

Thirty-three and fancy-free

An appraisal of the new organs in St John's College Chapel, Oxford (Aubertin, France, 2008)
and Jesus College, Cambridge (Kuhn, Switzerland, 2007) – Paul Hale



Jesus College case

Imagine you had permission to commission an organ of around thirty-three speaking stops for your Oxbridge College chapel. No PCC to worry about; no DAC to consult; no lack of funding; no need to keep the old organ. Sounds rather like being a child in a sweet-shop doesn't it? Except that it isn't like that at all for one is faced with the dread question 'what is the organ for?' It's at that point the real challenge becomes apparent.

The college chapels of the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge form two unique groups of ecclesiastical buildings. Nowhere else in the world is there such a collection of heavily-used, well-endowed Church of England spaces, provided with clergy, choirs and organs. At Oxford there are thirty-nine colleges; thirty-one at Cambridge. Virtually all (except a few of 20th-century foundation and, notably, the mid-15th century chapel of All Souls' College, Oxford) contain organs. In days gone by, these organs had but a simple role: to accompany the singing of the collegiate body at the obligatory daily services and to accompany the college or chapel choir, where there was one. In time, members of college ceased being obliged to attend chapel, so that left the choirs. Of the choirs, most were voluntary groups of undergraduates; a few retained their mediæval choir schools (St John's and King's at Cambridge, Christ Church, Magdalen and New College at Oxford) and thus sang daily services of cathedralesque nature. In the second half of the 20th century choral scholarships were founded at most colleges, along, of course, with organ scholarships, an inevitable and happy outcome of the establishing of Music as an Honours degree in its own right at both Universities. In recent years more and more colleges have taken to employing full-time directors of music; thus has been seen

Jesus College Chapel organ specification

GREAT ORGAN		SWELL ORGAN		SWELL ORGAN (cont.)		PEDAL ORGAN	
Bourdon	16	Geigen Diapason	8	Nazard	2 $\frac{2}{3}$	Subbass (large scale stopped wood)	16
Open Diapason	8	Lieblich Gedact	8	Octave	2	Violone	16
Harmonic Flute	8	Salicional	8	Tierce	1 $\frac{3}{5}$	Lieblich Bourdon*	16
Stopped Diapason	8	Céleste (TC)	8	Plein Jeu 15.19.22.26	IV	Principal	8
Gamba	8	Dolce	8	Trumpet	8	Stopped Diapason*	8
Principal	4	Principal	4	Oboe	8	Gamba*	8
Flute (open)	4	Chimney Flute	4	Tremulant		Octave	4
Quinte	2 $\frac{2}{3}$					Posaune	16
Fifteenth	2					Trumpet*	8
Mixture 15.19.22.26	IV						
Trumpet	8						
Tremulant							
		Couplers					
		Swell to Great	Swell to Pedal super	Great to Pedal			
		Swell to Great sub	Swell to Pedal				

* by transmission from the Great

the burgeoning of first-rate mixed choirs singing at a professional standard. Chapel music at the two ancient English universities has never flourished more – something of a paradox as a majority of college Fellows are agnostic at best.

To what purposes, then, are the organs of the college chapels put today, at the start of the 21st century? It would seem pretty clear from the above that any college with musical accomplishments might aspire to accompany its choir in a wide repertoire, to hear organ music of all periods, and to be able to teach its organ students on as comprehensive an instrument as possible. To fulfil all these requirements each organ would need to be large and expensive – clearly out of the question for all but a tiny number of chapels, most of which have room for no more than a two-manual or modest three-manual organ. To take each university as a whole, there should ideally be a great variety of instruments, so that many historical styles, periods and builders are represented, along with a body of truly historic instruments carefully conserved. Yet each college is autonomous and need pay no heed at all to what is going on in other chapels.

Choices, therefore, need to be made, and they currently come down to these:

- 1 an organ whose primary purpose is choral accompaniment,
- 2 an instrument which is an historic copy of one particular builder (Smith, Silbermann, Cavaillé-Coll, Schnitger, Hill – enthusiasms in academic circles move on every ten years or so),
- 3 a general purpose, eclectic organ for teaching and recitals, or
- 4 an organ which expresses simply that which its craftsman-creator chooses – in other words, the only non ‘committee’ organ in our list.

When assessing new Oxbridge organs all these factors need to be considered – no organ can really be seen as an island by the discerning musical public who will inevitably make comparisons as well as value judgements.

These lengthy musings are a necessary introduction to the two projects under scrutiny, for though both projects may have started out with similar aims, the roads to completion have led in strikingly different directions.

