

From Robert Parkins

by Robert Parkins, University Organist, 1997

The significance of the new Brombaugh organ in Memorial Chapel extends far beyond that of a purely functional instrument to accompany services, although it will most certainly do that. Like the Flentrop organ installed in Duke University Chapel in 1976, it is an organ of national, even international, importance. Among a mere handful of modern meantone organs at American colleges and universities (including Berkeley, Oberlin, and Wellesley), the Brombaugh is further distinguished by its early Italian orientation. Moreover, the Chapel is one of the very few settings in this country that could be considered architecturally and acoustically ideal for this kind of instrument.

As a complement to the Chapel's Flentrop and Æolian organs, the Brombaugh will specialize in music written before the age of J. S. Bach. Keyboard literature of the 16th and 17th centuries is rich and varied, embracing a wealth of liturgical and secular music in a number of national styles. To be sure, the core of this instrument is a modest though complete organ in pre-18th-century Italian style, but a judicious expansion allows for the performance of late Renaissance and early Baroque repertoire of other schools — most notably the southern European countries — without disturbing the instrument's integrity.

Although thoroughly new, this organ sounds “old,” for in using the kinds of techniques and materials employed by the ancient builders, John Brombaugh has created an instrument that emulates the sound of antique organs. The sensitive mechanical action, flexible winding, low wind pressure, and historical pipe scalings all contribute to producing with crystalline clarity the kinds of sounds that would have been recognizable to composers like Cabezon, Frescobaldi, and Pachelbel.

However, there is one aspect in particular most likely to be perceived by the attentive listener as noticeably different: the historical meantone tuning. The pure thirds (and nearly perfect fifths) in the major triads will sound sufficiently comfortable, even inducing an uncommon sense of repose at final cadences. On the other hand, the low leading tones and the unequal semitones, most dramatically demonstrated in chromatic passages, may require some aural adjustment for 20th-century musicians and audiences. (We should remember, of course, that just a few decades ago even the now familiar sound of the harpsichord demanded a similar adaptation from those accustomed to hearing the music of Bach played only on the piano.)

Meantone temperament, an admittedly “undemocratic” system antedating the increasingly egalitarian currents of the 18th century, strongly favors certain intervals, chords, and keys over others. Consequently, some tonalities occurring in later music are rendered unusable in exchange for the purity of the commonly used “good” keys, bringing the balance of consonance and dissonance, central to the ethos of Renaissance and Baroque music, back into bold relief. Strict 1/4-comma meantone, the tuning system employed in the Brombaugh organ, is especially striking as it highlights the contrast between harmonious and discordant sonorities. Early keyboard music, often perceived as banal when filtered through the more homogeneous tonal palette of modern equal temperament, suddenly springs to life when the appropriate tuning system is restored.

Similarly, other ostensible limitations imposed by such a specialized period instrument are conducive to a more authentic musical performance. The dimensions of the manual keys, placement of the pedal keyboard, and fastidious attention to other historical details discourage anachronistic playing techniques and specious interpretations. As a corollary, the sensitive musician learns from direct experience with a historically based organ in a way that “armchair expertise” alone can never provide. Thus, the Brombaugh will undoubtedly prove to be an invaluable teaching tool as well as a beautiful musical instrument.

According to the precepts of historical performance practice, the appropriate instrument is a crucial element in translating the notated score — at best, an incomplete blueprint for the imaginative and thoughtful player — into an authentic musical performance. Enlightened scholars and performers regard it as axiomatic that no single organ can adequately reproduce the entire spectrum of a literature spanning more than six centuries. Duke University is now blessed with three remarkably different organs under one roof, collectively capable of handling a substantial segment of that literature. The Brombaugh, an exquisite addition to the Memorial Chapel, becomes one of the few organs in this country able to reproduce earlier music with uncompromised integrity and cogency, retrieving the lost sounds of well over 300 years ago.