

Profile: Jean Ferrard

*Belgian Organist,
Scholar and Teacher*

DAVID YEARSLEY

AFTER A GLORIOUS BIRTH IN the eighteenth century, the concept of the amateur became tarnished by connotations of dilettantism: if the market did not recognize and reward one's artistic inclinations then they literally were not worth anything. The entry on "Amateur" in Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* (1751-72) evokes the golden youth of the term. Here it is defined as someone with a "decided taste" for art (usually painting), and the article concludes with the observation that "we [the French] have our amateurs, the Italians their virtuosos." In this final phrase we in turn get a sense for how virtuosity — now implying astonishing technical skill at a musical instrument — still required the moral probity with which aesthetic feeling should be infused, unmotivated by the prospect of financial reward. Appreciation is not only an essential talent to be nurtured, but also an ethical posture to be practiced. The parallel *Encyclopédie* article on "Connoisseur" raises the stakes, arguing that only those who themselves practice the art can offer truly accurate judgments about it. To claim connoisseurly credentials, the excitement of the amateur must be refined by study. But the flood of eighteenth-century music publications directed at both Amateurs and Connoisseurs (*Kenner und Liebhaber*) documents that the two categories of enthusiasts could share a love for the same body of art.

The name of Johann Christian Bach and Carl Friedrich Abel's Professional Concerts, begun in 1769 in London, reflects a move away from the mixed events involving both paid musicians and amateurs that had dominated the city's musical salons. The German émigré organizers — themselves products of the guild-like family system that trained so many great eighteenth-century musicians before it was largely supplanted by professionally-staffed and -minded conservatories in the nineteenth century — meant to guarantee their customers that the admission price ensured high standards of execution. But Professionalism is a chilling word, one which puts a price on the moral impulse of the amateur. Salary and tips become the carrots and sticks for aesthetic

motivation; professional success and industry merely distract from true artistic advance.

One of the most energetic, expert, and wide-ranging musicians of our time, Belgian organist Jean Ferrard is both amateur and connoisseur. A lover of the arts and of life, Ferrard retired this past summer at the age of sixty-five from his post as Professor of Organ at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Brussels. Meeting him, one would have a hard time learning that he has occupied this prestigious position since 1992, or that he counts figures such as Jacques-Nicolas Lemmens, founder of the school of modern organ playing in francophone Europe, among his predecessors. Though ascended to the top of his profession, Ferrard is too much of an amateur in the best sense of the word — too interested in music and in others — to be bothered much with self-promotion.

An indefatigable teacher and performer, Ferrard covers vast expanses of Europe (enjoying the pleasures of train travel, having shed the encumbrance of his car last year) to play ingeniously conceived and compellingly executed concerts from Trieste to Copenhagen, from the low lands of Flanders to the Swiss Alps, on monuments to the instrument's history both great and small, from the late Gothic to the just-completed. His own encyclopedic knowledge of the organ's long history and its current, sometimes flagging, success in withstanding the centrifugal forces of modern culture derives not just from endless hours of youthful practice and countless concerts at dozens of instruments built over the last half-millennium, but also from his training in, and subsequent dedication to, musical scholarship. Holder of a degree in musicology from the Free University of Brussels, he has edited important volumes of organ music, several of them devoted to composers active in what is modern-day Belgium, a transitional zone, often a battleground, between Protestant and Catholic Europe. The Low Countries forged musical gold in the crucible of the Reformation, and used it to produce gleaming alloys that combine erudite counterpoint worthy of the Sistine chapel with austere Calvinist psalm settings, animated by the virtuosic style imported by recusant English organists.

Ferrard's edition (with Pieter Dirksen) of the music of Peeter Cornet, the early seventeenth-century organist at the sumptuous Hapsburg archducal court in Brussels, is a testament to the rigors of modern scholarship animated by the desire to have the best music of the past available for the best purposes of the present. To hear Ferrard play Cornet, his long-distant predecessor in Brussels, on one of the more recent of his many recordings — *Four Centuries of Belgian*

Organ Music — on the splendid modern organ in the city's Gothic Cathedral is to encounter a rare performer who has the ability to make the learned style as astonishing as flamboyant passagework. Ferrard turns what many players are deceived into thinking is reserved polyphony into a provocation, a challenge to a game of wits (which can be heard on the CD accompanying this volume).

