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Johan van Meurs : een studie over een pionierend orgeladviseur

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SUMMARY

Johan van Meurs (1903-1986) had a broad record of service in the field of the organ and its music. In his capacity as a member of several boards he usually served as a stimulator. Due to his administrative activities, he was well informed about what was going on in the (inter)national field of the organ, and he shared this knowledge with his students. He liked networking without focusing attention on himself: music was at the centre. Van Meurs lived in an era in which many new developments in the field of organ took place. By means of his personal and business connections, he combined the necessary forces to initiate these developments in the North. Albert Schweitzer's organ performances must have had such a profound impact on his own way of using stops that the decades to follow, during which innovations in the field of performance practice took place, seemed to be wasted on him. Fifty years later he still waxed lyrical about Schweitzer's registrations.

As a teacher, the mere pleasure of making music was most important to Van Meurs. In addition he dedicated himself to the development of musical taste. Within this context he introduced his students to the interior of the organ and taught them to distinguish and name the various families of stops in an aural manner. Thirty years after his death, this method is still being praised by his former students. As a result of his large number of students and also of the concerts he organized, he made a valuable contribution to the national organ life in general and to the organ life in Groningen in particular.

Being an organ expert, Van Meurs was, among other things, concerned with the STICHTING OUDE GRONINGER KERKEN, which he co-founded. He contributed in considerable measure to the quality of decision-making during meetings of the organ committee. Whenever controversial matters came up, he immediately took the sting out of the conversation. Klaas Bolt, organ advisor and student of Van Meurs, praised his teacher because of his ready knowledge of Groningen's organ history. When Bolt had to visit instruments in Groningen for the purpose of consulting assignments, he regularly asked Van Meurs to join him.

As for the field of organ, the times in which Van Meurs lived were extremely complicated, both nationally and internationally. Developments such as the Organ reform, Organ movement (*Orgelbewegung*), Neobaroque, and the historicizing movement not only took place in rapid succession, but they also overlapped each other. Moreover, these developments were judged entirely different already after only a short period of time. This complexity had consequences for both organ builders and organ advisors, such as Van Meurs, who were involved in building new organs and restoring existing instruments.

During the pre-war years, other organ advisors were also active in Groningen and Drenthe. These were both individual advisors – mostly Van Meurs' fellow-organists – and institutional advisory bodies. Institutional education within this field did not exist: one had to learn on the job. The most important institutional representatives in this area were the Nederlandse Klokken- en Orgelraad (before World War II) and (in the period to follow) the Hervormde Orgelcommissie. Before the war, church councils were free to choose a particular advisor. After the war, especially within the Reformed Church, one was forced to make an appeal to one's own organ committee. The latter had serious consequences for the number of reports by Van Meurs.

Research into the work of individual organ advisors has hardly been carried out so far. It is true that the archives of two important figures in this area – Lambert Ern  and Klaas Bolt – are digitized in excerpt form by Utrecht University, but an analysis of their work is still lacking. Research into this digital excerpt form could prove who was involved in what kind of projects, and/or which information they considered important enough to preserve.

In order to gather sufficient knowledge in the field of organ building and advising, Van Meurs had contacts with numerous other organ experts in the Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany. By means of archives, one can reconstruct the way in which he approached potential clients, as well as how others judged his expertise. It proves to be less easy, however, to reconstruct the notion of the ‘early sound of the organ’ that Schweitzer and Van Meurs may have had in mind. Schweitzer’s view seems to have shifted, which cannot be shown in the case of Van Meurs.

Next, organs in which Van Meurs was involved in the broadest sense are highlighted, including the nature of his contribution. The spectrum of his activities turns out to be broad and includes (intended) consultancy, inspection, commissioning, and even repairs made with his own hands due to the absence of alternatives because of financial reasons. Sometimes he performed his duty after the project of realisation of an organ got stuck. In another case the Hervormde Orgelcommissie stood his ground and situational collaboration needed to be arranged. Van Meurs’ contribution demonstrates a strong involvement; contacts with municipalities for which he worked were preserved for many years.

By using the investigated advisory activities, Van Meurs’ work as an organ advisor has been analysed. Compared to contemporaries in the region, he was a much sought-after and appreciated expert. Considering two starting points, namely the way of acquisition and his source of inspiration, one can distinguish four phases in his work. During the second phase, approximately the period 1935-1950, he was mainly active as an advisor. Remarkable was his modest and gradual attempt to achieve a Schnitger-rehabilitation in the Der Aa-church (Groningen) in the thirties, consistent with recent developments in Germany. For the same instrument he developed a new, advanced restoration model in the sixties, which would be used more often in later times. In his early years he mostly did business with organ builders from the region; later he had a broader outlook. The most important instruments about which he advised included organs that were built according to the principles of the Orgelbewegung, as well as instruments that were made according to the basic principles of the historicising movement.

The personal collection of organ dispositions put together by Van Meurs occupies a unique place within the published collections. As has been demonstrated in the present study, this personal collection contains partly unique information and an almost perfect description of data. Therefore, this collection must be considered as a vital link within historical organ research.