The first of these two organs to be completed was that in Jesus College chapel, where the new Kuhn replaces a Mander of 1971 (which has found a new home) and complements the historic 1849 ‘Sutton’ organ in the adjacent arch. Writing to me of the thought-processes behind this organ, College Director of Music, Daniel Hyde, says:

‘We wanted an organ that was going to withstand almost constant use during term-time. It needed to be as versatile as possible, first and foremost as an excellent accompanimental instrument for the wide-ranging chapel liturgy, in addition to providing stimulus as a teaching and recital instrument. The decision to have a wealth of foundation colours at 8ft pitch reflects not only my love of the romantic repertoire, but also the need for variety within such a small chapel. The scaling of these foundation colours has proved so successful that the acoustic of the chapel resonates all the more for it. That being said, the clever spacing and voicing of the upperwork means that the organ can sound thoroughly convincing not only in the romantic repertoire, but also in the strident, North German baroque literature. As for the console design, the need to

train organ scholars in the art of registration was considered above all else, and the thoroughly ‘English’ layout of divisional and general pistons both in-between the manuals and as toe-studs reflects this. Whilst there is a sequencer which advances through the generals, the plethora of divisional pistons enables one to change stops one by one, getting the most colour and variety from the instrument.’

The design criteria are made pretty clear by this. A glance at the stop-list will show how these aims are expressed.

Note the presence of five 8ft flues on the Swell and the absence of a 16ft reed. Note also the derivation of several Great stops to the Pedal – necessary because of the constricted space available. Space was a huge problem in 1971 for Mander, who, unlike Kuhn, was unable to use the floor space beneath the organ loft (except for the blower). Kuhn places his building-frame at ground level, along with the soundboard for the Pedal 16ft registers, other Pedal stops sharing the Great soundboard or being transmitted from Great stops. Despite having this extra space and height, Kuhn opts for a small-scale, bearded wooded Violone driven really hard as his open 16ft flue. Though one misses the ‘cathedral roll’ of an English Open Wood (partly supplied by the large scale stopped Subbass), the Violone compensates for that by acting in place of a soft Pedal 16ft reed. It has another cunning role: the Swell *tutti* is obtained by coupling to the Great at unison and sub-octave pitches, though the bottom octave is obviously missing. The Violone fills in the bottom octave with reed-like tone deceiving the ear into believing the organ to have a 16ft Swell reed. This combination is so effective that one scarcely notices the lack.



Jesus College console

The room gained in the Swell is given over to five 8ft flues. As Daniel Hyde demonstrates the organ one immediately hears how cleverly these ranks have been scaled and voiced: each works in combination with the others, every pairing producing a fresh timbre. For accompanimental use these five stops are worth their weight in gold, as are indeed the four 8ft flues on the Great (eight of these nine ranks run right down to bottom C – no grooved basses here). This richness at 8ft is clarified with slightly brighter 4ft ranks and with distinctly brighter 2ft ranks and mixtures. Thus the blended subtle accompanimental or solo tones at 8ft pitch are lifted up into a pair of rich satisfying choruses, with cleverly varied mixtures pitched high enough to add controlled brilliance and low enough to break back and reinforce the lower chorus ranks.

The flutes are a delight, each having its own character. The same applies to the four reed ranks: the Great Trumpet is the brightest, yet it still has body, being of a good scale. The Swell Trumpet has more sonority and richness and the Oboe has character without being coarse. The Pedal Posaune (metal) blends very well with larger combinations and does not need to be reserved for the *tutti*.

The console is comfortable, once one has become accustomed to a straight, slightly concave, pedalboard set well back from the UK norm. The weight of touch is just right with the manuals uncoupled, playable with the unison coupler and rather heavy with the sub-octave coupler. I found the feel of the action a touch less crisp than I had expected, doubtless because the console is at right-angles to the soundboards.

The casework at first glance appears to have had little design time expended upon it; mature reflection in the chapel, observing it from all angles and – essentially – in context with the ‘Sutton’ organ case alongside, brings a different conclusion. Its restrained features (though spot those inverted pipes) sit quietly alongside the 1849 case, allowing that to dominate artistically. The angles of the pipe-shades and pipe mouths match those of the Sutton to avoid clashing; the wooden slats are necessary to ensure tonal egress. Actually, tonal egress is just about perfect, the organ not being overwhelming in the choir stalls yet filling the chapel with rich, blended sound. The Swell, set well back in a supremely effective enclosure, has a particularly atmospheric ambience, ideal for accompaniment and for much Romantic repertoire, yet with the box open is a perfect balance for the Great.