And he turns a critical eye towards the venerable *Monumenta Musicae Belgicae* in which much of this music was collected. For example, the edition of the works of Carolus Luython, which appeared in 1938, includes a spectacular chromatic Ricercar treating its unrelenting subject in contrary motion. Ferrard heard a young organist play the piece in a concert and found the culmination of Luython's contrapuntal argument unconvincing and garbled. Studying the 1938 edition confirmed his unease. The Ricercar is transmitted in a manuscript now in Krakow, though still with its shelfmark (Mus. ms. 40316) from the Berlin State Library from whence it was taken after World War II. The manuscript also contains most of Peeter Cornet's music and, having produced that edition and owning a microfilm of the source, Ferrard was quickly able to establish that two leaves in the Luython work had been reversed. A deft realignment yielded Luython's magnificent oration in all its fluent glory. Ferrard's scholarly edition of the piece will soon be published, to join his volumes of the music of Lambert Chaumont, Peeter Cornet, and most recently in 2008, the lavish new edition of the *Liber Fratrum cruciferorum Leodiensium* (1617), a manuscript copied in Liège (and still housed in the university library there) which transmits many unique pieces by the English catholic émigré Peter Philips and his august Amsterdam contemporary Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck. Having completed this gorgeous volume, and having impressively ferreted out the full list of concordances for the repertory contained in it, Ferrard now turns his attention more fully to finishing his complete edition of the keyboard music of Abraham van den Kerckhoven.

As if all this performing, teaching, and scholarship weren't enough, Ferrard is one of our great music journalists, and it is here that the real force of his amateur spirit can be perceived. From 1965 until 1985 he worked for the French-speaking wing of Belgian National Radio (RTBF), rising to become the head of music and continuing through his tenure there to offer daily commentary on current musical events. Beginning in 1975 he produced the program "Magazine de l'orgue" with a new installment every week even after he had left his job at RTBF to dedicate himself more fully to teaching and playing. In 1996 he ended his radio days, and turned to print journalism, publishing the *Magazine de l'orgue* three times a year for the past decade.

With its ninety-first issue forthcoming, this journal is always full of free-wheeling, often humorous, and always trenchant commentary on the organ and related topics in music and culture. As with the best music criticism, one learns as much about the editor — his tastes and passions, his variable moods and the shadings of his observational wit, and his perennial dislikes and favorite targets — as about the vibrant musical culture he chronicles. Ferrard's unbuttoned, always engaging, style retains the spontaneity of radio. Given his many duties and interests, Ferrard does not have time to ponder. He tells you what he thinks, but always with a real flair never weighed down by his profound knowledge of music.

As a practicing musician who also has the talent and dynamism to serve as an indefatigable commentator on contemporary musical life, at the organ and elsewhere, Ferrard follows in the tradition of François-Joseph Fétis, himself an organist, journalist, and historian and the nineteenth-century founding director of the conservatory from which Ferrard has just retired. From that other predecessor at the conservatory, Lemmens, and no doubt from other more immediate sources as well, Ferrard inherited his love and fascination for the organ music of J. S. Bach. Even Bach's supposed penchant for number symbolism informs Ferrard's journalism: each issue of the *Magazine de l'orgue* culminates in a now-famous Interview composed of exactly fourteen questions — the sum of the letters of Bach's name. The amateur in Ferrard cannot stop there: one of his many collections is of fourteens (and forty-ones) in various fonts, forms, and materials. Ferrard's elegant nineteenth-century terraced house in the center of Brussels also boasts a fascinating and hilarious collection of busts of Bach, ranging in style from austere Teutonicism to goofy experimentalism and spanning the spectrum of emotional registers from religious veneration to crass exploitation.

Imbued with the fantastical imagination of the collector, Ferrard sees Bach and the organ everywhere. His email address offers an excellent example: jf@lemagazinedel.org — only Ferrard could spot in this utterly banal technocratic syllable an inadvertent reference to the King of Instruments.

