

SPRING MEETING 2009

NETHERLANDS



On Monday, April 1st 2024, 43 European chapter members (and friends) took to the skies, railways and roads, descending upon the town of Leeuwarden in the Netherlands. All checked into the Fletcher Paleis Stadhoudelijk Hof, a former possession of the Dutch royal family converted into a four-star hotel. After a meet-and-greet session, the participants convened in a wood-paneled room with walls richly adorned in 18th century portrait paintings, to enjoy a festive opening dinner. As usual, our Dean (Johan Hermans) and meeting organizer (Judy Riefel-Lindel) took turns welcoming familiar participants, introducing new ones, and presenting the week's itinerary.

Those present received a songbook thoughtfully compiled by first time Spring Meeting participant Ineke Remmers and did some singing at the end of the meal. A program booklet was also distributed: inside was our itinerary, stoplists, photos and background information for the organs and churches at each destination, a map of each province with some local history, and a spotlight on the culinary specialties of each location. This document was so expertly prepared that a voice in my head

began asking what more there might be to report about our trip once it was over! The following paragraphs are my humble attempt to silence that voice through the offering of important facts and amusing anecdotes. One important disclaimer though: performances included but were not limited to those mentioned here. An exhaustive list would be beyond the scope of this article and would have been exhausting to the reader as well as the writer.

Tuesday, April 2, our first full day, was devoted to the province of Friesland, of which Leeuwarden is the capital. This province enjoys its own language,



distinct from the Dutch language, as well as several interesting local culinary specialties. A logistical incident in our itinerary led to us having a free morning, which was fortuitous, as some of us had travelled from North America or Australia the day before and were pleased to use the morning to get situated.

Some explored Leeuwarden by foot: little shops, canals, and brick-lined streets leading to its very own leaning tower (the medieval Oldehove). A handful of us convened at the Fries museum, an excellent place to take in an overview of Friesland culture through exhibits of local painters Christoffel and Kate Bisschop, of aerial photos of the Friesland landscape, and of memorabilia from the local resistance movement. Then it was a short walk to our first organ: that of the Waalse Kerk.



There we were welcomed by organist Peter van der Zwaag, who spoke to us about the churches' longstanding connection with a former French speaking community (the Walloons), with services in French (which is still occasionally the case today). Before that, the single-nave church had been the convent chapel of an order of Dominican nuns known as the 'Singing Sisters'. Subsequently, the chapel passed through the hands of several Protestant congregations; today, the Remonstrant congregation uses it for services.

Its organ was donated by Anna von Hannover, daughter of George II, who was an exceptionally accomplished student of Handel. It was the largest instrument built by Johan Michael Schwarzburg, constructed in 1740 and somewhat expanded in 1854 by van Damm (a builder based in Leeuwarden, whose shop remained active until the 1920's). In the 1950s further modifications were made by Flentrop, and finally the instrument was restored to its 1854 condition by Leeuwarden builders Bakker and Timmenga roughly twenty years ago.

A demonstration followed, featuring pieces by Isfrid Kayser, Böhm, Distler and Scheidemann. The dulcet tones of this instrument felt perfectly adapted to the space, with an intimate, immediate sound. The Distler piece allowed listeners to appreciate its possibilities for interpreting later repertoire, and the Scheidemann piece showed off the more penetrating reed stops. Our participants then enjoyed a playing session which opened and closed with original music, beginning with some unconventional hymn arrangements by Christa Rakich and closing with an engaging improvisation by Margreeth de Jong.

It was then a short walk to our next stop at the Grote Kerk, where Mr. van der Zwaag began the visit with a tribute to the churches' former organist and AGO European Chapter member Gerwin Hoeksktra, appointed in 2020 and deceased soon afterwards, at age 30. Peter van der Zwaag played his own "Requiem" for organ in memory of his close friend, as well as a lovely piece by Jan Jongepier, one of the churches' previous organists, composed at the tender age of 17. This was followed by a piece composed by Mr. Hoekstra himself, which brought this personal tribute to a meaningful close.



