

KARG-ELERT: ULTIMATE ORGAN WORKS VOLUME 7

Dr Elke Völker plays the 1903 Walcker organ of Christuskirche, Heidelberg

Opus 65 books V and VI AEOLUS 10991
www.aeolus-music.com E18.99

The Archive's Honorary Member, Dr Elke Völker, has already recorded the first four books of opus 65 as volumes 5 and 6 of the Aeolus Ultimate Organ Works series. This large scale undertaking is now brought to a conclusion with the recording of books V and VI of opus 65, an achievement deserving of the highest praise, since this is the first time that the whole of the 66 Chorale-Improvisations of Karg-Elert have been recorded. The organs used for this purpose are all those built by E F Walcker: Volume 5 at San Ignacio de Loyala, San Sebastian (1914), Volume 6 at Christuskirche, Lüdenscheid (1902) and finally Volume 7 at Christuskirche, Heidelberg (1903). The choice of these instruments ensures the authentic qualities of solo and chorus stops so precisely indicated by the composer; the completion of this project now affords those studying this highly significant part of the composer's output for organ the

opportunity to hear such an authoritative interpretation in its entirety. As the very detailed liner notes by Dr Völker so aptly expresses it: 'These works take the listener on a fascinating voyage of discovery through the world of religious faith'. For Karg-Elert, it was a faith steeped in the Evangelical-Lutheran tradition, which, in the final two volumes of opus 65, produced some of his most inspired interpretations of the Lutheran chorale, developing it as a unique art form, and culminating in a triumphant paean through the setting of *Wunderbarer König*, augmented by brass and timpani. An essential aspect of the music is, therefore, the text of the hymns which provided the composer's inspiration and which, in many instances, underlies the music itself; it is not always the first verse of the hymn, however, which fulfils this function (as, for example, in no 50). The provision of these texts in the liner notes (as in previous volumes) is an invaluable source of reference.

The titles of the numbered pieces are sometimes confusing when bearing no resemblance to the text set; for instance in no 62 *Wer nur den lieben Gott lässt walten* heads a setting of a baptismal hymn *Ich bin getauft auf deinen Namen*, more usually sung to the tune of *O dass ich tausend Zungen hätte*. Subtitles often give the clue as to the true subject of the chorale setting; for instance, no 64, though entitled *Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern*, actually refers to a marriage hymn *Ich und mein Haus, wir sind bereit, dir Herr, die ganze Lebens-*

zeit. The penultimate chorale setting, no 65 *Wie wohl ist mir, o Freund der Seelen* (a hymn for Confirmation), shows, in its polished setting and luxuriantly chromatic last line, that the composer's inspiration had remained undiminished to the very end of this achievement of the 66 'chorale-improvisations' – a curiously understated definition of a unique masterpiece.

Volume V no 1 is a setting of Martin Luther's paraphrase of Psalm 130 *Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir*, employing his words and music of the first verse. The chorale is heard, harmonised in the left hand, while above it floats a gentle arabesque, until, in the fifth line, double pedal underlines the text *denn so du willst das sehen an* followed by a return to the previous texture and, eventually, a charming little coda introducing the opening phrase of the chorale. All this is interpreted with great sensitivity, reflecting the penitential character of the piece. No.46, *Christe, du Lamm Gottes* comprises Martin Luther's paraphrase of the eucharistic prayer *Agnus Dei*, and therefore the composer thought it appropriate to employ pastiche 'in the style of Pachelbel', though Karg-Elert's own harmonic idiom is all too obvious, even though the piece ends on an open 5th! Here we hear the gentle, refined choruses used to such telling effect to create a mood of confident restraint. (A more conventional setting appears in opus 78 no 5) No 47 is one of the great showpieces of the entire set and reflects Karg-Elert's devotion to the Lutheran tradition in his dramatic transformation of *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott* – Martin Luther's paraphrase of Psalm 46 which became the rallying cry of the Protestant Reformation in Germany. Here, Karg-Elert superimposes every possible enhancement of the stirring tune, first thundered out in the pedals, and, after a brief respite followed by a cadenza, the opening phrase is repeated, this time in the dominant key, and, for good measure, with double pedal. *Der alt böse Feind* introduces an increasingly tormented texture, with a pedal part of extraordinary complexity, while the completion of the phrase (*mit Ernst ers jetzt meint*) is eventually introduced by another cadenza, strident arpeggios and ever more elaborate textures to accompany the rest of verse 1, culminating in more double pedal for its last line *auf Erd ist nicht seins gleichen*. Now the first and last lines of the tune are transformed melodically and harmonically in the pedal and manual parts, heralding a return to the first line, in a shimmering cloud of arpeggios and reiterated chords *quasi trillo* before the second line *ein gute Wehr und Waffen* makes a final, dramatic appearance in the pedal; the last, triumphant *fff* chord is further enhanced by the triple pedal notes. It need hardly be said that Dr Völker surmounts the considerable technical and interpretational challenges of this piece with immense skill, ensuring that her performance is one of the most memorable highlights of the disc. No 48 *Jerusalem, du hochgebaute Stadt* is, if anything, even more technically demanding, with hugely animated semiquaver movement in pedals and manuals accompanying the rousing chorale as it is declaimed throughout, sometimes canonically within the manuals, then in double pedal. A passing reference to the notes BACH leads into a cadenza, introducing an even more intense treatment of the last line of verse 1 *schwingt es sich über alle und eilt aus dieser Welt*. The second half of the first line now reappears, modified, and harmonised in the composer's characteristic idiom, fragments of which continue until a solo flute stop eventually introduces the first line once

