

# The American Organist Magazine

November, 2003

VOX HUMANA: Adagissimo?

Back in July, the *Wall Street Journal* printed a front page article from two of its European correspondents about a performance of John Cage's *Organ 2/ASLSP*. In Cage-speak, ASLSP means "as slow as possible."

The organ rarely appears on page 1, so when the *WSJ* devotes as much ink to this as to a new constitution for the European Union, it merits our attention. At the media pantheon level, the rarefied atmosphere of the *New York Times*, *WSJ*, *Times of London*, or the broadcast networks, such stories either relate a momentous event (like the high-tech restoration of the organ at Notre Dame of Paris), the unique curiosity of an insider (Craig Whitney's book and attention it garnered), or something just sensational, even weird (*WSJ*'s Cage story). Local papers are more likely to notice the daily doings ("St. Fidget's Takes Delivery of New Pipe Organ—Lucky Lottery Ticket Pays \$900,000 Price Tag"). Of course, no manner of inanity has ever evaded the media, and we hardly need to recapitulate the ubiquitous double entendres. If only headline editors would cease using the verb "to erect."

The Cage story is more about cultural phenomena than the organ. Heinz-Klaus Metzger has headed up an effort to "perform" this Cage score, which piece celebrates in the extreme the organ's ability to sustain tone. So ASLSP could really mean "until the mice eat the bellows," or "I want a rebuild with a 256-level combination action and MIDI," or until some maniac really does drop a nuke. Metzger and assistants have taken over an abandoned church in Halberstadt, a building used as a pig sty until recently (is that classically unreconstructed East German or what?), and have begun a performance of *Organ2* that they calculate will last 639 years. Exactly how their metronome ticks is unclear, but this much is: the organ has not yet been built. But, since Cage opens the score with a rest, what's the rush?

Technology meets tradition meets the cutting edge. This project began with a solar-powered blower. What an idea! Imagine all those five-manual organs in California, Florida and Texas roaring away with power to spare while the poor village organist in Barrow, Alaska sits staring at the one igloo wall from October through May. Team Metzger is building the organ while the Cage piece plays (sounds just like a dedicatory recital). The first notes sounded in February and two more notes will join the chord in 2004.

Backers have begun to support the project. A thousand Euros will sponsor a year of *Organ2*. Corporations have been slow in giving grants (another sign that the '90's are done), but one electrical contractor has pledged 1000 Euros a year for the life of the project. It's a shame Metzger can't collect that up front: 639,000 Euros would buy a tidy little organ today and there's no telling what inflation might do in another half millennium or so.

Is this humorous? Sure. Cracked? Of course not. In Cage, silence and stasis speak significantly and seriously. Sound and silence, in any configuration, denote something musical and, pushed to the margins, they can trap us dead in our tracks. Ever try your own version of the silence game? You are playing that wedding from Hell where the terms "liturgically appropriate" and "Kenny G." have gotten confused. You begin the prelude and the revelers in the pews only talk louder, laugh, tell jokes, shout, and otherwise inundate the poor *Viole Celeste*. So you begin the subtle crescendo – flutes, couplers, principals, octaves, mutations, the oboe, mixtures, finally... *les anches!* Then, with sardonic smile and anticipation overflowing, you release the chord! It takes a full 3 seconds for the screeching to halt. Cage was right after all.

The Halberstadt story is not a question of the musical validity of John Cage or the silliness of trying to make an organ play non-stop for six centuries. It is, rather, about the uncomplicated courage of musicians like Heinz-Klaus Metzger to make daring leaps, so daring that even the *Wall Street Journal* notices it above the fold, at least on a slow hot day in July. In a conformist, careful, world, where are our next Cages and Metzgers?

- Haig Mardirosian