

## Program Note

Our program in June 2019 recalled one of the largest organist/organ builder gatherings ever, in August 1596. In the countryside castle of Duke Heinrich Julius of Braunschweig-Lüneburg (b. 1564), a new organ by local builder David Beck was unveiled and inspected by a group of at least 54 mostly unrelated musicians. Located in the village of Gröningen, just slightly northeast of Halberstadt in north-central Germany, the castle had been renovated with a new wing and a large chapel about the size of Boston's First Lutheran Church – where much of tonight's program is centered. The duke had been administrator of the bishopric of Halberstadt since his youth, in addition to other duties associated with three separate courts in Wolfenbüttel, Gröningen and Hessen. Gröningen seemed to be his favorite among the residences, partly due to rich hunting grounds surrounding the area, and perhaps partly because the renovated wing, chapel and organ provided his personal, enduring stamp on buildings originally built by his ancestors. It was also the closest to Halberstadt, where another David Beck organ reigned gloriously in the cathedral and where Heinrich Julius probably played when he could. The organ congress gave him another personal stamp on Gröningen castle, as it was talked about for over a century afterwards and attracted numerous tourists. Johann Mattheson, the composer and theorist, paid a visit as late as 1706.

The 54 prominent players and builders, invited from across the German realms – free cities of the Hansa league, courts, bishoprics – were present for almost a week of playing and testing the organ, housed and fed at the duke's expense. Given that he had a resident troupe of English actors, probably with associated dancers and musicians, the organ group were treated to regular entertainment. An enormous wine cask that still exists was another source of merriment, perhaps not getting in the way of the more serious business of examining the new organ.

The duke intended to confirm his reputation as a connoisseur of the magnificent, in spectacle and sound. Organ decorations were just one manifestation of the potential delights beneath. Gilding and figurines, some holding small instruments, covered most of the case and even some of the façade pipes. Organ congress attendees subject to such aural and visual splendor would be enticed to contemplate heaven's glories and, perhaps in equal measure, the duke's impressive earthly power and beneficence. Nevertheless, their official duties were to certify that the instrument was of sound construction and not only suitable for playing, but a pleasure to hear. How it compared to similar large installations over the past 10, 15, even 20 years, whether it displayed any novelties in tone quality, interior design, or overall tonal design, and how it served the purposes of a castle chapel instrument were all factors in their estimation. Builders such as Henrik Niehoff (with Jasper Johansen) from the Netherlands, and especially the Scherer shop in Hamburg, had produced innovative works in various north German churches. Here was the Beck shop's attempt to measure up, but not in earshot of workers in the Scherer shop; none of them were invited!

The organ's size -- 59 stops for six separate divisions – may have been impressive, as well as the elaborate case. A surprise was the provision of 26 of those 59 stops for the pedal alone, almost half of the disposition. There was no parallel in contemporary organ design. These pipes were distributed across three divisions, two in interior cabinets and the other in a prominent pair of side towers. There was no pedal for the smaller Rückpositiv division which sat on a balcony behind the organist's back. Many higher ranks in the pedals allowed for solos. Whether melodies were put to sacred or secular use, there was no doubt that they would be prominent. Additionally, choruses involving flutes only, krumphorns and regals only, trumpets only, and gambas only (the Gemshorns) allowed the organist to alternate among various wind band types, and indeed to replace bands of human players when necessary. While such varied choruses could be found on the large instruments made by Scherer, the availability of matching stops in the three pedal divisions allowed for fuller wind bands. The

Rückpositiv division had no pedal attached, but that didn't rule out solos from an independent pedal. Certainly some fun could be had by the 54 visitors, with all these extra pipes. Sounds could come from below (by use of the Rückpositiv), from on high (the main portion of the case), and from both sides (the pedal towers), all at the same time, or one could alternate. Even acrobatics involving one hand on each of the two manuals, and two feet – heels and toes – on the pedals were possible for those wishing to show off their athleticism or prowess at combining melodies. More than likely however, the urge to experiment was dampened by the search to discern beauty, delicacy, and even inspiration amid potential flaws.