again, now on celestes. This serves to inaugurate a magical ending, the sixth and final chord suspended as if reluctant to leave what has been an astonishing evocation of the inspired text. The piece raises many problems of registration and balance with so much going on *vivacissimo e jubilante*, problems which are addressed and overcome by the soloist with distinction, so as to express this further stage in that 'voyage of discovery' Dr Völker has mapped out for the listener.

No 49 (missing from the track list in the liner notes) *Meinen Jesus lass ich nicht* provides a mood of total contrast, in this gently flowing three part fuguetta, based on the unpretentious chorale, which subsides into a restful cadence, illustrating the repetition of the first line of words. *O Gott du frommer Gott*, no.50, is the second setting in opus 65, the first being no 43, where the simple tune is afforded ingenious canonical treatment. It also appears in opus 78 no.16 as a lilting *Sicilienne*. No.50 is unique in several respects: it is the only piece of the 66 written in D flat; composed in memory of Karg-Elert's mother on the day of her death in 1908, it sets verse 7 of the hymn ('Lass mich an meinem End auf Christi Tod abscheiden') to a different tune, marked by the composer's characteristic short, echoing interludes; gradually the music fades away almost to nothing. Johann Crüger's much loved hymn *Schmücke dich, o liebe Seele*, no 51, also appears in opus 78 no 11; it is difficult to decide which of the two is the more appealing. The opus 65 version is certainly played more often, since it expresses an atmosphere of devotion appropriate to its association with eucharistic worship. No 52 *Sollt es gleich bisweilen scheinen* is an affirmation of trust and confidence in God, reflected in three part counterpoint in 12/8, ingeniously woven around the sturdy tune which is declaimed on a pedal rest in 4/4 time. The texture slims down further in no 53 *Straf mich nicht in deinem Zorn*, a paraphrase of Psalm 6 and a tune more familiar in England as set to the Easter hymn 'Christ the Lord is risen again!' Here is a further example of Karg-Elert's skill in trio-writing, characteristically, though, adding an extra fragment for the pedal part in the very last bar. No 54 comprises a setting of *Werde munter, mein Gemüte* but to different words; the gentle, accompanying pulses in 12/8 eventually rise to a climax at the words *dass ich meinen Trost im Glauben mir von niemand lasse rauben* and then subsiding peacefully over an extended tonic pedal. Book V of opus 65 ends, perhaps appropriately, with the solemn sentiments of no 55 *Wer weiss, wie nahe mir mein Ende! Hin geht die Zeit, her kommt der Tod*. Pulsating demisemiquavers provide a dark accompaniment to the chorale for which a 'supple' solo stop is required. This deeply felt contemplation of life's ending is given an appropriately sensitive reading enhanced by the sounds which this instrument possesses in abundance.

If I were asked which of all the 66 numbers of opus 65 I preferred, my choice would be no 56 *Jesu, geh voran auf der Lebensbahn!* Subtitled *Seelenbräutigam, Jesu, Gottes Lamm*, these are Adam Drese's words set to his own melody, which has even found its way into English hymn books. Karg-Elert clearly found inspiration both in the text of *Jesu, geh voran* and its music, since this is one of the most substantial of the entire set, being given the title 'Sinfonischer Choral' and which was performed at Karg-Elert's wedding. This well structured piece reflects the ideas expressed in each of the four verses, the opening section, *tempo di Sarabanda*, making much use



The Eberhard Friedrich Walcker organ of Christuskirche, Heidelberg was restored in 2009. The specification of this instrument is reproduced later in this article. Image by kind permission of Christoph Martin Frommen.



