

A Tower too high...

During 'Operation Market Garden' in 1944, Elst found itself on the front line. The enemy had occupied Elst and ensured that it acted as a barrier to stop the allies advancing on Arnhem from Nijmegen. In doing so they made use of the tower of the Grote Kerk, which was then bombed by the British using anti-tank grenades. Although heavily damaged, the tower survived. After a long weekend of heavy fighting, the enemy was finally driven out of Elst. The village had been severely damaged and the tower was once again used as an observation post. Despite being liberated, there was no respite, with artillery fire aimed at the tower from the direction of Arnhem. During the night of 30 September to 1 October, the tower was finally set alight, as was the church and the surrounding houses. As a result, the Witte organ of 1869 and the entire interior of the church was destroyed; only the tower and the walls remained standing. Although the occupiers tried on several occasions to re-take Elst, the allies held firm until the liberation of The Netherlands.

Before the church was restored, the governmental department 'Rijksdienst voor het Oudheidkundig Bodemonderzoek' requested that an archaeological survey take place. In addition to the remains of a church from the 8th century, the foundations of Roman temples dating from 50 and 100 AD respectively were also discovered. The latter temple must have been one of the largest built by the Romans north of the alps. These discoveries were incorporated into the restored church and can be seen in the museum basement. Originally the intention was to re-home the Strümphler organ from the redundant Hersteld Evangelisch Lutherse Kerk in Amsterdam in the restored church. However, it soon became clear that the instrument was slightly too large and, instead, this organ found a new home in the Eusebiuskerk in Arnhem in 1962. The Amsterdam church's pulpit did find its way to Elst however. A proposal for a new organ was submitted by one of the fashionable organ builders of the time, G. van Leeuwen of Leiderdorp.

Writing on 17 April, 1951, to the organ committee of the Dutch Reformed Church, Van Leeuwen notes "Due to this organ being constructed for one of the worst affected congregations in the Dutch Reformed Church, I have kept the price for the instrument extremely low..." In order to keep the price of the organ manageable, Van Leeuwen proposed to reserve nine of the 29 stops until further funds could be found. Van Leeuwen applied the 'new style' to his instrument in Elst. This resulted in an organ with mechanical slider chests, divided between Hoofdwerk, Rugwerk, and Pedal deployed in towers to either side. The Pedal features a Praestant 16', but no Subbas, and the whole organ embodies a single stylistic aesthetic, later referred to as 'neo-baroque'. In 2004, the absent stops were finally installed and the organ completed. The stoplist can be found on page 7. Due to its richly appointed specification, for an organ with two manuals and pedal, the Elst instrument can be counted among the finest examples of Dutch organ building from the period in question. The provision of reed stops on Hoofdwerk and Pedal (16', 8', 4' and 16', 8', 4', 2' respectively) is exceptional. These, together with the historically inspired double-mounted Praestant 8' in the façade, and the wide-scaled Nachthoorn 4', ensure a musically colourful and convincing instrument. However tragic the destruction of the church was, the discovery of the Roman foundations and the arrival of the organ were of great significance. Like 'A Bridge too Far,' 'A Tower too High' might awaken negative associations, 'A Tower High' is perhaps more appropriate...

In 1871, J.W. Walker & Sons built an organ for the church of St. John the Baptist in Winchester, England. In 1877, a second manual was added. Due to a reconfiguration of the church's interior, the organ was put up for sale. In 2019, it was restored and installed in the choir area of the church in Elst by F.R. Feenstra of Grootegast who added a newly built organ case. At this time, the organ received two extra stops: a Vox Celestes 8' was added on a clamp to the Swell and a Trombone 16' to the Pedal on a new wind-chest.

When putting together the programme, I have firstly chosen a sound-world linked heavily to the years 1940-1945 and, secondly, the sound ideal which encapsulates that of the Van Leeuwen organ. A Romantic intermezzo on the Walker organ acts as arbiter at the heart of the programme.

The 'Variations sur Lucis Creator' is an early work by Jehan Alain. It opens with a strict five-voice harmonisation of the hymn and ends with a transparent fugue. The tender first verse juxtaposes a walking left-hand line with melodies in the right hand and pedal. Alain was celebrated at a young age for his original manner of composition. At the outbreak of World War II, he was pressed into service as a soldier. The circumstances were difficult; the soldiers slept on straw when there was a shortage of

sheets. In the absence of active service during the first months of the war, Alain put his talents to work, establishing a choir, organising liturgical celebrations, including a Christmas Mass, making arrangements and playing the piano for the officers. During a reconnaissance mission, Alain encountered an enemy battalion. Instead of fleeing, he shot 16 men himself before running out of ammunition and being shot dead. Alain was posthumously awarded the 'Croix de Guerre', a military honour granted for heroism.

Hugo Distler grew up in a rather unstable family, something he blamed for failing on several occasions to gain a place at conservatory. Finally, he was admitted in Leipzig where his talent was quickly perceived. He was advised to study organ and composition with Hermann Grabner, a teacher keen to return to the musicality of Johann Sebastian Bach and his predecessors. In his Organ Sonata, written in 1939, the link with the baroque period is clearly audible. Distler's transparent style is characterised by short, repeated motifs which traverse the prevailing time signature, repeated notes and propelling harmonies. Distler's musical activities were limited by Nazi-Germany; his only brother died and the sad sight of burnt-out churches and lost historic organs made him depressed. Fearing that he would be called up to the German army, he committed suicide in 1942.

