

SCALING THE ALPS

What links 1435 with 2012? An unbroken line of organ building in Switzerland. The ISO congress demonstrated that there is far more to this country's powers of inventiveness than cuckoo clocks; **Maggie Hamilton** reports

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ISO AND MAGGIE HAMILTON

'I don't really know what this is,' said the Benedictine monk, 'but I'm told you can enlighten me.' On the table lay a first edition of *L'art du facteur d'orgues* (The Art of the Organ Builder) by Dom Bédos, while a group of ISO congress participants drew in their breath and pressed in from all sides (pictured below).

We were in the library at Einsiedeln Monastery in Switzerland, an elegant baroque room lined floor to ceiling with historic books. This was only the first full day of the International Society of Organbuilders congress, yet it felt like the third, so many rich experiences had already been packed into the programme. A hundred ISO participants, representing 60 organ building firms of the society's 270-strong membership and coming from Australia and New Zealand, the USA and Canada, and spanning the length and breadth of Europe, congregated in Zurich

on 29 July, to be treated to a recital on the IV/67 Orgelbau Metzler instrument (1960) in the Grossmünster, followed by dinner in the Zunfthaus zur Schmiden, one of the medieval guild houses that line the River Limmat running into Lake Zurich.

This juxtaposition of new and old was a taster of the week ahead, a journey through time that unravelled the story of Swiss organ building over nearly 600 years, beginning in 1435 and the oldest playable organ in the world, the I/8 organ in Sion Valeria Basilica (rest. Orgelbau Kuhn, 1954/Orgelbau Füglistner, 2004). Moving forward to 1600 was an exquisite collection of historical instruments gathered specially for the occasion from museums and private houses around the country into an elegant baroque music room in the Haus 'zur Schipf' Herrliberg, restored by Goll, Kuhn, and curators Adrian Steger and Ferdinand Stemmer. New organs in

17th-century cases were represented by Kuhn (Lucerne Hofkirche St Leodegar, V/81, 1972-77) and Goll (the Sebald Manderscheidt organ in the Franciscan Church, Lucerne, III/34, 1988), and in late baroque cases by the Orgelbau Mathis organs (the II/34 Marienorgel, 1988, and the IV/62 Mauritiusorgel, 1994) in Einsiedeln Monastery. Restored romantic instruments included the II/25 chancel organ in Lucerne's Hofkirche (rest. Kuhn, 2003), the IV/61 Aloys Mooser organ in Fribourg's St Nicolas Cathedral (rest. Neidhart & Lhôte, 1982), and the II/28 Friedrich Goll organ in SS Peter and Paul, Berne (rest. Goll/Wälti, 2011). We moved into the 20th century with a 1926 Welte organ, complete with rolls, in Schloss Meggenhorn (rest. Kuhn, 1987); and a line in new instruments that look and sound as clean and crisp as the mountain air, including the Mondrianesque II/17 Wälti organ (2004) in the Reformed Church in Wabern, a I/4 chest organ (2006) by Peter Meier, that – together with a recorder, violin and cembalon – played traditional ▶



The oldest playable organ in the world: Sion Valeria Basilika Anon (1435), Christoph Aeby (1685), Kuhn (rest. 1954), Füglistner (rest. 2004)





Table positive organ, Rätisches Museum Hof, Chur Anon (16th century), Kuhn (rest. 1986)



Fribourg, St Nicolas Cathedral Aloys Mooser (1834), Neidhard & Lhôte (rest. 1982)



Einsiedeln Monastery, choir organ Victor Ferdinand Bossart (1754), Mathis (rest. 1987)

Chest organ Peter Meier (2006)



◀ dance music one lunchtime on a farm; the II/17 Goll organ in the Dreikönigskirche in Visp, completed only last year; and the futuristic III/5 Prototype III (Peter Kraul Orgelbau, arising from an ongoing research project dating from 1999).

In a country with four official languages and distinctly different characteristics spread over the 26 cantons, is it possible to talk about a national style of organ building? Simon Hebeisen, joint director of Orgelbau Goll and the president of the 2012 congress, responded: 'The Italian-speaking part of Switzerland is historically seen as an Italian space; most of the organs are by



Italian builders and maintained by them. So organ builders in northern Switzerland don't have much chance to work in Ticino. The French Swiss builders are historically influenced by French organ builders; but at the moment Manufacture d'Orgues Saint-Martin also build in the Italian style, or German romantic style. Swiss-German organ builders sometimes build a French romantic instrument or a French classical instrument, so this straight stylistic thing is no longer here. The firm with the clearest guidelines in the neo-baroque style is Metzler – they have stayed with the tradition of neo-baroque style up to today.