Mr. van der Zwaag took the time to explain some history: the Grote Kerk was also originally part of a 13th Century Dominican (Jacobin) monastery. Some of the monastery's buildings, including cloisters and a refectory, remain intact. In the 16th century, chapels and the south aisle were added and the nave was lengthened. During the period from 1578-1580, the church served for both Catholic and Protestant worship. After the Reformation, the frescos which had adorned the church were painted over by the Protestants. During a restoration effort in the 1970's, some of these frescoes were uncovered, and we were able to admire them.

The church had possessed an organ during the Middle Ages, now lost: its current three manual instrument was built between 1724 and 1727 by Christian Muller, a German who had been recruited in Amsterdam. We learned that many German builders found the Netherlands attractive during this period as the Reformation had created a need for new instruments there. Additionally, organ builders in Germany were obligated to be part of a guild, which created constraints.

The Grote Kerk instrument was originally intended for liturgical use. Later work by van Dam (between 1821 and 1944) brought a broader compass, a swell box, and the removal of mixtures to make room for more string stops. Consecutive restoration by Leeuwarden builders Bakker and Timmenga between 1972-1977 sought to regain the character of the original Müller organ while preserving some later features, preserving the original timbres while facilitating the performance of more recent music.

We were treated to a demonstration consisting of works by Bruhns, Bohm, and JS Bach. The instrument impressed the listeners with its warmth, majesty and versatility. Our own players took to the bench, beginning with Giorgio Parolini in a decidedly Dutch direction: a variation on Merck Toch Hoe Sterck, by Cor Kee. Along with other things, our members played an effective arrangement of Gershwin's "Summertime" (Christa Rakich) as well as original music (Bernard Sanders, Theo Meurs, and Margreeth de Jong).

On Wednesday morning, the group boarded a bus in the direction of the province of Groningen, in the extreme northeast of the country. Our itinerary took us through picturesque country landscapes, under a melancholy and overcast sky. We passed traditional homes and farms, with sloping thatched roofs. Observant eyes could spot newly arrived members of the ovine community, in the form of frolicking lambs. Though my hopes had been high, I failed to spot any tulips along the way, but hope was not lost, it was still early in the week.

We learned that this region had been hit hard by earthquakes, due to underground extraction of natural gas. Widespread damage had occurred to homes and buildings since the late 1980's, and there has been a local feeling of disillusionment about compensation offered by the government. As we soon would learn, public property (including churches and organs) was not excluded from this phenomenon.

The bus left us at a large brick church (the Petrus en Pauluskerk), towering above the quaint, quiet village of Loppersum. Thanks to large windows, its interior was bathed in that same melancholy light. We were



meantone tuning.

greeted in this peaceful space by organist Stef Tuinstra, who explained the history of this 20-stop organ, first built in 1562 by Andreas de Mare. Hendrik Huisz made a major restoration in 1665, and after some debate about starting over with a completely new instrument, Albertus Anthony Huisz added a new Great Division, among other work. New pipes for the Rugpositief were made in 1803 by Freytag, and a thorough restoration (controversial in retrospect) took place in 1858.

More recently, this instrument had been a victim of earthquake damage. Our demonstrator spearheaded a campaign for its restoration, raising up to 600,000 euros. In 2017-2018, it was ultimately rehabilitated to its pre-1959 state by Bakker and Timmenga. This rehabilitation was contingent on a colorful painting of the instruments' case. The choice was also made to use a 1/5 comma

This restored instrument's appearance was striking: a deep green case with brilliant gold details. Its bright and regal sounds spilled forth as Mr. Tuinstra improvised a partita on a theme suggested by our member Jean van Cleef. Our participants next took turns playing mainly German repertoire: Krebs, Bach, Buxtehude, Scheidemann. The time flew by too quickly, and it was soon time to board the bus again.



We made our way through a more urban, contemporary landscape on our way to the city of Groningen, a major student center with a proportionally young population. The sun continued to elude us as we entered the Martinikerk, where organist Sietze de Vries was waiting. He presented its instrument, which originated around 1450 on the West Wall of the church. The original organ had been the object of a Renaissance style reconstruction in 1542, and then an extension by Arp Schnitger in 1691 (involving the repurposing of ship masts for the Principal 32').

