

## SPRING MEETING 2022

# AACHEN

*You can't miss it!\*\*\**

On April 19<sup>th</sup>, 2022, after a two-year pandemic-related hiatus, members of the European Chapter of the AGO finally convened again to enjoy a Spring Meeting. In the lobby of the Mercure am Dom hotel in the city of Aachen, Germany, each of us took a Covid self-test before setting off to connect with friends old and new - while visiting the instruments in and around this city.

Our first stop, on a small, shady side street in the city center, was the Annakirche. Axel Wilberg, chapter member and co-organizer of our itinerary (with Ricarda Kossack) greeted



us and gave us an overview of our itinerary. Organist Klaus-C van den Kerckhoff spoke to us about the building, which had previously been a medieval women's monastery. All but its walls were destroyed during World War II, after which it was rebuilt, with the interior and position of the organ completely reorganized.

It now houses a three manual organ by Weimbs (built in 1994), a builder from Hellenthal in the Eiffel district,

not far from Aachen. There is an active musical life around this instrument, as three professional organists and several amateurs share the responsibilities involving the services, as well as roughly 24 concerts per year. The public is encouraged to sit in the loft, which can hold up to 40 seats. *Orgelcafés* are also organized, where the audience has a convivial sort of café experience, while listening to a brief presentation followed by 45 minutes of music.

Our host then played a demonstration including works of Reger, JS. Bach, and Widor. AGO members then had the opportunity to take turns discovering the organ. With only 22 participants instead of the usual 40 or so, there was an initial ambiance of shyness as the loft filled with polite echos of "After you" and "no, you first"... But the ice was quickly broken and the fun began.



Next on the schedule was a real treat: member Ariane Toffel gave a performance on the carillon of the city hall, while the rest of the group listened from the sunny terrace of a café just on the other side of the square, enjoying a glass of wine or German beer. The town hall,



a large neogothic structure, stands precisely on the footprint of Charlemagne's former castle. It was rebuilt several times, most recently after World War II, when the choice was made to restore the neogothic design which had originally been built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In one of its high towers is a carillon. We listened to a nearly hour-long program featuring the music of Louis Armstrong, Joseph Kosma, Oscar Peterson, Claude François, and others, primarily in transcription by Ariane herself. The song "Fever" (John Davenport/Eddie

Cooley) was particularly memorable, partly because of how well it sounded on the instrument, and partly because it was truly an unexpected context for this music.

That evening the group was admitted to the Aachen Dom, after its usual closing time. Organist Michel Hoppe spoke to us about this building, which dates back to the ninth century and whose principal and oldest part is a chapel with an octagonal structure resulting in a circular interior, symbolizing eternity. The ground level of the chapel was intended for the public, while the first story houses Charlemagne's throne (as well as the organ) and a second story is the dedicated space of Jesus.



The organ is an instrument in three parts which share a console, built by Johannes Klais and renovated in several stages. We were treated to an impressive demonstration including music by Wilhelm Middelschulte, after which we were invited to take turns at this powerful instrument. Afterwards, we adjourned to our rooms (some by way of a local tavern) to prepare for the next day's early departure.

On Tuesday morning, carpools were organized to bring all the members to the Dutch town of Vaals, just a 15-minute ride over the border. Though we did not know it yet, we were in fact taking a route historically used by Protestants living in Aachen during periods when worship was banned in that city. Churchgoers would walk several miles every Sunday to the small town of Vaals, just across the border with the Netherlands, which boasted four protestant churches – two of which were on our agenda.

We were first greeted by Christine Moraal, organist and musicologist, in the Cultureel Centrum de Kopermolen, a formerly the Lutherse Kerk, now repurposed as a cultural center. The building was another round structure, with a second story housing the organ as well as a



painting exhibition, with balcony seating all around the church. We learned that during the pandemic, a leak in the air conditioning had gone unchecked, causing water infiltrations that could have menaced the building's structure (as well as our visit), but solutions had recently been found to repair the damage, and luckily the leak occurred far from the organ.

