the *Westfield* office. In this month's issue you will find further information on our April 2010 conference, and a detailed report on last month's EROI conference, co-sponsored by Westfield, focusing on 'Mendelssohn and the Contrapuntal Tradition'. As ever, we would be glad to publicize upcoming events involving, or of interest to, Westfield Center members, so please do get in touch. In the meantime, Happy Thanksgiving to you all!



Westfield: The Eugene Conference, April 8-11, 2010 *Early Northwestern European Organs and their influence on recent American organ building and performance practice*

The Conference will focus particularly on the work of Hendrik Niehoff and his mentors, colleagues and followers, and their relationship to American organ builders such as John Brombaugh, whose work is represented by three organs in Eugene, Oregon.

Three main series of talks and panel discussions will anchor the conference:

- I. **“The Netherlandish organ and Hendrik Niehoff: Then and Now”** will focus on Niehoff's work in its own time, and its influence both in Northern Europe in the 17th century and North America in the 20th.
- II. **“Niehoff at Lüneburg: Documentation and Recent Discoveries”** will offer us the opportunity to learn about the recent documentation of the great Niehoff organ at the Johanniskirche, Lüneburg, revealing new insights into this instrument and its maker.

III. The Netherlandish and Northern European organ: New Perspectives on Building Traditions and Musical Practices will allow us to explore the wider implications of the Niehoff tradition for musical repertoire and performance practice.

Concerts during the conference will be given by Mark Brombaugh, Julia Brown, Matthew Dirst, Christa Rakich, Dana Robinson, Harald Vogel, and David Yearsley. Panel participants will include, among others, John Brombaugh, Cor Edskes, Koos van de Linden, Annette Richards, George Taylor and Harald Vogel.

A highlight of the conference will be a visit to, and reception at, the workshop of John Brombaugh & Associates. We will also have the opportunity to view the remarkable new film on organs in the province Groningen, "Martinikerk Rondeau." Events will close with a Sunday morning worship service at First Lutheran Church, directed by ElRay Stewart-Cook.

A full schedule, with information on conference registration and practical details will be available in December. Please plan to sign up early! Westfield members will have priority, but space will be limited.



EROI Festival 2009: Mendelssohn and the Contrapuntal Tradition *By Aaron James*

Over the past eight years, the EROI festival (Eastman Rochester Organ Initiative) has been recognized worldwide as a vibrant forum for the exchange of new ideas about the organ and its music. Held annually in Rochester under the auspices of the Eastman School of Music, EROI now embraces not only the art of organ performance, but also contributions from a variety of allied disciplines, ranging from theology and musicology to the emerging science of haptics.

This year's festival had two distinct focal points, as suggested by the title: "Mendelssohn and the Contrapuntal Tradition." On the one hand, it would be unjust to let 2009 pass without acknowledging the bicentennial of the birth of Felix Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn holds a crucial place in the history of organ music; not only for his own works, but also for his determined efforts to promote the music of J. S. Bach as a performer and conductor. On the other hand, Mendelssohn did not work in a vacuum; rather, his work as a composer, performer, and Bach proselytizer represent the nineteenth-century flowering of an unbroken tradition of contrapuntal writing. An unmistakable link to this tradition was provided by the new Craighead-Saunders organ, dedicated at the 2008 EROI festival. Based on a 1776 Casparini instrument in Vilnius, Lithuania, this instrument represents an eighteenth-century Central German aesthetic

which both Bach and Mendelssohn would have recognized. The 2009 EROI festival, then, was to be a nexus of performance and scholarship surrounding the works of Mendelssohn, featuring performances of the complete Mendelssohn organ works on the Craighead-Saunders organ.

The festival began on the afternoon of Thursday, October 29th, at Rochester's Hyatt Regency hotel. After opening remarks from Douglas Lowry, Dean of the Eastman School of Music, and from the three Eastman organ professors, Wm. A Little presented a paper on "Mendelssohn and the Organ." Little traced Mendelssohn's interest in organ playing from the young Felix's first study of the instrument through the tortured composition history of the six organ sonatas. This paper offered the attendees a fascinating glimpse into the history of the music they were about to hear, situating it in context within the composer's life. Besides being a distinguished scholar of music history and German studies, Little is the editor of the five-volume complete edition of Mendelssohn's organ works, published by Novello. Long out of print, the Little edition has recently been made available to performers as an on-demand reprint, hopefully introducing this superb piece of scholarship to a new generation of performers.