The overall impression one gains of this organ is that it is an intelligent fusion of the concepts of its commissioners (the College, David Sanger and – particularly – Daniel Hyde), devised and refined for a specific aim: choir accompaniment – with solo use running a close second. The choice of firm was inspired by the perception of Kuhn as a company who always manage to make their organs a perfect match for the buildings for which they are designed, coupled with a standard of build and finish second to none, and with an affinity for the warmer, more romantic end of modern organ-building.

And now to Oxford, where St John’s College (cradle of Peter Philips and the Tallis Scholars) has replaced its much rebuilt old west-end organ with a new one from Bernard Aubertin, whose workshop sits in French countryside about 150km west, as the crow flies, from Kuhn’s factory at Männedorf. And a very different sort of workshop it is. Kuhn inhabits a large modern plant, much like Harrison & Harrison or J.W. Walker (when at Brandon) in the UK, employing some 45 people in total. Projects are managed by teams, so several organs can be going through the factory at once. Aubertin, in complete contrast, is more of a ‘craft’ organ-builder, working with his team of about 12 on a single major project and being personally

responsible for the design concepts (tonal and physical), the casework (design and execution) and the voicing and regulation. Each organ is a personal statement by him – a sort of take-it-or-leave-it approach which wins admirers through the numerous spectacular successes he has had in recent years. One such devotee is Nigel Allcoat, who writes:

‘After the small committee of Drs Higginbottom (New College), Flood (Canterbury Cathedral and ex-St John’s Organ Scholar), and Marlow (Trinity College, Cambridge) had evaluated builders and tenders on behalf of the College, the brief given to Bernard Aubertin was to construct an instrument that would be of the highest international artistic and musical worth, and one also that

would mirror the very best he had constructed throughout France. All agreed that an instrument displaying such a musical pedigree would without doubt be able to play accompaniments. Therefore this organ was designed primarily by its creator to play centuries of repertoire and then to provide for the Liturgy. The greatest challenge for an organ builder is how to use the intimacy of the chapel to its optimum advantage – one of the problems of previous instruments. This is an astonishing modern musical essay that excites and stimulates both visually and aurally and meets that challenge with uncompromising artistic bravura.’

So, in entrusting Bernard Aubertin with creating a new organ for St John’s, the college and their associate Nigel

Allcoat were putting themselves entirely into Aubertin’s hands – a quite different approach from the ‘hands-on’ project at Jesus College, where every detail was discussed and refined by all parties. A glance at the scheme will show it to be typically Aubertin, with its Portunal, Buzène, Traversières, Franco/German choruses, basic console (hand-written stop labels) with no playing aids, shove



St John's College console

St John's College Chapel organ specification

GREAT (II)	
Portunal	16
Montre	8
Flûte	8
Gambe	8
Prestant	4
Flûte	4
Doublette	2
Mixture	IV–VI
Trompette	8
Tremulant (also to I)	
I to II (by shove coupler)	
III to II (by drawstop)	
POSITIF (I)	
Portunal	8
Bourdon (wood)	8
Montre	4
Flûte (chimney flute)	4
Nazard	3
Flageolet	2
Tierce	1 3/5
Mixture	III
Voix Humaine	8
Tremulant (also to II)	
RÉCIT (III)	
(unenclosed)	
Traversière (wood, harmonic)	8
Flûte (wood)	4
Quint	1 1/3
Cornet	III
(enclosed)	
Viole	8
Unda Maris (TC)	8
Salicet	4
Dulcimeau	8
Tremulant	
PEDALE	
Bourdon	16
Octave	8
Bourdon	8
Prestant	4
Mixture	2 + III
Buzène	16
Sacqueboute	8
II to Pedale (by toe lever)	
Appel for Great Trompette	
Appel for Pedal Buzène	
Récit Cornet sounds from c# on short pull and from c on full pull.	
Pedale Mixture sounds 2ft on short pull and III on full pull.	
Compass: 56/30	
Tuning unequal (Young 1/6th comma)	



St John's College organ

coupler, etc. A glance at the case will reveal it also to be typically and wonderfully Aubertin – his slender towers, sharp angles, beautiful untreated oak, and flights of fancy such as ‘flame’ shaped mouths of dominant case pipes, with whimsical decorative devices abounding. Aubertin concerns himself with the design and often the execution of every last detail: here he built the gallery floor (also oak) and made all the ironwork. Everything was accurate to the millimetre: the organ was built, voiced and regulated in the workshop, ‘opened’ with great fanfare and much wine, then dismantled and in January 2008 re-assembled in ten days in the chapel, which it fitted perfectly – even around the roof trusses which go right through the *Grande-orgue*.