The organ may have transformed the thinking of many players about intriguing registrations: for example, reed sounds that could be incorporated into the instruments they already had. At that time Michael Praetorius was just 25, but he had lived in several locales in eastern and southeastern Germany and, given that he was an organist as well as lutenist, had familiarity with the keyboard instruments in the churches. He was no wallflower at the Gröningen meeting, for in his 1619 publication *De Organographia* by he lists descriptions and stoplists of organs played by a number of the group of 54 including Hieronymus Praetorius, Johann Steffens, and Hans Leo Hassler, who are on this program. Hassler was dead by 1619, but the last two instruments he played, in Ulm and Dresden, are listed in *De Organographia*, an indication that he and Praetorius maintained contact. Whether Praetorius visited all the instruments is unlikely given the barest descriptions of a few, but most of them, like the Gröningen instrument, contain descriptions of new developments such as the split keys in the Gottfried Fritzsche Dresden palace chapel organ (a characteristic of the Wellesley College chapel organ, built in the Fritzsche style).

The title of this evening's concert also refers to transformations in compositional style inspired by the company of many talented player-composers. About a third of the group of 54 were local, including Michael Praetorius, but several came from much farther away: Berlin, Lübeck, Hamburg, Bremen, Rostock, Danzig, Nuremberg, Augsburg. Danzig organist Cajus Schmiedtlein, who traveled the farthest, had made his fame in Hamburg before moving east to take up what must have been a most prestigious position in the immense Marienkirche (playing another organ described in Praetorius' *De Organographia*). Hans Leo Hassler and his older brother Kaspar were the novelties from the south. Regardless of position (court, large imperial city, smaller town), most players improvised in services. Luckily for us 400+ years later, students of a few of them copied pieces in tablature that have survived. We can then see what the students used as templates for improvisation and infer the compositional styles of their masters.

A contemporary source preserved a list of the performers in order of appearance, starting with the oldest and proceeding down by age, but not always in that order. Schmiedtlein came early and so did Kasper Hassler, an indication that their clearance to attend the Gröningen meeting was comparatively short. **Hans Leo Hassler** (b. 1562) was placed further down on the list, in the company of **Michael Praetorius** (b. 1571) of Wolfenbüttel, **Johann Steffens** (also called Stephani, b. 1560) of Lüneburg, and **Hieronymus Praetorius** (b. 1560) of Hamburg. Had **Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck** (b. 1562) been an occasional traveler to Germany, he might have been invited to the congress as well, but his duties required secular organ concerts almost daily for the public. Our concert samples keyboard music published or otherwise preserved in tablature form by these five player-composers, who transmitted vocal music in print or tablature as well.

Hans Leo Hassler was the first major German composer to study in Italy, under the direction of Andrea Gabrieli, organist at San Marco in Venice. There he was privileged to experience the building's architecture and what antiphonal practices that space called forth. Alternations of multiple

choirs, or wind bands, and organs, alternations of dynamics, or chordal vs. polyphonic textures, or rhythms, must have been marvelous to witness. To this heavenly feast for a young man was added the variety of organ compositional types. Popular tune variations, short improvisational pieces with rapid figuration to establish pitches, and sectional toccatas that displayed astonishing manual dexterity were a sampling of what Hassler's northern compatriots might have implemented on occasion. But the formal, strictly imitative writing in the form of fugue and *ricercare* was entirely novel and not derived from vocal writing. If the northerners were familiar with Hassler's published vocal music in the Italian styles (*canzonetti* appeared in 1590, sacred motets in 1591, and more in 1596 before the Gröningen meeting), they probably were unprepared for the learned, yet appealing, sectional *ricercare*. That genre, with its ordered laying out of contrasting themes with increasingly virtuosic figuration that varied constantly, enhancing intensity and drive, became the north German prelude with a uniquely north German organ stamp.

In the largest of Lüneburg's churches, St. Johann, was an organ in the Dutch style created in 1553 by Hendrik Niehoff and co-workers. It had three manuals and pedal, and many of the original front pipes still survive in its massive renaissance case. Some additions were made over the next 30 years, and the result is the disposition recorded by Michael Praetorius in his *De Organographia* in 1619. Also in Lüneburg is St. Lamberti, where a former apprentice in the Scherer shop in Hamburg named Johann Steffens became organist in the early 1590s. The 100-year-old organ there had one of the earliest Rückpositiv divisions recorded in Germany. But the deteriorating condition of the instrument called for an overhaul that was completed after the Gröningen meeting by, no surprise, another member of the Scherer shop. Steffens took advantage of a vacancy and church-hopped over to St. Johann. After playing there on a provisional basis for three years, he was permanently installed by the time of the Gröningen meeting, but perhaps willing to hop elsewhere if another position was attractive enough. He evidently maintained contacts with Praetorius, for the revised St. Lamberti disposition is also published in *De Organographia*. A small number of Steffens' pieces survive in tablature, several in the so-called *Celle Tabulaturbuch* which will appear in a new edition by organist Dr. Ulf Wellner. From these, Ulf has selected one of the earliest Reformation chorales, "Ach Gott vom Himmel, sieh darein," the text a paraphrase by Luther of Psalm 12; Steffens' treatment is polyphonic in both hands and feet, like a motet without the words.

