

## Program notes by Joris Verdin

There is no single musical instrument with a history as clearly defined as that of the harmonium. Its existence is entirely linked to the musical expressiveness common in the period 1830-1930. Towards the end of the 18th century, a new wave of developments began in the world of keyboard instruments as, throughout Europe, people sought new solutions to the increasingly problematic issue of combining sustained sounds with dynamic expression. Organ builders such as Sébastien Erard experimented with special stops, piano makers developed new forms of the pianoforte, while the harpsichord and clavichord gradually disappeared altogether. None of the instrument makers found a solution which combined practicality and compactness with an instrument which was able to be produced on a large scale, and was comparatively durable. Equally, the instrument makers failed to find a manner of making the organ, or pianoforte, truly 'expressive'. Following various forms of the so-called 'orgue expressief', developed during the first decades of the 19th century, it was finally left to Alexandre François Debain to invent an instrument which would radically change the keyboard world. In 1842, he took out a patent on a keyboard instrument which he called the "Harmonium". It was the prototype of an instrument which would be spread throughout Europe, America and Asia during the subsequent 100 years. The characteristics of Debain's 'Harmonium' are as follows:

- i) The sound is formed by so-called free reeds (the same principle found in the accordion).
- ii) The wind is provided by a bellows system, manipulated by two pedals.
- iii) The instrument is played from a keyboard with a compass of five octaves.

iv) The variety of colour is made possible by a minimum of four stops.

In this manner, a keyboard instrument had been created which fulfilled the key desire of the time: a sound so supple as to make all variety of musical expression possible. Other instrument makers followed Debain's cue and made their own imitation models, initially under another name, but, following the expiry of the patent, also called 'harmonium'. The two most important firms were Alexandre, who utilised the modern concept of massed production and combined it with socially-responsible conditions for their employees, and Mustel, whose instruments testify to an extremely artistic and craft-driven approach, producing a limited number of 'perfect' instruments.

Victor Mustel was also responsible for the development of various new devices designed to increase the player's ability to manipulate the sound. This resulted in the ultimate "Orgue expressif", or "Harmonium d'Art", which made its entry into the homes of the more elite pianists and organists during the 1860s, without threatening the dominance of the classic model. This situation remained more or less constant until the instrument's disappearance in the middle of the 20th century. In this context, we should ignore the Anglo-American "reed organ" as well as the German "Saugluftharmonium" as these were primarily intended to replace the organ in small rooms for customers with limited financial means. The harmonium came into existence to fulfill the era's desire for an expressive keyboard instrument and not as a replacement for the organ, although this was a role into which it was often pressed. This must be considered a somewhat remarkable phenomenon:

the harmonium found itself in church due to such characteristics as stable tuning, limited size, a flexible sound with which to accompany a choir and also its limited need for maintenance. In this context, one should not forget that until the 20th century, the presence of an organ required a bellows-hand to pump it. In this sense, the harmonium, pumped by the player, also had an economic advantage. Remarkably enough, the harmonium's most essential characteristic, its expressivity, was of little use in the church. The consequence of this was the harmonium's sad relationship with the church in general.

This recording presents a cross-section of the harmonium repertoire from the countries where it found its greatest popularity: on the one hand the French, Belgians and Spaniards with their interest in the instrument's dynamic possibilities, and, on the other, the Germans, with their interest in changes of timbre within a single dynamic. The pieces heard here are, without exception, intended for concert use, and have no place within a religious context. The music was written with the intention that it be performed in a chamber music hall, a salon, or at a venue such as the Parisian "Salle Pleyel" or "Salle Gaveau".

Lefébure-Wely can be considered the father of the harmonium repertoire: among other things, he wrote the first harmonium method which established the technical principals for playing the instrument that would remain unchallenged. He was a man of his time whose considered choices of style closely reflect the nature of the instrument. In addition to his considerable organ oeuvre for church use, he composed a large number of pieces for the "orgue de salon".

The Trois Esquisses Musicales are, as far we know, the only

works for "orgue expressif" by Georges Bizet. The fact that the pieces are dedicated to Lefébure-Wely provides ample evidence of Bizet's respect for the harmonium's first virtuoso.

Camille Saint-Saëns' opus 1 (1858) consists of three pieces for harmonium: an honour for the instrument and a glimpse into Saint-Saëns' appetite for modernity.

Jacques Nicolas Lemmens is well known as the father of the French organ school, but during the period of time he spent in England (more than 10 years in total), he performed primarily on the "Orgue Mustel" for which he published his own original compositions.

Like virtually every other French organist, Théodore Dubois developed a concert career inhabiting a totally different atmosphere than his parallel career in the church. The Fantaisie Pastorale is a genre introduced to the harmonium in Lefébure-Wely's 1840 method for the instrument. Alexandre Guilmant purchased a Mustel in 1871 and immediately set about publishing a series of pieces, of which 'Recueillement' is an attractive example. A representative selection of his harmonium oeuvre can be heard on another CD (Gallo no ...)

Antonio López Almagro was the harmonium's Spanish pioneer. He introduced a harmonium course at the Conservatory in Madrid, and published regularly. Although little known outside Spain, he gained the admiration of harmonium experts such as Alphonse Mustel and even Karg-Elert.

Sigfrid Karg-Elert was the Master of the harmonium and his

compositions are imbued with his affinity with Mustel's instrument. His ability to melt the timbres of the harmonium into each other was without rival, his sound world irrevocably tied-in with the modesty and flexibility of the (Mustel) instrument. The choice of which piece to play on this CD was, therefore, difficult. A more complete picture of Karg-Elert's voluminous harmonium output can be heard on the Gallo CD no ...

The harmonium heard on this CD is an excellent example of the quality produced by the house of Mustel. Only the winding system has been restored, while the playing mechanism and windchest are completely original. Mustel's work displays extraordinary craftsmanship which explains the extremely high prices he charged for his instruments, comparable in fact with those paid for concert grand pianos. His customers included Alexandre Guilmant, Jacques Lemmens, Clément Loret, Aristide Cavallé-Coll, Lefébure-Wely, Alphonse Mailly, Théodore Salomé and Fernand de la Tombelle.

MUSTEL, anno 1891 Forte expressif - Harpe Eolienne - Basson - Clairon - Bourdon - Cor Anglais ou percussion - Cor Anglais - Grand Jeu Expression Flûte - Flûte ou Percussion - Clarinette - Fife - Hautbois - Musette - Voix Céleste - Baryton - Forte expressif

English by Chris Bragg, Glasgow.