Modern organists often think of Mendelssohn as an organ performer first. In actual fact, the organ was largely peripheral to his performing career throughout his life; he performed in public almost exclusively as a conductor or a piano soloist. Although popular as an organist in England, only once did Mendelssohn present a solo recital in Germany. His concert, held in Leipzig in 1840, featured works by J. S. Bach, beginning and ending with his own improvisations. As the first concert of the festival, the Eastman organ professors chose to reconstruct this concert, using the extant descriptions of Mendelssohn's playing to guide their interpretation. Hans Davidsson, David Higgs, and William Porter displayed their usual mastery of the instrument in the appointed Bach works:



Eastman Organ Professors William Porter, Hans Davidsson, and David Higgs (featured left to right) at the opening concert.

the "St. Anne" Fugue, the choral prelude on "Schmücke dich," the Prelude and Fugue in A Minor, the Passacaglia in C Minor, the Pastorale in F Major, and the Toccata in D Minor. The most fascinating part of the performance, however, was William Porter's

recreation of the opening and closing improvisations. A brief introduction at the opening of the concert set the stage for Bach's E-flat Major fugue, but the final "Freie Phantasie" was on a much larger scale. Porter opened with the chorale "O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden," using it as the basis for a set of variations mirroring those in Mendelssohn's sixth organ sonata. The fantasia closed with an extended fugue on B-A-C-H. Porter's masterful performance was a highlight of the festival, using his own unmatched skills as an improviser to bring this 150-year-old performance to vivid life.

Particularly welcome at the 2009 festival was the presence of Mendelssohn scholar R. Larry Todd of Duke University, whose 2003 biography of Felix Mendelssohn received widespread critical acclaim. His keynote address traced the links between Mendelssohn and the older contrapuntal tradition, showing how Mendelssohn's music linked Baroque polyphony and Romantic *cantilena*. He was careful to point out, however, that Bach was not the only contrapuntal influence on Mendelssohn: the young Felix profited from the study of imitative polyphony by C.P.E. Bach, Mozart, Palestrina, Beethoven, and such now-forgotten composers as J. F. Fasch. The thread of Mendelssohn's relationship to the contrapuntal tradition was picked up by Bach scholars Christoph Wolff and Russell Stinson. Wolff's paper traced the Bach tradition in Mendelssohn's ancestry, telling the story of Felix's great-aunt Sara Levy, a student of W. F. Bach who regularly performed keyboard works by the Bach family as a regular part of her concerts, and revealing that Mendelssohn's father Abraham saved many unique J. S. Bach manuscripts from destruction by purchasing the entire estate of C.P.E. Bach for the Berlin *Singakademie*. Stinson's paper treated Mendelssohn's 1840 recital in more detail, placing its contents within the broader tradition of Bach reception history.

Later lecture sessions explored more disparate aspects of Mendelssohn's career. Laurence Libin discussed the Jewish background to Mendelssohn's organ works, pointing out that Mendelssohn viewed his family heritage with considerable ambivalence. Despite identifying as a Protestant, Mendelssohn nevertheless was regarded as a Jew because of his family name, and the tension resulting from this double identity can be felt in the organ music. Celia Applegate unravelled the complex web of 19th-century Protestant Church politics in Germany and England, and showed how Mendelssohn negotiated these theological conflicts to create religious music with broad appeal. Nicholas Thistlethwaite discussed Mendelssohn's contribution to the organ reform movement in Great Britain, showing how he and his English colleague Henry Gauntlett helped to define the aesthetic of the Victorian pipe organ. Finally, Wm. A. Little presented a second paper tracing a "minor Mendelssohn mystery": the curious case of Mendelssohn's cantata "Wir glauben all in einem Gott." Never performed during Mendelssohn's lifetime, the work was premiered shortly after the composer's death at an English choral festival; however, the manuscript has since disappeared, leaving us with more questions than answers about the work's intended purpose, and its possible relationship to his other works.