When 'De Nederlandsche Kultuurkamer' was introduced in 1942, as a result of which cultural life was stimulated under strict Nazi censorship, many artists refused to become members, as a result of which they were forbidden from working. Nevertheless, around 42000 artists did sign up, as they had little choice. The fines imposed for cultural activity outside the rules of the 'Kultuurkamer' were absurdly high. Carrying out one's work without being a member invoked a fine of 5000 guilders. Even being a member but omitting to carry one's membership book whilst carrying out activities, invoked a fine of 1000 guilders. Thanks to the efforts of the church and, for example, the Christelijke Zangersbond (Christian Singers' Union), church music was largely kept outside the rules despite the initial intentions of the Kultuurkamer. As a result, many church choirs were established during the war. Jacob Bijster refused to join the Kultuurkamer. Although a gifted organist and composer, Bijster was primarily active as a teacher. From 1929 he taught second study organists at the Amsterdam Conservatory and, from 1942, first study organists. The Fantasia e Fuga, inspired by the Genevan Psalter melody for Psalm 68 carries the subtitle 'Fantasia and Fugue in Church Style on the melody of Psalm 68'. Could the confusing (in this context) term 'Church Style' be a late addition in order to avoid unwanted attention from the Kultuurkamer? Bijster completed the work in June, 1945, therefore shortly after liberation. The choice of Psalm 68 was probably not a coincidence:

'Let God rise up, let his enemies be scattered;
let those who hate him flee before him.'

Charles Villiers Stanford was born in Ireland and studied at the 'Hochschule für Musik' in Berlin as a pupil of, among others, Friedrich Kiel, a composer wedded to the style of Bach. Stanford ended up, thereafter, in Cambridge and London and became one of the country's most influential musicians and founders of the exceptional musical climate which arose in early 20th century England. The gripping opening of the Fantasia and Toccata in D minor is reminiscent of the Fantasia in G minor by Johann Sebastian Bach; grand chords juxtaposed with virtuosic scale passages and melodious themes.

Matthias Weckmann, choirboy under Schütz and a good friend of Froberger, brought Italian influences to Hamburg, where he served as organist of the Jacobikirche for the majority of his life. His teacher and colleague Jacob Praetorius had been a pupil of Sweelinck. Together, Weckmann and Praetorius brought the musical culture in Hamburg, and far further afield, to a high level. The first notes of the melody 'Ach wir armen Sünder' are harmonised simply and modestly. In turn, we hear the individual qualities of the Quintadeen 16', the Nachthorn 4' and the Trompet 16'.

Johann Sebastian Bach gained much praise during his life as a player of various keyboard instruments, but particular admiration was reserved for his unequalled pedal playing at the organ, about which many testimonies have been passed down. Observers were astonished how Bach played with his feet; as quick as others could manage with their fingers. The pedal solo from the Toccata, Adagio & Fuge in C is just such an example; never before had a pedal solo of such scale formed part of an organ work. The Adagio, here registered on 16' basis with the string-like 16 Praestant in the pedal, concludes in a remarkable manner; a sequence of dramatic harmonies, finally returning to C major. The work concludes with a virtuosic and exuberant fugue characterised by the breaks in the subject, filled-in by Bach in the countersubject.

Werenfried van Elst (or Saint Werenfriedus), a Priest of Irish origins, came to Elst in the 8th century to convert the population to Christianity. There, he built a church on the foundations of the Roman temples and named it the St. Maartenskerk. In addition, he also made use of the remaining Roman building materials. Werenfried died in Westervoort and, according to legend, his body was claimed by both Westervoort and Elst. In order to leave the decision to higher powers, his body was placed on a boat on the Rhine, coming to rest at Elst. Thereafter, Werenfried was buried in the church at Elst and the village became a place of pilgrimage as a result. Depictions of Werenfried see him holding on to a boat and the boat with his tomb aboard graces the coat of arms shared by Elst and the later incorporated municipality of Overbetuwe. The present Gothic church and tower date from the 15th century. In the choir of the church can be seen the remains of its Roman predecessor. The tower, consisting of two square, and one tall octagonal sections, topped by a short spire with a pear-shaped crown, houses a belfry with three bells. In 1995, the tower was decorated with statues of eight saints. On the basis of details known about the previous statues, which were removed during the pre-war restoration and which then disappeared in 1944, Saints Werenfried, Martin, Thecla, George, Gertrude, Peter, Catherine and Willibrord were each assigned a niche.

IJsbrand ter Haar (b1982) received his first organ lessons as a pupil of Gert Oldenbeuving on the Blank organ in the St. Helenakerk in Aalten. Thereafter he studied with Theo Jellema at the Arnhem Conservatory and at the Messiaen Academy with Cor van Wageningen, Leo van Doeselaar and Theo Jellema. He graduated, with distinction, in 2006. In addition, he studied harpsichord with Chris Farr at the Zwolle Conservatory. IJsbrand won prizes at national and international organ competitions and performed at venues including the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam, the Bovenkerk in Kampen, the Eusebiuskerk in Arnhem and the Stevenskerk in Nijmegen. IJsbrand ter Haar is the cantor and organist of the Grote Kerk in Elst. www.ijsbrandterhaar.nl