To accommodate the organ and to create access to the new gallery, the College cleverly moved the return stalls east by about a metre, thus creating a space between them and the screen wall at the west end of the chapel, within which a staircase now snakes up to the organ loft.

The differences between the Jesus and St John's organ are clearly legion, nowhere more obvious than in the case design. The St John's case causes one to gasp when, turning west in the chapel, one beholds it for the first time. It repays a whole day's study, so much lively detail does it possess. Immaculate in execution it is a real work of art in itself – all in hand-planed Burgundian oak, inside and out.

The interior finish of the organ is a little more ‘relaxed’: everything is about function rather than form, and is finished sufficiently to work well but no more. Just as outside the organ, so within are imaginative design features – too numerous to list here, though the sight of the unique action to the tiny swell-box is one to bring a smile to the beholder. The console is uncompromising: no angled jambs or recessed concave pedalboard here. This organ demands much of the player, especially when playing on the light, suspended key and pedal action.

What of the sound? Aubertin has a remarkable ear: he assesses a building, taking days to do so, then builds, voices

and finishes an organ in his workshop, simply installing it and touching up the tuning *in situ* – no detailed tonal regulation on site but making intimate adjustments throughout the following months when he visits. In this he is probably unique, for many ‘art’ builders spend a great deal of time on site doing much of the voicing and all the tonal finishing.

Does the Aubertin approach work? Well, on the basis of this organ the answer is ‘yes’ in as much as he has calculated scales and power levels perfectly, but ‘no’ in as much as some of the stops whose speech is more tricky to get right (and this organ is full of them) need further attention. I visited only days after its installation; doubtless a return visit by M. Aubertin when the organ has settled down will accomplish this.

The Principal choruses are magnificent – clear, singing, bright yet not strident. The flutes are beguiling and brimming with character. The chorus reeds and Voix humaine do their job well; about the experimental Dulcimeau I’m not so sure! The *Récit* (historically a French solo manual) is an intriguing department with a use that will undoubtedly become more evident with constant playing in the Chapel. It certainly has roots in the 17th and

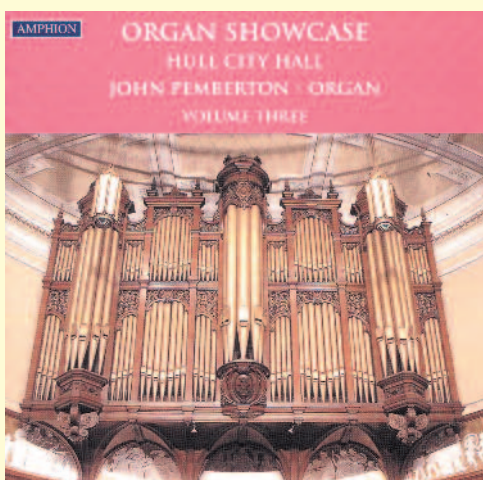
18th-century French *Récits* (Souvigny’s Clicquot having 8 IV 8). It is then married to the semi-enclosed English departments of around 1800 (St Alban’s, Macclesfield). At St John’s it becomes a fusion of cultures and traditions devised by Aubertin to provide musical versatility – and registrational challenges.

One might expect an organ builder from France to be building in a French style. This is not really the case with Aubertin, as his training included Germanic influences. There is an unexpected narrowness to the scales which gives a more north German tinge to the choruses and mutations, with a nod perhaps towards the English work of such builders as Snetzler. But to define Aubertin’s work with reference to any national school is quite impossible; equally to compare his case designs with any national school or period is pointless: Bernard Aubertin is a unique creative force crafting unique instruments which will generate vigorous discussion for many years after their birth. This is one such organ and Oxford is immensely the richer for its advent.

On returning to our initial question ‘what is the organ for?’, and augmenting it with ‘and is it fit for purpose?’, one comes to the conclusion that the Kuhn is perfectly suited to its

purpose and as such will invite well-deserved admiration and help keep musical standards in the Chapel at a peak. The Aubertin, on the other hand, will create and inspire its own purpose, its own fresh chapel music tradition at St John’s, as it imposes a very particular discipline upon player and Music Director. One suspects that of the two instruments, the Aubertin will be the more hotly debated and the more eagerly visited, for years to come.

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