The Christuskirche in Heidelberg, Germany, was built in 1900. Architecturally, it is a blend of Art Nouveau, Renaissance and Gothic elements. The tower, 65 meters in height, has an unusual spire, apparently unique in design. Photo by kind permission of Rudolf Stricker.

of a short, pregnant phrase on celestes before the entry of the setting for verse 1 – an elaborated, intense version of the original square-cut tune. After an increasingly agitated bridge passage, verse 2 enters, sounding out in bare fifths, *fff*, a reflection of the words *Solls uns hart ergöhen, lass uns feste stehn*, with a return to a peaceful flute solo for *denn durch Trübsal hier geht der Weg zu dir*. After the return of the opening celeste phrase, verse 3 is echoed by an increasing chromaticism, its last phrase, *richte unsern Sinn auf das Ende hin*, being given to left hand chords. Verse 4 enters immediately, with strikingly confident chords for *Ordnung unserm Gang, Jesu, lebenslang*, rising to a great climax for *tu uns nach dem Lauf deine Türe auf!* Soon, however, the celeste theme returns, after which fragments of the chorale's first line usher in the peaceful close. All the varied moods and

accompanying tone colours of this most imaginative piece are faithfully reflected in a performance to savour with great pleasure. No 57, *Liebster Jesu*, also appears in opus 78 no 11 – a much simpler and shorter setting than that in opus 65. Here, the ingenious use of canon between left hand and pedal do nothing to distract from the lyrical right hand quavers; finally, the manuals take over for the merest suggestion of the tune's third line before dying away. Throughout, the use of refined, well balanced stops reflect the spirit of the words, again associated with baptism.

No 58 *Lobe den Herren, den mächtigen König der Ehren* is a setting of the familiar hymn of thanksgiving, though here presented as a study in brilliant passage work interspersed with chromatic transformations of the hymn's opening line *tempo di Sarabanda*. It is then further punctuated by dramatic gestures from the tune's second line, a reflection of the words *Kommet zuhauf* or, more probably from verse 5, *Er ist dein Licht*. A more animated appearance of the tune's last line and subsequent cadenza (one of several) introduces a short chordal passage, before the opening passage work returns, this time an octave higher, gradually falling, then rising again as the texture thins out to a final quiet chord. Not only is this 'study' impeccably played, but the tonal contrasts which this instrument affords (and indicated by the composer) are particularly well displayed, notably in the powerful stops of the *tutti*. Even those organists who never play any Karg-Elert will admit to knowing no 59 *Nun danket alle Gott*. Its direct appeal has ensured its popularity with recitalists and recording companies, not to mention arrangements made for various instrumental ensembles. Yet it is not as simple a piece as might at first appear; if played too fast it can sound simply ostentatious, and the continuous use of powerful reeds can become wearisome by the time the first section is repeated. Nor need Karg-Elert's injunction to close the swell box in the middle section be taken too literally. Dr Völker's interpretation of this all too familiar war horse provides a freshness of approach, so that, in the unlikely event of someone's hearing it for the first time, the reaction would be one of genuine excitement. Subtitled *Air*, no 60 *O du liebe meine Liebe* reflects the sentiments of a somewhat obscure Passiontide hymn, here expressed in its Bach-like coloratura idiom, with 'continuo' octave leaps in the pedal; its restrained interpretation provides a palate-cleansing contrast to the previous number. *Was Gott tut, das ist wohlgetan* is also set in opus 78 no 19 where it takes the form of an elegant little trio, lasting barely a minute. No 61 of opus 65 is subtitled *Canzona* and continues the restrained character of its predecessor, the numerous triplet patterns and echo effects suggesting a calmly pastoral atmosphere. This is further enhanced by the sparing use of chromatic harmony, the use of the flattened 7th imparting an unexpectedly modal character to the piece, especially towards the end.

