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Brief history of the Organ in the Church

It was nearly 700 years ago that the organ was first crowned “The King of Instruments”. In its early form it was considered an extravagant gift to be exchanged between empires. Over the past several centuries it has come to be a central fixture of music in the church. A look at the organ’s history will help shed light on this instrument often shrouded in mystery and reveal how it came to be at the center of church music.

Something that makes the organ distinct as a musical instrument is that its form varies greatly from one instrument to the next. The components that make an organ an organ, as defined by organ historian Peter Williams, are rows of pipes sitting on chests of pressurized air operated by a keyboard. The number of each of these components can vary so much that an organ can be a mobile instrument with only a few keys and a small row of pipes, or a gargantuan construction of seven keyboards and tens of thousands of pipes.

The oldest documented pipe organ was an instrument called the hydraulis invented by the 3rd century B.C. engineer Ctesibius of Alexandria. The hydraulis had only a few pipes and keys and was more of a model than an instrument, used to demonstrate how water could be used to generate wind pressure. References to musical uses of the hydraulis appear a century-and-a-half later. Over the next several centuries, as technology progressed and creativity expanded, the number of pipes and keys on an organ continued to increase as the primitive engineering model developed in to the full-fledge “King” we know today.

The organ’s initial role in the worship of the church was to act as a signal calling worshipers to the service. But by the 10th century A.D., organs were being used during the course of worship services. As the organ’s role regarding worship changed, so did its location in the church building. Early organs would have been found near the entrance of the church to best perform their “summoning” function. As mechanical innovations progressed to allow the organ to be played in a more nuanced and musical way, it began to fill a role that comes so naturally to it: accompanying singing. Because the organ produces sound through pressurized air, or “breath”, and because of the manner in which it sustains tone, it was found to be well-suited for accompanying the choir and congregation. In order to be used more effectively in this role it was moved inside the sanctuary and placed in proximity to the choir and/or congregation.

An important piece of the puzzle in how the organ came to be an instrument of the church is the Benedictine Order. We owe a great deal to the Benedictine monks who, throughout the 9th and 10th centuries, were significant contributors to the development of literacy, scholarship, musical notation, and the very existence of Western music. According to Williams, the Benedictines are perhaps solely responsible for developing organs for use in church services.

The organ and Western music progressed hand-in-hand. The way music was perceived, composed, and performed is reflected in developments in the organ. Or is it the other way around? Were larger, lower-sounding pipes added to organs because the bass line was becoming more important in singing, or was the way people sang a reflection of what was being discovered through experiments in organ building? Scholars believe developments went both ways.

By the time that the Reformation was in full swing in the 16th century, organs were ubiquitous in Cathedrals and churches across the Western world. As the reformers sought to bring theology and worship back to biblical conformity, the use of the organ in worship went in two directions. On the one hand were Luther and others who had no issue with the participation of the organ or other instruments in worship, and out of that tradition came Bach, who could perhaps be crowned the King of The King of Instruments. On the other hand, were Calvin and other theologians of the belief that biblical worship excluded the use of instruments (including the organ). In some cases, organs were destroyed as waves of iconoclasm followed the Reformation. But in other cases, the organ was so valued that alternative uses for it were found where biblical conviction barred its use in the service. This was the case in the Oude Kerk in Amsterdam where Sweelinck was organist. In the 16th Century, it was common that churches and organs were property of the city and organists were on the city's payroll. So in Amsterdam, as in other cities, the local magistrate valued the organ and its music and sought ways for the art form to continue outside of worship. A common solution was to establish weekly recitals, often played following a service, where the organists would play literature or improvise on psalm tunes sung during the service. So, even when the organ was not being played during the service, it was still inseparable from the songs being sung by the church.

In considering the Reformers desire to worship God according to His Word and how the organ factors into that consideration, it is natural to look at the appearance of the word "organ" in Psalm 150 in some translations. Since we know that the organ did not exist until the 3rd century B.C., well after Psalm 150 was written, there is not a direct path from the Hebrew word at the end of verse 4 in Psalm 150 and the modern pipe organ. But there is logic in the connection that has been made. Throughout the book of Psalms, we find three types of instruments referenced: those that are blown, plucked, and struck. In other words, strings, winds, and percussion. Innovations in the types of sound that could be produced by an organ followed these same lines. Different types of pipes were created to represent the sounds of strings instruments, wind instruments, and the high percussive sounds of bells and cymbals. Another way of looking at it is that the Psalmist clearly calls us to praise the Lord with everything that we have: all types of instruments--"everything that has breath." The organ is as good a representation as any of that idea. The organ employs the full forces of technology, range of volume, and variety of sound. And perhaps therein lies the main reason why the organ has withstood the test of time and, after more than a millennium, it continues to play a central role in the music of the church.

A lot has changed in the world since the organ first appeared over two thousand years ago. And much has changed since it was first brought into the church a thousand years later. Changes in technology now occur at blistering speeds, and many recent technological advances have been incorporated into the organ to its benefit. Yet, just as the initial establishment of the organ with the church was no accident, we have every reason to believe that its continuation in that establishment is a good and worthy way forward. As much changes around us, we seek to preserve what is good and valuable so that it may continue to be part of the life of the church for generations to come.

*Much of this article draws from the research of Peter Williams and is book *A New History of the Organ: from the Greeks to the Present Day*, Indiana University press, 1980.