Ferrard's recent CDs, like the one mentioned above, are published under the auspices of his non-profit organization, [*Sic*], whose ingenious name reflects the man's irreverent and irrepressible humor. The acronym stands for *Sauvegardes des Instruments de musique à Claviers* — Guardians of Keyboard Instruments. [*Sic*] also appears on other Ferrard projects such as his gorgeous little book of observations on, and grainy black-and-white photos of, the organ, entitled *Le plus impressionnant dans l'orgue est son silence* ... This collector's item comes

with an even smaller English version without the photos, which translates the title as *Most Impressive in the Organ is its Silence* ... The observations are in prose and poetry; presented in various formats, these pieces range in tone from the arch to the elegiac, and consider topics as diverse as the organist's shoes and the instrument's soul. The opening item is a poem:

From the forest it took the strongest trees,
Earth gave tin and lead,
Sheep offered their fleece,
And man, the wind ...

My lasting impression of Jean was formed in Bruges in the summer of 2006, when we served together on the jury for the organ competition in the famous early music festival that takes place each year in that perfectly preserved late Gothic city. After dinner my family and I were hopped up on *moules* and *pommes frites* and otherwise giddy after watching a street performer escape from a straitjacket in front of throngs of tourists in the town square. As we headed back to our hotel, one of my daughters tripped on the cobblestones and broke off a recently grown adult front tooth right in the shadow of the magnificent thirteenth-century Belfry. Never was a more postcard-perfect backdrop found for a vacation mishap that terrifies the parents and shocks the kids.

It was a Friday night in August when the vast majority of European dentists are at the beach. I picked up the fragment of the tooth, and we made it back to the hotel where I knocked desperately on Ferrard's door at around ten o'clock that same evening. I told him what had happened. "Bummer!" came his idiomatic response. Fluent in four languages, his linguistic gifts were sparked by the bilingual educational reforms that taught French-speaking school children Flemish in the more optimistic post-wars years of the bi-ethnic (tri-ethnic if you count the small German-speaking minority) Belgian state. Like many others Ferrard predicts that modern Belgium will decompose itself along ethnic lines; impatient with such atavistic divisions, he flies a Belgian flag from the third-storey of his house above the Rue du Trône.

Ferrard had headphones around his neck and a glass of genièvre in his hand. He beckoned me into the room. His computer was open on the desk next to a wooden box containing a few dozen CDs. After a numbing eight-hour day of listening to organists in the competition, he was busy reviewing the latest influx of recordings for *Magazine de l'orgue*. This amateurism is not to be confused with workaholicism: the joy in the task was written all over Ferrard's face. He got the Director of the Festival on the phone and by Saturday morning the

tooth was back together, the one remaining dentist in town agreeing to see my daughter in his office and charging his normal rate of forty euros for a procedure that would have been two or three hundred dollars in the USA.

And also by the following morning Ferrard was back at the jury table, the next issue of the *Magazine de l'orgue* sent off and ready to be printed.

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On the very day that Ferrard retired from the conservatory, fresh from his valedictory meeting, he met me at his house for this interview. Typical of his indefatigability, he recommended that we “get right to work.”

We went upstairs to his study, with its magisterial partner desk providing a platform for gentle scholarly chaos: stacks of books and correspondence, and kindred signs of work being done and work being avoided. Nearby a step up leads out through a glass door to the terrace overlooking the garden. The fourteen-foot walls of the study are dedicated to books and prints. There is a harmonium, and in the adjacent room along with still more books a three-manual practice organ and another harmonium. Tucked alongside is a book-lined bathroom with a library ladder that can be ascended from the seat of contemplation.

Since I was the last person to have been interviewed in the *Magazine de l'orgue*, it seemed fitting that I should then be the first to invite Jean to do the answering instead of the asking — in the format, of course, of fourteen questions.

David Yearsley You’ve just a couple of hours ago retired from the conservatory. What is the greatest advance in organ education that has taken place during your tenure?

Jean Ferrard The biggest improvement in higher music education has come about through the Erasmus program — a European system of student exchanges. I’ve been its coordinator for the Royal Conservatory in Brussels for the last four years, and I can tell you this aspect of my job involved vast amounts of organizational work. The Erasmus development is a product of the goals embodied in the Bologna Declaration of European educational reform and hopes to create a uniformity of level between all universities (and conservatories) of the twenty-seven countries of the European Union. This may not mean so much to the American reader, because from coast to coast in the U.S. there is essentially only one language and one system of education. But just think of the difference between a student of the organ in southern

Italy and in northern Germany. Indeed, the European context is dominated by diversity and wide disparities of level and quality across the educational system. Still more fundamentally, we have had to solve problems of language and institutional communication. For the time being our students may go abroad during one full school year and receive the same credits as if they had stayed at home. I hope this exchange will become a requirement for all students in the near future. One may also dream of a diploma for European organists which would entail studying four out of ten semesters in four different countries, and in this way becoming familiar with four different national or, even regional, schools of organ building, playing, and composing by acquiring the unique experience provided by the historic organs of these diverse and distant areas.