This German builder became active in the region because Groningen was a member of the Hanseatic League, providing trade opportunities between its member states. Later, (in 1728-9) Schnitger's son Frans Caspar added a 16 stop Rugpositief. Though many Romantic modifications took place in the 19th century, the most recent restorations (1967-7 and 1983-4, carried out by Jürgen Ahrend) sought

to return the organ to the conception of 1740: with original voicing, Neidhart III temperament, and A= 466 pitch. Its façade pipes are 100 percent lead, with a tin veneer.

We were able to appreciate the many possibilities of this instrument during Mr. de Vries' demonstration: first, the stops were heard one by one with the help of microphone narration, then in the context of improvised variations on "Jesus, meine Zuversicht". The playing was as dazzling as the instrument, now luminous, bright and playful, now bold and stirring. Several participants were able to visit the console in small groups, among them Peggy Sniezek and Cheryl Duerr (USA) and Karel Baeten (Belgium), mostly playing North German repertoire: Bach and Buxtehude, but also Sweelinck. But soon our time in the Martinikerk was up, and it was time for a walk to the Aakerk.

Here, organist Peter Westerbrink offered us a very different experience to the Martinikerk. This instrument has two distinct facets (one Baroque and the other Romantic) which a resourceful organist can navigate



expertly. It was not originally conceived for the Aakerk (which owes its name to the proximity of the river Aa); having originally been built for the Academiekerk in Groningen, it was moved to the Aakerk in 1815. Originally it resembled a North German organ, with some elements by Arp Schnitger, and others by nearby builders. Work was performed in 1830 (by Timpe) and in 1856 (van Oeckelen).

In the 1970's, this became the city's main organ, since the one in the Martinikerk was undergoing renovation. By the year 1990, as the Aakerk itself underwent a restoration, a controversy emerged about a project to restore the organ. A court verdict (2002) finally helped the decision making along, in favor of preserving both Baroque and Romantic aspects. Reil did the work, under the supervision of a team of organists. In 2011, the organ was inaugurated in its current state.

Mr. Westerbrink's demonstration effectively showed the Romantic and Baroque facets of the instrument, showcasing Romantic and Baroque works. Participants were able to try on both types of repertoire as well, and after about 45 minutes (including Barry Jordan's excerpts of JS Bach's "Sei gegrüßet") we filed back to the bus. The experiences of this day left meeting participants lots to discuss in the evening. Thankfully, adjacent to the hotel was a pub, De Walrus, where we could chat while sampling local beers, mustard soup, and other goodies.

The following morning started with a bright and early 8 am bus departure towards the province of North Holland. Our chauffeur Pieter van Dijk (not to be confused with future organ demonstrator, also named Pieter van Dijk) knowingly steered us through more wet and windy Dutch countryside, including a ride along the 32 kilometer long the Afsluitdijk (built between 1927 and 1933), which separates the IJsselmeer lake from the North Sea. After a two-hour journey we arrived at the St. Bavo Kerk in the city of Haarlem.



Because of a slight delay in our arrival, our host (organist Anton Pauw) adjusted his demonstration to a shortened time frame, providing a concise but comprehensive overview of the instrument in the form of original variations on “Erneure mich, o ewigs Licht”. Our experience was enhanced by a handout featuring the registration for each variation. The organ imposed its presence without overpowering the interior of this large monument, in which the presence of tourists and passers-by created a completely different atmosphere from that at our previous, more private destinations.

The imposing instrument by Christian Mueller (1738) covers the whole west wall of the church and measures 30 meters from the ground, possessing pedal towers 11 meters high. Commissioned by the city council of Haarlem, it has been played by many important musicians including Handel and Mozart, and is coveted among today’s organists. Restoration work took place in 1866 (Witte), and two subsequent twentieth century restorations (1959-1961 Marcussen and Son; 1989-2000, Flentrop) sought to return it to its original Baroque sound and feel.

