

WHAT I LEARNED IN GERMANY ... AND DO WE STILL NEED EUROPE?

Rhonda Sider Edgington



The author at the Schnitger organ in St. Jacobi Church, Hamburg, Germany

A FEW YEARS out of grad school, I took stock of my life as a church musician and freelance musician in Chicago. It was all pleasant enough, but I needed a new goal, and through a series of events and conversations, a project crystallized—a Fulbright scholarship to Germany to study the organs and organ music of 16th- and 17th-century North Germany with Harald Vogel.

One year turned into seven, and the experience I had with the instruments, the people, and the works I studied all changed me in ways I'd never anticipated. I could speak at length about how I am now different as a result of this phase of my life, but what interests me more, for the purposes of this article, is the question of why. Did I need to go to Europe to learn these things? Or, to put it another way, what's so great about studying in Europe anyway? While my answer to the first question is an unequivocal "Yes"—as I imagine it is for many colleagues who have lived in Europe—is that just

our prejudice? Do we have a specific answer to the second question?

I've had some interesting conversations with fellow musicians recently, wondering if we, as American organists, still suffer from European envy and an emulation of that continent's organ culture that we supposedly gave up several generations ago. Some examples of how we saw this playing out include: big-name European organists as guest faculty at some of our most famous conservatories; Europeans holding major church positions in the United States; the prestige we give to European performers in this country; and the seemingly never-ending array of European organ-study opportunities available to Americans.

Not that any of this is incomprehensible. I know many of those European teachers and performers, and I would pay good money to study with them or hear them perform. They are simply fabulous musicians, and I'm thrilled we have the opportunity to hear them and work with them here

on our own soil. Conversely, though, can we picture the opposite happening? Could an American land a position at a highly ranked European cultural institution, no matter his or her talent, connections, accolades, or reputations on this side of the ocean? I don't believe so, and I've heard stories that back up this supposition.

Now, this could be due to our open and egalitarian American spirit, which I applaud. It could also be due to the fact that Europeans jealously guard their cultural institutions—and for good reason, which is also commendable. But though the average European organist might not know it, or want to admit it, we Americans also have an organ culture of which we can be proud. Incredible instruments exist in this country, built in almost every possible style. There are also amazingly talented organists who understand how to play these instruments, and places of higher education, with highly respected pedagogues, where one can learn how to perform everything well on those organs. We also have a great indigenous organ culture of which we should be proud—think of Ives, Buck, Hook & Hastings, Skinner—the likes of which one finds nowhere else in the world. Certainly, the days of feeling that one "must" study in Europe to be a credible performer are long gone in this country, and I'm glad. We have come of age as an organ culture, and the high quality of the best of our performers, teachers, and builders show that.

On the other hand, I'm wondering how to balance that belief with the simple realization that I would not be the musician I am without having spent those years in Germany. To investigate that quandary, I need to examine what happened as a result of that time overseas. It began, I think, with leaving home, the place where I felt comfortable and established. Living in another country made me a more flexible person, taught me so much about culture (both the newly

encountered one, and my own native one), and led me to ponder in musical contexts and outside of them what I feel is negotiable and what is not.

My time in Germany provided me with an unanticipated depth of knowledge in the field where I wanted to specialize. I expected to learn some new repertoire, encounter noteworthy instruments, hear inspiring concerts, and learn from a master; but I hadn't anticipated the effect that comes from being immersed in a culture and specific topic. My daily practice instrument during my first year was tuned in a quarter-comma meantone temperament, with sub-semi-tones, built in 2002, using 16th-century North German models and inspiration. The Vierne and Messiaen that had been regular staples of my repertoire in Chicago took a break, and I hardly played anything post-Bach my first years. I also enthusiastically took off on the train to visit any old organ I heard about, and accompanied Harald Vogel to demonstrate organs and play concerts, being apprenticed in his very particular tastes for registrants. I held keys for him to tune the reeds, I froze in cold churches during practice sessions, and I sought out every opportunity I could. I soaked up as much as possible, and the end effect seems so much more than just the cumulative effect of the hours spent.

The great musicians that I encountered, heard perform, and studied with taught me so much. And here is another thing I learned: when I play a very good instrument, I learn something from it. Just as we turn to an old aunt or grandfather for wisdom, the instruments I played, having experienced so much in their "lives," had things to share with me—new insights into performance practice, revelations about registrations, and, after a while, a kind of intuitive understanding about what I needed to do—what worked and what didn't. These instruments were built with such careful craftsmanship, attention to

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detail, and sensitivity, they teach us when we play them.

Surprisingly, Schnitger and Scheidemann weren't the only things I learned in that new land. Far from Lübeck (the town) and Buxtehude (the composer)—and vice versa—I found myself interested in, and investigating, subjects as unrelated to my original topic as figured bass, Reger and Romantic instruments, Gottfried Silbermann, as well as contemporary repertoire and composers, and even Cavallé-Coll.

I wonder if getting used to failing on a more frequent basis (at language, cultural cues, and understanding how things work) helps one be less afraid to try new things. Or perhaps, if being out of one's comfort zone, with the easy answers and well-worn paths suddenly gone, enables one to more willingly tackle new challenges. There were also the things that had nothing to do with organ playing, but which shaped me greatly nonetheless. A new culture, with its different pace of life and contrasting priorities, the experiences traveling, meeting new people, eating strange foods, speaking

a new language . . . I am not the person I was before. I wouldn't trade any of it now—the struggles and triumphs—because it brought me to where I am now, richer by far for the experience.

