

ECHO festivals

European Cities of Historic Organs

4. TOULOUSE

A wide choice of competition repertoire is possible on organs spanning 400 years in south-west France, writes

Andrew-John Smith. PHOTOS PATRICK-GALIBERT/TLO



ECHO is an association of nine cities in nine EU countries that are the homes of precious historic organs – cities in which organ culture plays an important role. The main aim of ECHO is to encourage and foster this curatorship and the historic heritage through all means possible and across borders.

The nine ECHO cities are: Alkmaar (The Netherlands), Brussels (Belgium), Freiberg (Germany), Fribourg (Switzerland), Innsbruck (Austria), Lisbon (Portugal), Toulouse (France), Treviso (Italy) and Trondheim (Norway). www.echo-organs.org



What happens in Toulouse for ten days of October each year is certainly, as the organisation claims, ‘more than a festival’ – it is ‘a grand mission to showcase the organ’ and to make the instrument ‘accessible to all’. With more than 20 instruments of many styles and periods in the city and another 370 or so in the region, Toulouse has phenomenal resources with which to achieve this. The city’s membership of ECHO is contingent on three things: an organ festival, a competition and at least one historic instrument of international significance. Toulouse les Orgues combines all three with spectacular and, arguably, unparalleled success.

While ECHO is concerned only with historic instruments, the festival’s artistic director and organiste titulaire of Saint-Sernin, Michel Bouvard, stresses that Toulouse les Orgues seeks to promote all worthy instruments in the city. At the centre of this is the Concours Xavier Darasse, named after Bouvard’s distinguished predecessor at Saint-Sernin. Together with Jan Willem Jansen – an important figure both for organ playing and early music in the region and a former director of the festival – Bouvard developed the competition in 1996. It is unique among European organ competitions in allowing the candidates a free choice of both instrument and programme. An additional performer is even permitted for a specified portion of the programme.

The twelve candidates selected for the semi-final are asked to play 30 minutes from the recital programme they have chosen for the final – so in 2013 it was therefore possible to hear twelve different recitals on five different organs by players from Japan, South Africa, Hungary, USA, Austria, Germany, Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands and, of course, France. Understandably, most opted for exclusively French repertoire under such titles as ‘Visages de l’orgue symphonique’ and ‘L’orgue impressionniste’, but there were also programmes of all Reger, Hindemith and even one of



The 1899 Cavaillé-Coll organ in St-Sernin is one of the stars of Toulouse les Orgues; (inset) St-Sernin titulaire and the festival's artistic director Michel Bouvard

Hungarian repertoire entitled 'l'expression de la douleur dans les œuvres des compositeurs Magyars' ('sadness expressed in works of Hungarian composers').

Five instruments were used in the competition, of which the 1888 organ by local builder Eugène Puget in Notre Dame la Dalbade and, of course, the 1889 Cavaillé-Coll of the Basilique Saint-Sernin are the most extraordinary. One can't help feeling sorry for Puget that, had it not been for the prominence of his illustrious contemporary, he might be so much more widely celebrated. At Notre Dame la Dalbade, Puget used much of Moitessier's 1850 pipe-work, enclosing two divisions (nearly half) of his three-manual, 50-stop instrument. Particularly impressive are the rich, singing fonds and the characterful reeds. As with early Cavaillé-Coll instruments, there is no

Had it not been for the prominence of his illustrious contemporary [Cavaillé-Coll], Puget might be so much more widely celebrated

mixture on the Récit. For earlier repertoire, the three-manual, 33-stop Ahrend (1981) in the Église-musée des Augustins proved an excellent choice, even if the control of its action was occasionally elusive! Built with impressive integrity in the style of the north German baroque, its panels are painted in 16th/17th-century fashion, and it is not without personality. The organ of the Église des Dominicains (Chéron, 1960) also has a strong flavour but is, by contrast, a thoroughbred neo-classical instrument, typical of its era. Whether it is would have been to Hindemith's taste is questionable.

Though with much to recommend it, the organ at La Cathédrale Saint-Étienne (Lefebure 1612 / Cavaillé-Coll 1849 / Kern 1976) is a rather more confused affair. With 46 stops disposed across four manuals and pedals, it suffers (like the building that houses it) from an identity crisis. Perhaps not in the very best of conditions, its sound owes much to its 1970s restoration.

For the public there are clearly great advantages to a competition in this format, even if the task of the jury is made considerably harder. To compensate for the lack of opportunity to compare like with like, the ▶

SLUG



The 1888 Eugène Puget organ at Notre Dame la Dalbade has rich, singing fonds and characterful reeds



The 1864 Cavaillé-Coll in the Église du Gesù: limited funds have helped to save it from inappropriate changes

◀ jury is extraordinarily large: its 22 members are, as Pieter van Dijk (Alkmaar) believes, ‘less a jury, than an audience of professionals’. João Vaz (Lisbon) wonders whether it is even intentionally subjective: ‘I certainly treat it subjectively and listen as an artistic director booking an artist. Which players do I want to present to audiences in Lisbon? Who do I want to present to them?’ Such an approach seems refreshingly honest, and with such a large jury and no conferring, the usual accusations of jury corruption are avoided. That the four finalists all studied in France and played French music may therefore say more about their familiarity with the instruments and the suitability of their repertoire and its execution than anything else. As is usually (and perhaps inevitably) the case under such circumstances, the fast and loud was by and large far more convincingly handled than the poetic or poised.