The chance to play was long-awaited for many of our participants, the first of which dove into dense polyphonic Baroque repertoire, basking in the sound (Christian Michel’s rendition of JS Bach’s Alla breve, Barry Jordan’s pair of movements of a concerto by Walther). Agnes Goerke was then able to sample two very different registrations for the final movement of JS Bach’s Trio Sonata in E-flat major. Then things took a very different turn when Meredith Baker plunged into Franck’s Pièce Héroïque, and we heard more Romantic possibilities under the fingers of members Jennifer Chou (Brahms, Mendelssohn) and Margreeth de Jong.

While we could have spent all day there, it was time to head for Alkmaar. Upon arrival in this bustling, small



city, we were greeted by very strong winds, heavy bicycle traffic, (resulting in a few minor collisions or reprimands) and... the opportunity to purchase local cheese, thanks to this city’s historical cheese market and museum. Seeking further thrills following the St. Bavo organ, Christian Michel was able to purchase a piece of cheese aged to 26 years. Those later sharing his part of the bus were grateful that he had it carefully wrapped.

After a brief chance to explore the city on foot, the group convened at the Grote Kerk, or Sint-Laurenkerk. Pieter van Dijk (the organist, not to be confused with our chauffeur) greeted us, explaining the history of the choir and great organs.

The choir organ (Jan van Covelén, 1511) boasts a pitch of $a = 427$ and an unusual range (low note of F). It is the oldest playable organ in the Netherlands! Despite its small

size, this instrument has a penetrating, precise sound, as we were able to hear during a brief demonstration consisting of Scheidemann and Sweelinck. Members had a very brief playing opportunity. Mr. van Dijk explained a connection between Sweelinck and this instrument, through the fact that Sweelinck played an instrument (in Amsterdam) constructed by a master student of this van Covelén.

Our attention was then turned to the great organ, which was also originally tuned in meantone (first phases between 1638 and 1645, by Levinus Eekmans and then the van Hagerbeer brothers), but was later returned to equal temperament in order to better serve in the city's long-standing tradition of concerts. Future work was done between 1685 – 1704 (Duyschot) and 1723-5 (Frans Caspar Schnitger). Three different restorations were undertaken in the last century by Flentrop, but this instrument remains 90 percent original. We were able to hear its possibilities during M. van Dijk's interpretation of JS Bach's chorale partita on "Sei gegrüßet, Jesu gütig". The unfortunate result of such a rich visit, with its two instruments and comprehensive demonstrations, was the limited time left for members to play. Still, we heard Christian Michel (Anthoni van Noordt), Giorgio Parolini (JS Bach) and others, including Johan Hermans, Mike Irvine, and Mary Joy Rieder. Following the bus drive back to Leeuwarden, members debriefed the day's experiences around tables at De Walrus again, trading stories and bites of Dutch food. It was off to bed not too late, given another 8 am departure the next day.

Indeed, Friday morning the bus took us south, to the province of Gelderland, which a handful of our members call home. Our first stop was Zutphen's Walburgiskerk, a monument rich in treasures in addition to its organ: a medieval 'chain library', a baptismal font from 1527, a candle crown – all open to the public with friendly staff to greet them.

Organist Klaas Stok greeted us and explained that in its original condition (between 1637 and 1643) the organ had had two manuals. Between 1812-1815, W. Timpe enlarged the instrument's case, added a third keyboard, and moved it to the opposite side of the church. In 1915-16, it was returned to its original location by Sanders and Split. More and more additions ensued, and the instrument became increasingly difficult to play. It was therefore restored in 1996, with its original 1642 condition as the starting point, and the decision to retain some of the later additions (including the third manual). The result is largely a Baroque organ on the first two manuals, and a Romantic organ on the third.

Mr. Stok then performed a demonstration of works by Bruhns, Böhm, and Sweelinck. Almost as impressive as the instrument were the acoustics of the space, creating a halo

of resonance around each work and suspending our applause for a few seconds after the release of each final note. This situation was deftly navigated by Mr. Stok, allowing us to experience both clarity and resonance. Because of the building's use as a public space, our time slot was quite limited and only a very few of our members were able to play for a handful of minutes. Though this was a disappointment for some, we headed



eagerly back into the city to find the marketplace with its carillon tower – for we were about to experience a carillon concert by our members Georg Wagner and Ariane Toffel.