'I would say Swiss organ building is regarded on a high level internationally. Swiss companies build in quite distinct aesthetics from builder to builder, and I'm happy about this. We have good relationships with each other, even though we are sometimes in competition; but in the Swiss organ builders conference, and collaborating for this conference, there is very good cooperation. It has changed since previous generations, when they didn't really exchange anything: they didn't have the opportunity to visit another builder's workshop, they couldn't have a look at another builder's organ [a situation not confined to Switzerland, by all accounts]. But that has all changed in the last 15-20 years. The new generation is much more open to exchange of ideas – open-mindedness is characteristic of Swiss organ builders.'

As a rich country, Hebeisen went on to explain, Switzerland commissioned many new instruments in recent decades: 'Over the last 25-30 years, many new organs have been built: in each little chapel, every church, every cathedral, there is either a new instrument or a beautifully restored historic instrument. All the churches had



Lucerne Culture and Convention Centre KKL
Goll (2000)



Berne Münster, Prototype III
Peter Kraul (2004)

the money to pay for a new instrument; if they had an old organ, they just threw it out and bought a new one. This can also be dangerous: many valuable, beautiful historic instruments were thrown away, just because the money was there to replace them – many of them pneumatic. And also late 19th-century mechanical cone chests: we only have about 10-12 of these instruments left in the country because we had the money to replace them. So it's dangerous to have enough money to throw away, or to indeed to change, an instrument

according to fashion.'

As always at ISO gatherings, equally valued as learning about the organ culture of the country hosting the congress was the opportunity for builders – normally scattered around the globe – to come together and discuss issues relevant to their profession. Inevitably, a recurrent theme this year was the financial depression. Its effect on business was being felt almost ▶





Schlosskapelle Meggenhorn
Welte (1926), Kuhn (rest. 1987)

◀ across the board as prospective commissioning bodies (largely churches) hesitated before signing contracts, and orders for new organs were being superceded by requests for restoration and maintenance work (see the address by John Mander, ISO president). Even Switzerland – not a member of the EU nor in the Eurozone – has been adversely affected, both by business shrinking on a global scale, and more specifically by the strength of the Swiss franc. Hebeisen explained: ‘Our problem is not so much within the Swiss borders, but we all also work in other countries, and at the moment the exchange rate is a real problem for us – the Swiss franc is much too high, and that makes our instruments too expensive for other countries. There’s not enough work in Switzerland alone for us now: because so many new instruments were built in Switzerland in the last 25-30 years, they will not be replaced for the next 50 years. There will be maintenance, tuning, for sure, but the business of building new instruments is shrinking. So as Swiss organ builders we

need to work elsewhere. Up to six years ago this wasn’t a big problem because the quality of Swiss organs was held in very high esteem, and we could sell to Germany, Portugal, Norway, wherever – and we could convince people that it was worth buying a Swiss organ because of the very high quality. But now, although the instruments are still of very good quality, with the current exchange rate the price is 20 per cent higher than two or three years ago for exactly the same project, and that’s too much. The different firms try different strategies to compensate for this, but it’s really hard – it’s impossible to deliver the same quality for 20 per cent lower price, because it’s not about the cost of materials; around 80 per cent of the cost of an organ is working hours, and you can’t change the rate of pay for your employees – and I wouldn’t want to, because they work so well. We still tender if asked, but if we don’t have a really close personal contact with, say, the organist or to a consultant, we don’t stand a chance. We work hard to put together a proposal but it will be thrown

Extract from the ISO president’s address, including an update on the issue of lead in organ pipes



Dark storm clouds hang over Europe, of the sort very few of us here have experienced before. It is not my intention to deliver another lecture on the economic situation, but I think we will all be in agreement that things are far from rosy and as yet, there is no real sign of light at the end of the tunnel. I am minded to mention the sad demise

of the pipemakers Giesecke only recently, a firm whose history extends back over more than 150 years – it is surely a reflection of the times we live in. It is inevitable that these developments have an effect on us all, and the craft of organ building in general.