A more hands-on approach was taken by renowned Dutch organist Jacques van Oortmerssen in a series of two masterclass sessions on Mendelssohn's organ music. Using examples from the 19th-century German *Orgelschulen*, van Oortmerssen discussed the basic principles that govern Mendelssohn interpretation, with a particular emphasis on

rubato and rhythmic alteration. Where many performers believe Mendelssohn's written metronome markings are too fast, van Oortmerssen demonstrated that a successful result can be obtained by simply taking the composer at his word. The performance sounds rushed only if the performer maintains this tempo strictly throughout the piece, rather than allowing for a sense of rhythmic flexibility. Van Oortmerssen worked with several Eastman organ students on excerpts from the Mendelssohn *oeuvre*, exploring the stylistic dimensions of nineteenth-century performance practice, as well as the many subtleties of attack and release possible on the Craighead-Saunders organ.

A series of concerts throughout the festival presented the entirety of Mendelssohn's organ works, including rarely-heard pieces from Mendelssohn's youth, and several early versions of movements from the organ sonatas. David Baskeyfield, Thatcher Lyman and Jonathan Wessler, all doctoral students at Eastman, performed at the first of four concerts; the second featured Delbert Disselhorst, emeritus professor at the University of Iowa. Disselhorst presented two particularly intriguing rarities: the early organ Duets (with David Higgs) and a rendition of the Fourth Sonata using early, manuscript versions of the various movements, providing a unique perspective on this



Delbert Disselhorst and the Eastman Chorale. William Weinert is pictured with the Chorale in the balcony of Christ Church.

popular work. He was joined by the Eastman Chorale, under the direction of William Weinert, performing Mendelssohn choral works which ranged from the well-known ("Hear my Prayer") to the obscure (the 16-part setting of "Hora est" composed by Mendelssohn at 18). The remainder of the organ works were performed by Hans

Davidsson, David Higgs, and William Porter, and finally by Jacques van Oortmerssen, who shared a programme with the Schola Cantorum of Christ Church Episcopal, conducted by Stephen Kennedy. Van Oortmerssen's assured performances on the Casparini organ, coupled with the exquisite singing of the Schola, made for a memorable conclusion to EROI's Mendelssohn cycle.

Many attendees were forced to leave the festival early to attend to church responsibilities, but those who were able to stay enjoyed a variety of activities on Sunday afternoon, shifting the festival's focus away from Mendelssohn. A series of organ demonstrations featured Rochester instruments of varying styles, including the Italian Baroque organ at the Memorial Art Gallery, the newly installed Hook and Hastings at St. Mary's, the Brombaugh organ at St. Michael's, the large Fritts instrument at Sacred Heart Cathedral, and the practice instruments and harmonium at the Eastman School itself. An

afternoon symposium presented cutting-edge research in the area of haptics (the scientific study of touch perception). During recent years, the application of haptics to organ playing has become a subject of considerable interest, as researchers attempt to determine what characteristics make different organ actions "feel" different from one another, and how much of the movement of the pallet the performer is able to control. With presentations by Hans Davidsson, Joel Speerstra, Alan Woolley, Jack Mottley, Munetaka Yokota, and Randall Harlow, attendees heard a variety of perspectives on haptic technology, including how this knowledge might affect organ building, pedagogy, and even the study of a composer's handwriting. Particularly promising were the results of detailed research into key-touch characteristics on different instruments, performed independently by Woolley and Mottley, which aim to provide a quantitative, scientific analysis of how an organ action reacts to the player's touch.

As its ambitious title promised, this year's EROI festival both celebrated a composer of the past (Felix Mendelssohn) and placed his work within the context of a larger contrapuntal tradition, one which continues to develop through the work of organists today. Highlighting this strange unity of past and present, for this writer, was an amplitude/time graph of a *suspirans* figure, as performed by Joel Speerstra: a centuries-old example of musical rhetoric, made visible by the latest in scientific research. Developments such as this reveal a flourishing organ culture, and whet the appetite for more exciting new ideas at EROI 2010.



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