From Magnificat settings going back perhaps farther than the late 1490s, when a florid and virtuosic six-part setting by William Cornysh was being sung in Eton Chapel, through the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, when Josquin's pupil Nicolas Gombert created a cycle of Magnificats on all eight tones, composers of the Magnificat canticle exploited vocal sonority. Alternating verses of chant with varied sonorities gave composers a large range of vocal colors to choose from to express the changing moods of the Magnificat text. The principle of varied alternate verses continued with Hieronymus Praetorius towards the end of the century. A singer-player whose father was already organist at St. Jacobi in Hamburg, he had studied in Cologne and taken an organist position in far-away Erfurt before returning to the Jacobi as organist. His grasp of different vocal polyphonic styles from the different places he lived in may have induced a comparable cycle of Magnificats on all eight tones for the organ, played in alternation with sung chant verses. Occasional flourishes by one hand are all that remain of the ebullient vocal pyrotechnics of Cornysh one hundred years earlier. But the majesty and immense variety of color in the large city organs of master builders like Scherer or Niehoff more than sufficed. Niehoff had built a large, three-manual instrument in St. Petri, and in the Jacobi was an instrument that was overhauled by the Scherer shop during the tenure of Praetorius' father, and further overhauled by the Scherer shop at the request of Hieronymus Praetorius in 1592, just four years before the Gröningen meeting. That organ now had four divisions for the hands, plus pedal towers,

in a building at least twice the size of Gröningen! It too was featured in *De Organographia*, as well as the Niehoff instrument in St. Petri.

Services in Hamburg and other wealthy establishments (such as the court of Gröningen) adhered to the old Latin rite (with Lutheran modifications). Choirs of men only, or boys only, or combined, sang most of the liturgy in chant, and canticles such as the Magnificat in alternation with organ. The old Latin hymn tunes were given a similar treatment by Hieronymus Praetorius: alternation of chant with polyphonic organ verses, which could produce absolutely stunning effects. As one example, today's program includes his seven-verse "Veni Creator Spiritus," for the invocation of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost (seven Sundays after Easter). Although the chanted verses could be sung by the boys choir and men's choir in alternation with the organ verses, alternatim practice was nowhere as varied as in Venice, until Praetorius made the acquaintance of Hassler in Gröningen. He may have seen Hassler's sacred vocal works in print beforehand, but the two must have conferred about spacing of choirs for effective sonority. That one-on-one meeting spurred a huge output of published motets and Magnificats by Praetorius, beginning only three years later. Four-part congregational settings of chorales followed, to be sung with organ accompaniment; perhaps this practice evolved separately from the Gröningen meeting, but perhaps not given Michael Praetorius' familiarity with the singing in churches in Torgau. Johann Walter, colleague of Michael's father and editor of the first Lutheran hymnbook for choir, had been cantor in Torgau and highly influential in disseminating the new Lutheran vocal music.