Apart from the competition, the festival presented some 50 other events. These fulfilled an educational and wider cultural brief, which Michel Bouvard takes very seriously: ‘[ECHO] was conceived as a full cultural exchange involving the cooperation of “ambassadors”, right up to the mayor. We have poetry, dance, singing, cinema...’ Nor were these concerts simply thrown together, but were clearly the product of some highly creative and considered programming. During the days I spent at the festival, I heard three offerings of early music. Ensemble Clement Jannequin and Les Sacqueboutiers gave the opening concert of La Rue, Ockeghem, Dufay and Josquin. At the organ the ‘L’homme armé’ theme was taken up by João Vaz, with interpolations of Spanish and Portuguese batallas. Tasto Solo (directed from a portative organ by Guillermo Pérez) also gave a thoroughly enchanting, if necessarily speculative, realisation from the *Buxheimer Orgelbuch*. In the Cathedral’s Italianate Chapelle Saint-Anne, Maurizio Croci directed Ensemble Il Pegaso in a programme of unpublished Monteverdi, recently discovered in Poland. On the west end Tamburini organ (1980), Croci also performed several unpublished Frescobaldi pieces, discovered in the Bibliothèque nationale – a rare treat indeed.

At the Basilique Notre Dame la Daurade, the four-handed piano (‘London’) version of Brahms’s Requiem was performed in ▶

ECHO FESTIVALS: TOULOUSE



The III/33 Ahrend (1981) in the Église-musée des Augustins is an excellent choice for earlier repertoire

◀ conjunction with several of the op.122 chorales, the G minor Praeludium und Fuge, and the Fuge in A flat minor. This instrument (Poirier & Lieberknecht 1864 / Puget 1888) is by reputation impressive but, despite obvious quality, on this occasion may not have sounded at its best. The organ of the Église du Gesu (Cavaillé-Coll 1864) on the other hand most certainly did. Its 24 stops are distributed over one-and-a-half manuals and pedals, which has caused its partial neglect. Michel Bouvard feels that the relative lack of money in Toulouse, compared for example to Paris, has prevented instruments such as this from being unduly corrupted. The fonds of this organ are truly sumptuous, the flutes clear but singing, and the tutti substantial but not overbearing. I heard

two performances on this magnificent instrument: an improvisation to choreographed dance and, the next day, Séverac motets and several smaller pieces of Saint-Saëns, Franck and Litaize, followed by a particularly captivating display of artistry from Joris Verdin on an 1865 Mustel harmonium. Subsequent programmes included the Orchestre National du Capitole with Thierry Escaich at the organ, a recital of accordion and cello, an improvisation to Buster Keaton's *Le Mécano de la 'General'* by Samuel Liégeon, Bach harpsichord concertos, and even a Wurlitzer playing in the square Charles de Gaulles. Regrettably I was unable to visit the Église Saint Pierre de Chartreux on which four-manual 51-stop organ (Delaunay 1683 / Micot 1783 / restored Grenzing 1983)

Peter Hurford recorded the Couperin masses in 1985.

Most organ lovers will be familiar with the name of Saint-Sernin as the home of one of the 19th century's most extraordinary instruments. To hear it in the basilica's magnificent Romanesque nave is an almost visceral experience. I, for one, felt like a 13-year-old schoolboy as I listened to six concerts there in two days! No recording could ever do it justice, and the fonds in particular are much warmer than on disc. If the rest of the festival doesn't interest you (and I can't help but feel that there is plenty both in the festival, city and region for everyone), then Saint-Sernin alone is worth the trip.

Organists and promoters everywhere face the challenge of bringing new audiences to the organ and of retaining those that they have. Toulouse les Orgues embraces this wholeheartedly, without any compromise of integrity. During a conversation about the relative importance of organ culture in different countries, I asked João Vaz how the festival of Toulouse differs from those of other ECHO cities. His reply was both gracious and apposite: 'The festival of Lisbon was born in Toulouse. This festival is special.' ■

www.toulouse-les-orgues.org

The next ECHO festival will be featured in the XX issue of Choir & Organ.

Andrew-John Smith studied as an organ scholar at New College, Oxford, and the Sweelinck Conservatorium, Amsterdam. He records for Hyperion both as an organist and conductor of the chamber choir Consortium. Also active as a composer, he has been organist and director of music at St Peter's, Eaton Square, London, since 1997.

SERGIYN



Toulouse is home to 'more than a festival' for ten days every October