No 62 is the setting of a baptismal hymn *Ich bin getauft auf deinen Namen*, as explained in the second paragraph of this article. The words of verse 1 are illustrated by the music's upper part, being later transferred to the pedals. No 63 is set as a minor version, this time very much in the style of a Bach invention, its unpretentious charm forming an agreeable contrast with the more elaborate settings of Volume VI. After a more chromatic, slower interlude, the original theme returns, but in the major key, eventually returning to the minor, in time for

the final cadence which utilizes the pedals for the first time. No 64 is in fact a hymn for marriage, as the subtitle suggests, though set to the Epiphany tune *Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern*. Philipp Spitta's words *Ich und mein Haus, wir sind bereit, dir Herr, die ganze Lebenszeit mit Seel und Leib zu deinen* are reflected in a setting of much sensitivity, utilizing stops of considerable delicacy. The setting is also one of ingenuity, as the chorale moves gently among the inner parts, finally coming to rest in a sequence of chords which subtly conceal the tune's very last line. It is remarkable that, having reached the 65th 'chorale improvisation' Karg-Elert's inspiration remained unabated in what might well have been a very personal interpretation of the Confirmation hymn *Wie wohl ist mir, o Freund der Seelen*, its very last line producing an extraordinary sequence of chromatic chords in the accompaniment – a reflection, perhaps, of the final line: *O reicher Trost: mein Freund ist mein!* ('O rich consolation: my friend is mine!') All these last six of Book VI are played with restraint and a sympathetic insight into the spirit of the texts as well as that of the music.

Karg-Elert brought his great collection of opus 65 to a resounding climax in setting Joachim Neander's hymn of thanksgiving in No 66 *Wunderbarer König*, which he also set soon afterwards in No 1 of *Drei Choral-Improvisationen* W14. While this version employs Neander's familiar, if rather pedestrian tune, for opus 66 Karg-Elert sets the striking 18th century tune by Michael Müller sometimes sung to *Gott ist gegenwärtig*. Trumpets, trombones and timpani adding an air of solemn festivity to a very de-

manding and, at times, elaborate organ part (also performed, incidentally, at the conclusion of Karg-Elert's wedding). The first two lines of the tune are declaimed by the brass 'as from a distance', simply harmonised, then repeated on the organ *misterioso*, with the composer's characteristic harmonies. The instrumentalists then share with the organ in declaiming the tune's last two lines. The organ now leads into an increasingly animated introduction to an elaborate accompaniment to the first two lines, again heard on trumpets and then trombones. Finally, both combine with the organ in a strikingly harmonised version of the last two lines, followed by the organ's announcing a richly harmonised version, alternating with the brass to usher in the timpani, which, with organ and brass, bring the entire opus to an overwhelming conclusion, sounding out the tune's opening phrase, its final chord marked by a bare fifth. The complexity of this finale to opus 65 requires considerable skill by organist, brass and timpani players alike; in addition to Dr Völker, much credit is also due to the trumpet players Klaus Wendt and Friedhelm Biessecker, trombonists Jürgen Schaal and Stephan Kirsch, and timpanist Thorsten Gellings.

This successful completion of such a praiseworthy project should act as encouragement for both students and teachers of Karg-Elert's organ music to study all the recordings of this monumental collection, with, of course, the six books of opus 65 – all absolutely indispensable! Grateful thanks are due to Dr Völker for making this unique experience at last possible.

Anthony Caldicott ■

The Walcker Organ of the Christuskirche

The organ was originally built in 1903 by Eberhard Friedrich Walcker of Ludwigsburg. This three manual instrument (C-g3) has 41 speaking stops and a pedalboard. It is a fine example of the romantic tradition. The original pneumatic action was converted in 1955 to electric action. In 2009, the organ was restored by Gerhard Lenter.

Hauptwerk		Swell		Echo division (with swell box)	
Principal	16'	Bordun	16'	Lieblich Gedeckt	16'
Principal	8'	Principal	8'	Geigenprincipal	8'
Gedeckt	8'	Traversflöte	8'	Rohrflöte	8'
Doppelflöte	8'	Quintatön	8'	Aeoline	8'
Viola di Gamba	8'	Salicional	8'	Vox Coelestis	8'
Gemshorn	8'	Dolce	8'	Traversflöte	4'
Synthematophon	8'	Octav	4'	Fugara	4'
Octav	4'	Flöte	4'	Oboe (1954)	8'
Rohrflöte	4'	Piccolo	2'		
Rauschquinte II	2 2/3'	Mixture	III-IV	Pedal C-f1	
Mixture	IV-V	Trompete (1954)	8'	Principalbass	16'
Trompete	8'	Clarinete	8'	Violonbass	16'
				Subbass	16'
				Gedeckt bass (from II)	16'
Koppeln				Quintbass	10 2/3'
Normalkoppeln: II/I, III/I, III/II, I/P, II/P, III/P				Octavbass	8'
Superoktavkoppel: I/II, III/III				Cellobass	8'
				Salicetbass (from II)	8'
				Octav	4'
				Posaune	16'
				Trompete	8'