I, and the ISO board, are well aware that it might appear that we have been inactive over the past two years. We have not been able to organise a single workshop. One reason for this is that many of us are feeling the effects of the recession and working so hard at maintaining our workshops, that there is little time to be diverted onto other matters. I am pleased to say that a workshop is being planned for next year in London, to look at a series of restored organs from different times and by different builders.

Another reason why we were not able to spend time organising workshops was the EU lead in organ pipes issue... this issue was raised some years ago and effectively laid to rest, and it was decided that organs should be left outside the scope of any legislation. One crucial alteration to the definition of what should be included arose with the second stage of this legislation, the principle of homogeneity. This principle dictated that any piece of equipment was to be considered as a whole and anything that used electricity in any form would not be allowed to contain lead, together with a few other substances. It was not the intention that organs should be pulled back into the scope of the legislation, but the interpretation of this inevitably brought pipe organs back into the scope. Once we became aware of this, we immediately made contact with the relevant authorities to find out what could be done about this. The answer was that an impact assessment had to be drawn up to find out and analyse the effect that this legislation would have on pipe organs... we were informed that an impact assessment was to be carried out by a firm based in Paris on behalf of the EU... A draft impact assessment was produced, which stated two main reasons why organ building should be excluded from the legislation. The first of these was that in terms of the overall intention of the ban on lead, organ building featured to such a miniscule extent that it was effectively irrelevant and could be ignored. The second, even stronger, point was the impact that banning the use of lead in organ pipes would have on one of the most important cultural heritages of Europe.



Zürich Grossmünster
Metzler (1960)

out in the first round.’

So, some tough times ahead and it would be easy to lose hope. But it’s in the more difficult times that a network like the ISO is even more important, giving builders support, encouragement, practical ideas, and – perhaps most importantly – a sense that they are not alone. In the UK over the last two years there has been too much political capital rather cynically wrought from the tired mantra of ‘we’re all in this

together’. By contrast, the ISO really does put flesh on this concept; as on previous occasions, I was impressed by the mutual caring and respect – members know how to listen attentively and to respond thoughtfully to each other, which, alongside the superb programme balancing work and fun put together by the organising committee, left them feeling strengthened and invigorated by the end of congress. ■
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Wabern Reformed Church
Wälti (2004)

On 6 July, the impact assessment was presented to the European Commission. At this point, there is absolutely nothing more we can do. This now rests with the commissioners who are expected to produce a document outlining their reaction to the impact assessment shortly before the deadline for doing so, which is not until July 2014.

Regarding combination organs: the wording of the current Statement on Electronic Tone Generators stated that the document should be used as guidance to the board in deciding who should be admitted to the ISO as members. Unfortunately, this led to an ambiguity whereby it was suggested that the document did not apply to firms that were already members of the ISO. It is my belief that this was not the intention of the original document, but that it should apply to all existing members of the ISO and not just those applying for new membership. We have, therefore, produced a document that we hope clarifies this and a number of other points and at some stage you will be asked to vote on this to decide whether or not we wish to adopt this.

Finally, I would like to express my thanks to all the board members of the ISO for their assistance and in particular their advice. There are times when I need to be advised and I am pleased to say that some members of the board are not reticent in pointing out when I am about to make a big mistake. In particular, there are three members of the board to whom I would like to express my special thanks, and these are your secretary, Göran Grahn, your editor, Klaus Rensch, and your treasurer, Guido Schumacher.

And from the president's speech at the final banquet...

Ladies and gentlemen, fellow organ builders,
First of all and on behalf of you all, I want to thank Simon Hebeisen and his team for organising and realising a simply wonderful congress, run like a piece of Swiss clockwork, and one we will all remember for a very long time [Rapturous and lengthy applause]. I don't think I need to say any more about that, as your applause really says it all.

In my president's report, I mentioned the problems we organ builders are facing, along with many other people. After this wonderful congress where we have all been exchanging thoughts and ideas, and seeing so much of interest in the organ world of Switzerland, I want to return to us and the purpose of the ISO. The ISO is there so that organ builders can cooperate and help each other. In times of recession, the temptation is to turn inwards, to batten down the hatches in the face of a pending storm and above all to keep any secrets we may have for ourselves. I do not believe that is the right way forward for us. This is the time we need to help each other where we can and to make things better for us all. These are the founding principles of the ISO.

I would like to paint you a vignette to illustrate this. If ten organ builders get together and each gives all the others a good idea, each one, for a payment of one idea, will receive in return nine others. I would suggest that is a very good return and something well worth bearing in mind.

John Pike Mander