From the English troupes resident at Heinrich Julius' court came word of the amazing keyboard facility of some of their countrymen such as William Byrd and John Bull, but also of Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck over in Amsterdam, who had embraced and adapted English keyboard technique in much of his music. Baptized as a Roman Catholic, he remained so for his lifetime as did Byrd and Bull, but his position at Amsterdam's Oude Kerk became subject to the strict demands of the Calvinist regime. Like stained glass or sculptures and paintings, organs were deemed a distraction from the word of God. Unlike stained glass and the sculptures and paintings, organs were retained in the churches, as a manifestation of the city's wealth. In the Oude Kerk were two, built by Niehoff. Church authorities allowed them to be heard before and after the services, and during the week in public concerts of secular music. "Public" meant wandering in and out, including dogs whether pets or not. Contemporary paintings reveal that businessmen in attendance may have regarded the organ as an extension of their own prestige while they attended to dealings. Regardless of the attention of the audience, public concerts gave Sweelinck the chance to write serious music such as fantasias, or variations on the popular tunes in vogue, varying accompaniments from elegantly simple to whirling or dashing dances – always charming regardless of sophistication – to the finish. He may have delighted in keeping the public guessing about what might come next, but the tune was always first and foremost. "Almande gratie" is a German dance, also known as "More Palatino," indicating a tune origin south or west of Holland. The parallel thirds and sixths were a favorite device and were passed on, eastward. Word of mouth may have been one vector, but a far more important one was an influential group of German organists, sons of Hieronymus Praetorius and a few others at the Gröningen meeting. They were sent west to study with Sweelinck and came back to serve as composers and teachers themselves in prominent churches in Hamburg and beyond. For instance, Jacob Praetorius, son of Hieronymus, secured a vacancy at St. Petri, where he taught Matthias Weckmann, who in turn taught Dieterich Buxtehude.

Note the split keys and short octave on the Wellesley Fisk organ, which resembles a Fritzsche organ built about a generation after the Gröningen instrument. Short octaves were in common use by Sweelinck's time and allowed large-spaced chords in the bass line. The lowest notes looked like E and

F but sounded as C and D. As an example, playing C, G and reaching up to the upper C and E produced the chord C-G-C-E – a full chord. Split keys allowed chromatic pitches to be used in the meantone instruments, whether organ or harpsichord/virginal/spinet. In *De Organographia* is provided the sequence of pitches on various short octave instruments, including the split keys for the Dresden organ built by Gottfried Fritzsche and played by Hassler. Depending on octave, a split G# could sound as G# if pressed in front, A flat if pressed in back, or E down in the lowest octave. All the composers in tonight's program would have been familiar with use of the short octave, and most would have heard on split keys, although they were not used in the Gröningen organ.

Michael Praetorius, who had a split-key instrument by Gottfried Fritzsche built later in his life in the palace chapel in Wolfenbüttel, was already writing song and hymn tunes as a youngster to share with his classmates in Torgau. He loved singing and playing the lute, and the music impulse was strong, but as son, brother, and brother-in-law of pastors, his training and aspirations were for the ministry. Family deaths and subsequent moves disrupted his studies in Frankfurt on the Oder – and an organist position on the side at the university church – and when his sister's husband Daniel Sachse was elected head preacher at the cathedral in Halberstadt, he followed them there. Praetorius may have been 21 or 22 when he met Halberstadt's bishop – Duke Heinrich Julius. With the distraction of the large David Beck organs in the cathedral and nearby, Praetorius found it difficult to continue formal studies in theology, and his ministry became one of preaching music, first as the duke's chamber organist, and then more formally as organist of Gröningen castle and master of the duke's chamber ensembles in Wolfenbüttel. He was no doubt well acquainted with the Gröningen instrument during the phases of its installation, and perhaps felt assured of his appointment there even in the company of far more experienced servants of church music. But there was much to learn from many in that group, and Hassler may have been the most influential. The most ravenous of his attentive listeners may have been Praetorius.

Within 10 years of the Gröningen meeting Michael Praetorius was publishing large, extended polyphonic works for organ in choirbook format, along with equally extended choral works – many for two or three choirs – with similar contrapuntal lines. “Ein feste Burg” is one of several chorales that straddle the line between organ chorale fantasies and the more compact, polyphonic chorale prelude, both characteristic of north German early baroque organ music. On the one hand, it is bound to the four-part style of choirbook writing, with no additional voices, though reduced textures are frequent. On the other hand, Praetorius writes idiomatically for the virtuosic keyboard artist, with exultant displays of rapid scales and figuration that speak the chorale text. Had he lived longer than his 49+ years, his art of extended chorale settings would have established a high bar for the robust development of Lutheran organ music throughout Germany.

At present the castle is gone, some of the chapel's artwork is scattered in various locales, and the main organ case and some façade pipes survive in two different churches, the Rückpositiv case in tiny Harsleben, located several miles south of its sister case in Halberstadt's Martinikirche. A fundraising program is under way to reunite and restore the instrument. Visitors to the Martinikirche can view a large poster display of research on the pipes, carvings, and restorations of comparable instruments. More information about the organ and the restoration project can be found at <https://www.praetorius-beckorgel.de/ogr-en/news/news/Donation.php>

– Cheryl K. Ryder, June 2021