How do we balance that with my earlier exhortations, though? We have come of age as an organ culture! "Those Europeans don't need us, so why do we still want or even need them?" some might say.

Just because we can hear or play the wonderful Taylor & Boody in Yale's Marquand Chapel doesn't mean we don't want to hear and play the amazing Wilde/Schnitger organ from the 17th century from which it was copied. Just because we could learn from Michael Bouvard at Oberlin doesn't mean we don't want to meet him in Toulouse at Saint-Sernin, on his Cavallé-Coll there.

Now, as an organ culture in the United States, we have made our mistakes, and we have our embarrassments of the past, which we might rather sweep under the rug when guests come calling. I believe it's better if we acknowledge them ourselves—though opinions may differ among

us as to which exactly were the faults! Despite all that, there is so much to be proud of here.

Why do the European organists mentioned earlier want to come here? Our students are often talented, motivated, and hardworking, and the best of our churches and universities are well funded, with fabulous instruments and facilities. Audiences can be enthusiastic and appreciative, and our best builders craft wonderful organs—as good as anything European organbuilders are making now, I would argue.

I would also argue that Europe does need us, as much as she might like to ignore this fact. I think, for instance, about the influx of Americans who rushed to study with Harald Vogel during his early North Germany Organ Academy days (a veritable who's-who of the organ world in America), in order to become more acquainted with historic instruments. It was certainly the attention of the Americans and Japanese, who suddenly were rushing around the North German countryside to see organs, that helped focus local people's attention on the

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treasures they possessed. Many were the small-town residents who told me proudly of the organists from around the world who would come to play the instrument in their tiny village church.

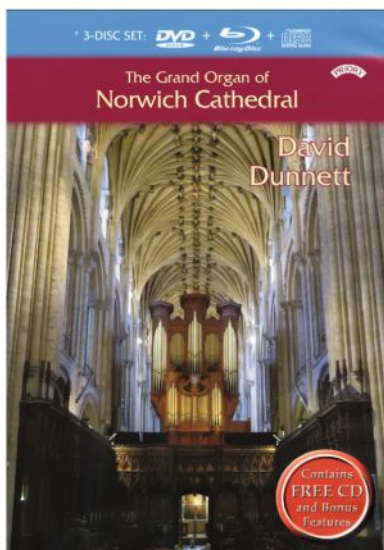
Am I suggesting, a friend half-jokingly asked me, that because of my experiences, I could play a Buxtehude chorale fantasy better than he, who did a lecture recital for his doctorate at Eastman on the North German chorale fantasy, but hasn't spent extensive time in Germany, or that his interpretation would be less credible than mine? No, of course not. Wonderful musicians I know in this country, who haven't set foot in Europe, can still give convincing performances of European works.

I can't speak for my friend, or others, but I would never say they lack the musical insights I have gained. The fact of the matter is that increasingly, we don't have to go to Europe, because Europe now comes to us. Those marvelous teachers and performers, visiting this country to share their experiences; the array of experienced teachers in this country who have spent significant time on the organs of Europe; the ability to hear recordings of the highest quality of almost any instruments; even, regardless of your opinion on it, using Hauptwerk to "play" those instruments; and the many instruments built in this country in the style of almost any historical significant model—as the world shrinks, we increasingly *don't* need to leave our practice rooms to learn and expand our horizons about the organs and organ music of Europe.

However, here my prejudices will have the final word. I can picture the dreary, cloudy skies over the moors of the northern Germany countryside, where Buxtehude spent his days. I can see the small church spires sticking out over the red rooftops of a small village, as we speed (by bike, bus, or car) toward an organ we have come to visit. I can feel the damp of the churches, seeping through my many layers, as I practice on those instruments, feel the sensitivity and quiriness of the keys under my fingers, hear in my mind the sounds and colors of the individual stops, and the power of the plenum. The dialects of the people, the taste of

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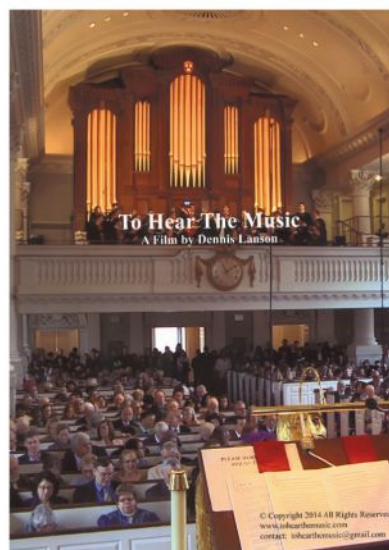
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the bread, wurst, and traditional Ostfriesland tea—it's all lodged in my memory. I don't play Buxtehude like I did before I knew these things, and I treasure the knowledge and experiences I gained there. I will also continue to rave about those experiences to anyone who will give me the chance—students, retirees, and everyone in between. Go! Not because you must, to understand this music, but because of how much more there is to know.

After spending seven years in Bremen, Germany, **Rhonda Sider Edgington** moved with her husband and two young children to Holland, Mich., where she is organist and assistant music director at Hope Church, staff accompanist at Hope College, seminary organist at Western Seminary, dean of the Holland AGO Chapter, and active performing in Western Michigan and throughout the United States and Germany. Pictures and recordings of some of her favorite instruments can be found on her website (<http://rhonda.edgington.info>).