DY What is the biggest challenge facing organ studies?

JF The biggest problem I have experienced in recent years is related to what we have just discussed. This has to do with the fact that conservatories in Europe have a long tradition of not being very academic, and now that the Brussels Conservatory has been placed at the level of universities, many colleagues — mostly pianists and violinists of a certain age — complain that their students do not have enough time to practice their scales if they must also read some books. Happily, the director of the conservatory and some of the faculty — and I happily number myself among this group — are convinced that it doesn’t hurt a musician to be cultivated.

DY What are the most significant changes in approaches to organ playing that have taken place in your lifetime?

JF When I was a student the big novelties were Helmut Walcha’s recordings on historical organs, and Michel Chapuis playing *notes inégales*. This should be enough to let you judge the tremendous amount of progress we’ve made not only in interpreting early music, but also in applying the new attitudes about early music to repertoires of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

DY Who was your own most influential teacher?

JF Although I was Marie Claire Alain’s first student and studied with her for five years, and although I went for three successive years to the Haarlem Summer Academy, where I studied with Anton Heiler and Luigi Tagliavini, the most influential person for my own development as a keyboard player is someone with whom I had only had three weeks, and in that case I was simply an auditor of a workshop. This person was Gustav Leonhardt, and I never even played for

him. But he is the first person who drew my attention to the essential problem and potential of articulation.

DY You have been active as a journalist both on the radio and in print, as a teacher, musicologist, and performer. Could you say something about the interaction between these aspects of your life as a musician?

JF Some people say being an organist is nothing: they claim that you also have to sing, to play a bowed instrument, blow a recorder, and, if possible, conduct a little ensemble. As far as I am concerned, I have lived all my life around the organ doing only those things related to the organ, and I don't find myself unsatisfied or, I hope, unsatisfying to others.

DY What role does journalism play in fostering organ culture?

JF If what you are asking is why I bother with the *Magazine de l'orgue*, look around you this very moment at my library and ask yourself how a professor of organ could afford such a large collection of some five-thousand books on the organ, organists and the performance of its music and some four-thousand scores of organ music. The price to pay for this tremendous resource, which has always been at the disposal of all my students, is having to review some three-hundred CDs a year, of which more than two-hundred-and-fifty are not worth listening to. The books and scores I am much more inclined towards. Now that I don't have students any longer, I will keep doing it because keeping up with the organ world is a matter of life and death. If I stop working, I'll die.

DY You are an avid reader in and out of music, and a vivid, prolific writer. Are there particular authors or journalists that have inspired you most?

JF It would be pretentious for me to claim a literary model or journalistic inspiration. The only thing I know is that when I was in school I had the reputation for being a lazy or even bad student. I dare say I was such a non-stimulated pupil that my French teacher did not know that I could write at all because I never handed in the required monthly essay. But when I was eighteen and the last year of school rolled around, it came to the final exam, and I could not escape any longer. I duly produced a few pages which, much to the surprise of the teacher, were seen to be the best of the school. As a kid I read Jules Vernes, Raymond Queneau, Guillaume Apollinaire, Charles Dickens. Right now I am reading Irvin D. Yalom's *When Nietzsche Wept*. As for the organ: I read everything about it.

DY You are a committed and creative collector and your house is full of many fascinating things. Among these are: some eighty busts of Bach; antique

German coins that Bach could conceivably have held in his hands and had in his pockets; the number fourteen in a huge and fascinating variety of fonts and materials; images of the organ ranging from postcards and early engravings to recently commissioned works, all of which document the organological and social history of the instrument; letters, manuscripts, first editions, and various treasures of the early twentieth-century Belgian writer André Baillon of whose literary society you are a founding member; old postcards of Ixelles, your home borough, a photographic record going back to the last decade of the nineteenth century. Describe the collector's mentality.