The weather was not in our favor, so we all took to seats in various covered café terraces and unfolded programs which the musicians had handed out in the bus. In a statement made during the ride over, George expressed the importance of programming consensual music for this very public type of performance, emphasizing that “there is no way for the listener to escape a carillon concert”. Their choice of repertoire did not disappoint, as there was truly something for everybody: we were treated to four-hand arrangements of three two-part inventions by JS Bach (say that 5 times fast!), followed by each player’s solo set. Georg honored our host country by performing his original variations on a tune from Thysius’ luitboek (ca 1600), followed by excerpts of a suite by Leen ‘t Hart. Next, Ariane treated us to music by Nino Rota, Maurice Jarre, and the moving classic rock ballad made famous by the Scorpions, ‘Winds of Change’.

While this last song tempted the listener to raise lighters skywards in a swaying motion, we had no lighters, and it was raining, so we tried to shout our appreciation loudly enough to reach Georg and Ariane’s ears. In an unexpected twist, loud horn sounds were heard at various points throughout the concert. We ultimately encountered the source of these sounds, a man who happily answered questions from random Americans on the street. He explained to us that he was playing a shofar, made from an antelope horn. According to custom, he sounds this horn in thirty different locations in the city on Fridays at 11 am, as part of Jewish tradition.

Finally, we headed to our last church, in Doesberg. On the way, we passed the charming village church where our member Theo Meurs has served an impressive 45-year term as organist. On arrival at the St. Martinus Kerk, Wilbert Berendsen showed us the church’s three organs: first a very small choir organ (Freytag, 1805), on which he played an excerpt from Frescobaldi’s Fiori Musicali. Next, a larger choir organ, built by Flentrop in 1953, which was originally intended to become the Rugpositief of the church’s new main organ. This project took a different turn, however, after the completion of this first phase: in Rotterdam, the Nieuwe Zuidkerk had to be demolished, and it became urgent to re-home its organ. Thus, a four-manual



instrument which had been commissioned from E. F. Walcker and Co. became available for sale, for less than the price of its parts. This organ found its new home as the great organ in Doesberg, and both choir organs remained choir organs.

Mr. Berendsen performed an original Veni Creator for us, and then a generous time slot allowed many of our members to express themselves in a decidedly more Romantic way. We experienced Mendelssohn, Widor, Reger and more, though the tight quarters in the loft made

it difficult for this writer to know who was playing much of the time. Most of us listened from downstairs while sipping coffees and teas from this church’s in-house café. When all was said and done, Mr. Berendsen treated us to a performance of the Finale from Vierne’s Symphonie No. 1.

This performance appears to have chased away the clouds and rain, because as we left the church, it felt as if Spring had arrived. We were just one brief bus trip from our final dinner, planned in the bucolic setting



of Bronkhorst (population 100) - the smallest entity to be recognized as a city by the government of the Netherlands. As our bus wound through quaint farms on small roads, tulips and daffodils finally showed their faces. Family members of member Wim Riefel waved us on as we drove past their house.

The Inn in Bronkhorst served us a delicious typical meal, complete with the mustard soup which had now become a favorite for some of us. As tradition would have it, our organizer Judy was showered with gifts by each member

of the group. Johan, our dean, made some closing comments, and invited our member Agnes Goerke to present next year's destination: Helsinki. Toasts were held, and conversation and laughter lingered on into the bus ride home, where it then overflowed one final time into De Walrus.

And then, another meeting had come to an end. It was time for each of us to pack our bags and catch our trains, planes, and automobiles to the next destination. During our meeting, the chapter had grown by seven members. We also celebrated the 26th anniversary of the meeting (approximately, depending on how you calculate the pandemic years). Watching the Dutch landscapes recede into the distance from my train seat, reflecting on the week that had just passed, my mind couldn't help returning to Christian's piece of 26-year-old cheese. What a coincidence that as our chapter was holding its first Spring Meeting, that cheese had also just come into existence, only kilometers away from where the group was gathering! It is easy to draw the obvious conclusion that good things just get better with time. Allow me to offer an additional perspective: between our Chapter and the piece of cheese, it feels safe to say that only one will defy the test of time and be around by this time next year... Food for thought!