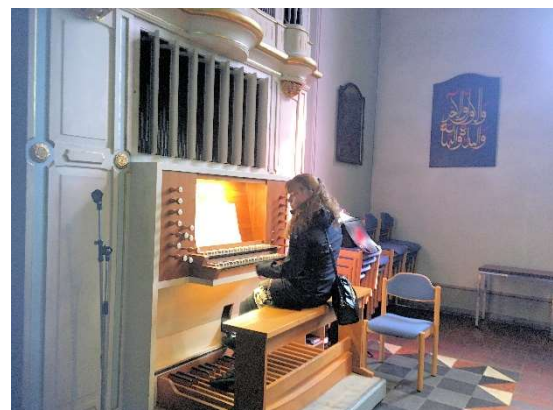
The organ is from 1765, by Johann Baptist Hilgers. It is a single manual instrument, with a pull-down pedalboard in the French tradition. The Centrum, which also houses a grand piano, holds a concert series around this instrument. Dean Johann Hermans performed a demonstration with works of Moretti, Pachelbel, and Stanley. Members then climbed into the small, cage like structure which holds the console, taking turns to play.

We then took a brief walk to another of Vaals's protestant churches, the Hervormde Kerk, which also holds a one-manual organ, of a very different character. Christine Moraal told us about the instrument's history, beginning with an initiative in 1765. The chosen builder was Teschemacher, who had a reputation for building small organs and house organs. Despite the modest proportions of these instruments, he was influenced by a lyrical, romantic aesthetic. Consequently, this instrument can be suited to Romantic repertoire, provided it can fit on a one-manual instrument with pull-down pedal. She demonstrated its versatility with a set of Haydn variations.



After a return to Aachen by car and a quick lunch, we reconvened at St. Adalbert's Church, which boasts two instruments: a powerful three manual Rieger from 1965, and a smaller two manual by Wilbrand (1972). Members Bernard Sanders and Axel Wilberg provided a comprehensive demonstration, beginning with Bernard playing Pepping, Böhm, Langlais, and Sanders on the Rieger. Axel performed Frescobaldi on the smaller organ, incidentally by the same builder as his home practice instrument. Despite their very different sounds and conceptions the organs sounded well together as Bernard and Axel then performed an arrangement of an echo fantasy by Gherardus Scronx (17thC) for both organs.

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pieces from one organ to the next, until it was time to convene for a tour of historical Aachen on foot. This tour was much too rich in information to report in detail. Suffice it to say that we were able to learn one of the “magic ingredients” in Aachen’s thermal water (arsenic), the origin of the name Aachen (along with “Aix”, from its French name, it’s related to “aqua” = water), how to read the seal of Charlemagne, and finally, an improbably creepy story about why there is a stud behind the right doorknob of the doors into the Dom (the devil’s thumb got stuck in there, of course!)

In a twist on our usual tradition, the opening and closing dinners were fused into one midweek dinner, which took place right after this tour, at the Eisenbrunnen restaurant. Bernard Sanders made an emotional tribute to Judy Riefel-Lindel’s years as Dean and mentor to so many, presenting her with a bound version of the newsletters of our chapter since their beginnings in 1998. Johan made announcements and acknowledgements, Axel and Ricarda were showered with gifts from the homelands of all the participants, and we all enjoyed a delicious dinner featuring local Sauerbraten and heavily seasoned with Printen, a local gingerbread specialty. Applause all around, and off to bed until Thursday morning.



Our first stop Thursday morning was in St. Foillan (counterintuitively pronounced “St. Follian”), a church just at the foot of the Aachen Dom. Traditionally, this has been the spot of the Parish church of Aachen, and the existing structure is the result of some rebuilding following World War II. Its current organ was originally built (by Klais, 1913) for the church in Kornelimünster. In 1963 it was transferred to St. Nikolaus church, with a new,

contemporary case designed by Franz Pauli, with paintings illustrating Psalm 150. In 2010 a fire damaged the church and the organ was removed and rebuilt, with its Pauli case, by Weimbs in St. Foillan in 2012. Barry Jordan provided a demonstration including works by Rheinberger and Sanders before members took their turns at the bench.