JF In my kitchen hangs a frame that does not contain a painting but rather a series of old corkscrews, so that many of the visitors to this house will say: "Oh, you have a collection of corkscrews." But this is not a collection. It is a panoply. It is not a collection because it is finished.

DY Speaking of your collection: which among your many busts of Bach, the figure who is the central preoccupation of your musical life, is your favorite?

JF Perhaps the one that stands before you in my study. This stern statue belonged to my first organ teacher. It was on top of the two-manual and pedal Aeolian harmonium looking down at me when I took my first organ lessons in Brussels at the age of twelve. My audition piece on that day was Bach's little E minor Prelude and Fugue, BWV 533.

DY If you could only have one of your books, which would it be?

JF As always, I'd take my last buy, acquired at auction ten days ago: Correa's *Facultad orgánica* of 1626. This print even has some hitherto unknown pieces written into the unused tablature lines which occur in the volume. Among these pieces, which at this point appear to be unique, is what might well be the very first *Battaglia* ever committed to paper.

DY And if you had to spend your retirement at a single organ?

JF It would be Silbermann's masterpiece in the Petrikirche in Freiburg, Germany which I will play in September and October, and where I have made a recording of works by J. S. Bach. On this instrument one truly experiences the gravity which Bach himself cherished as the essence of the organ, its foundation.

DY I suspect that retirement for you will not be one involving restriction, but rather one that promises even greater possibility. What are your real plans for this next phase of your life?

JF Two other colleagues from the conservatory — this was a trio made up of three of the rare faculty members who hold university degrees — and I founded the degree of doctor in the arts with the University of Brussels a few years ago. Believe me, I didn't participate in this initiative for my own direct benefit, but since these people had the good sense to institute such an interesting and useful program, I'm going to use some of my new-found time to undertake it myself. In retirement I will earn my doctorate. And there's lots of other stuff to keep me busy. Aside from continuing to play many concerts and resuming production of the *Magazine de l'orgue*, the lion's share of my efforts will go towards completing this thesis. The work concerns seventeenth-century organ music of the Low Countries considered in the wider historical context of the emergent national schools of the period. Aside from its scholarly and interpretive apparatus, the dissertation will include a minimum of eight CDs recorded on historical instruments of England, France, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, and of course Belgium. Oh yes, and just before embarking on my doctorate, I want first to finish my complete edition of the works of Kerckhoven so that all the references discussed and recorded for the thesis will have been published by me. That should keep me busy, at least for a while.

DY You are the leading expert on this topic. Who dares to be your thesis advisor?

JF Funnily enough, my supervisor, who is now professor of music history at the Brussels Royal Conservatory and also teaches at the university, was my first organ student in the Belgium Music Academy, more than forty years ago. That is how long I've been around.

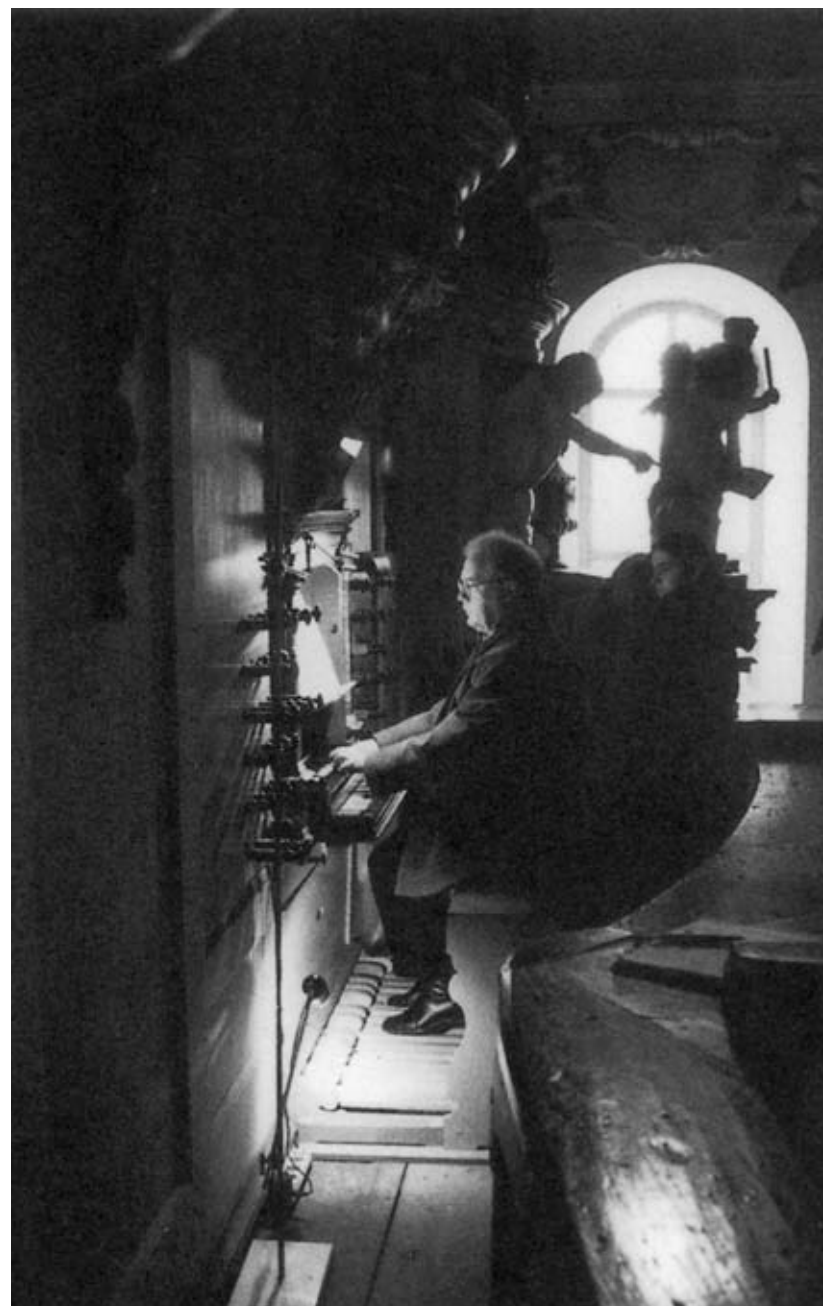
DY What are you doing tomorrow?

JF I'm going to the Bishop's Palace to discuss the fate of historic organs in the diocese. Then coming home and getting to work on the first electronic issue of *Magazine de l'orgue*.

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The following morning on the first full day of his retirement, Jean took me to the café on the Rue du Trône where he breakfasts. After a quarter of an hour or so a bus pulled past the window. Jean quaffed his espresso, wished me a safe journey home, grabbed his newspaper and backpack and jogged out the door. He jumped onto the bus and was off.

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Jean Ferrard, Photo: André Janssens



Photo: André Janssens, from Most Impressive in the Organ is its Silence...

PROSE-POEM XIX

Most Impressive in the Organ is its Silence...

FROM JEAN FERRARD
(Brussels: CFC-Éditions, 1999), p. 43

Contrary to popular belief, the organist is the most deprived of musicians. Unable to modulate the sound produced by his instrument, he cannot modify the intensity, the pitch or even the timbre with the flexibility and sensibility of a singer, a violinist or a flutist. The organist is poorer even than the pianist: unable to swell a sound or to sustain its length, the pianist can, however, by his touch, create nuances which the romantic composers used often to move their listeners. And, facing his audience, the pianist can transmit the most subtle inflexions by his presence, his gestures, his facial expression, his aura.

Hidden in the heart of his instrument, far from the audience to which he turns his back—although they aren't aware of it—the organist can only, by a simple pressure of finger or foot, open and close pallets which free the wind furnished by the bellows and let the pipes sing in the colour established once and for all by the voicer.

How, then, can the organist give meaning to the music? How can he make it more than a mechanical and mathematical reproduction of the musical text, like a barrel-organ does? His only tool, his sole means of expression is time. With infinitely small modifications of the length of sounds, with minute attention given to the tiny silences between notes, by a subtle and almost imperceptible game between sound and silence, despite his instrument's inertia, the organist manages to make the lines more flexible, to bring out the polyphonic entries, to give the melodies a singing quality. Paradox: the organist's sensibility is expressed by his intelligence more than by his soul.

This machine's miracle is that by the simple use of levers and systems governed only by the blind laws of mechanics, it is possible to fabricate emotion, to express feelings, to move the listeners and bring tears to their eyes.