Next, we resumed our carpool plan to travel to St. Martinus in the Richterich district of Aachen, a sort of village on the city's outskirts. Indeed, we were taken in by the bucolic atmosphere of this small town: on our quest to find parking, we witnessed a family taking a walk across the fields with a baby stroller, a dog, and a horse in tow. Leading up to the church was a grassy cemetery and brick labyrinth. Kantor Angelo Scholly, organist at this church for 25 years, greeted us at the door.

He explained that the disposition of seating, altars, etc. within the church has been made flexible in recent years, to accommodate the pandemic (replacing pews with individual seating) but also different needs: various seating configurations and orientations for baptisms, services, and concerts. He spoke about the organ, built by Maas in 1836, and reworked by Weimbs in 1988. It is a one manual instrument with a pedal board (a later addition). He obliged with a demonstration including Johan Bernard Bach, Mendelssohn, and Carson Cooman, before inviting us to take turns at the bench. While members expressed satisfaction with many aspects of this instrument, the unusual dimensions of the "custom" pedal board was not one of them.



Upon leaving this church, our group began to disperse somewhat, with some members returning to obligations in their respective home countries or elsewhere. The remainder of us drove back to Aachen center, enjoyed lunch and ice cream cones, and then gathered in two groups (the Walkers and the Drivers) to travel to the Burtscheid neighborhood of Aachen. We first went to the Herz-Jesu-Kirche, a church in neo-roman style dating from the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It has an uncommon shape, as well as the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest mosaic after that of Aachen Cathedral.

The organ, by G. Stahlhuth (Pelzer) has been through renovations since its initial version in 1939, involving changing the Positif case and pipework. It is scheduled to be rebuilt again soon, with renewed wiring, and new casework. This is the last instrument produced by its builder, just before his entire

workshop, along with most of its archives and many of the staff, perished in World War II. Though it seems neo-Baroque in conception, it has a Romantic voicing, making it versatile. This versatility was reflected during the demonstration by Kantor Andreas Hoffman, as well as during the informal playing that followed.

We then packed up and walked to St. Michael, 15 minutes away, where a spacious white and gold interior flooded with the sounds of a Mustel harmonium being played awaited us. Andreas Hoffman offered this brief prelude before introducing the 1999, French-inspired Weimbs organ. He performed a demonstration of Dupré and Franck, and those of us who were still there took our final turn to play a bit as well.

We convened for an informal final meal together at the Magellan tavern that evening, enjoying local (and less-local) beers and local (and less-local) foods, as well as company and conversation that had been sorely missed for the two previous years. We had thoughts for those of our members who were not with us, whatever their reasons, and hope next year that all those willing and able will be able to do so. Conversations lagged on as each of us inevitably broke off to return to our rooms.



The following morning, in the time before my train, I felt there was an important part of Aachen that I had not experienced: the Carolus thermal baths. No members were able to linger and come along so I promised myself to report my experience in conclusion. Though smaller in size than certain thermal spas I've visited in other countries, this was a gem of a place to unwind from the week. Hot, steamy basins next to cold, bracing ones provided for an energizing experience.

An outdoor whirlpool made it possible to enjoy the spring air while drifting gently in circles. After a few hours I ventured upstairs to the sauna area, where I soon became aware that this was a "textile-free zone". At this point, I felt that after a week of discovering and comparing organs, I was not in the mood to encounter any more ... "organs" - and so I returned to my locker, to my suitcase, and to my train, with the intention of writing this report. I'm already looking forward to next year!

*Alissa Duryee*

\*\*\* "You can't miss it" – thus spoke our fearless leader Axel Wilberg (a number of times) while explaining to the sheeple how to reach the various destinations – because, for the first time in a number of years, most churches were reached on foot or by private cars, not in a coach. In fact, he perhaps overestimated the collective intelligence, and it turned out not to be impossible at all. And so the phrase became the unofficial motto of the meeting.

