

Nivers and his admirers

'Ornamentation, phrasing and pre-classical stylistic practices are little-known and still present problems for the performer, which explains why the music of Nivers still remains fairly little-known, although he is one of the greatest of French composers.'

So commented Jean Saint-Arroman,¹ writing in 1987. Twenty years earlier, Willi Apel observed in his *History of Organ and Keyboard Music*² that 'it is regrettable that the organ works of Nivers, so distinguished in style, are no longer played today'. In 2006 modern editions of his organ music are still hard to come by. It is, however, worth pointing out that Nicolas Gorenstein³ wrote a convincing defence of Nivers.

After writing three volumes of organ versets (in 1665, 1667 and 1675), and a treatise on composition,⁴ (a résumé of all the styles of his time), Guillaume-Gabriel Nivers (ca 1632-1714) became organist of the Chapel Royal in 1678, and later Master of the Queen's Music in 1681. By virtue of his training as an organist and harpsichordist, and because he frequently worked with singers, this direct contemporary of Lully is a remarkably precious example in the history of French music. Without ever completely abandoning his earlier inspiration from the Flemish school and the style of Titelouze - who represents the last flowering of the Renaissance - Nivers was a disciple of Chambonnières and Du Mont.

¹ Preface to the *Premier Livre d'orgue* by G.-G. Nivers, facsimile edition, Fuzeau, 1987

² Willi Apel, *Geschichte des Orgel- und Klaviermusik bis 1700*, Kassel, 1967

³ Nicolas Gorenstein, G.-G. Nivers: un repère historique faussé par l'Histoire, *Tribune de l'Orgue*, 37/nos 3 et 4, 1985

⁴ -*Premier Livre d'orgue: contenant cent pièces de tous les tons de l'Eglise*, 1665

-*Deuxième Livre d'orgue: contenant la Messe et les Hymnes de l'Eglise*, 1667

-*Traité de la composition*, 1667 - translated into Flemish by Etienne Roger, Amsterdam, 1697

-*Troisième Livre d'orgue: les huit tons de l'Eglise*, 1675 [François Couperin, was seven, and Nicolas de Grigny three at the time]

He was an important innovator of musical forms between the preclassical and classical periods.

If it is suggested that the music of Nivers does not rival the purity of style of Titelouze (*Hymnes*, 1623 and versets for *Magnificat*, 1626), D'Anglebert (*Fugues and Quatuor sur le Kyrie*, ca 1660), Roberday (*Fugues et Caprices*, 1660) or Grigny (the five-part fugues from the *Messe* and his *Hymnes*, 1699), one might well answer that no-one has had the effrontery to condemn Bach's wonderful arias, cantata movements and Passions simply because they might be contrasted with the same composer's 'Art of Fugue'.

Nivers had admirers as far afield as Germany. Walther's *Dictionary of Music*⁵ cites the *Premier Livre d'Orgue*, the *Motets*, the *Dissertation sur le chant grégorien* and the *Traité de la composition*. Walther's copy of the *Prélude et fugue en la mineur*⁶ by Nivers has also survived. Might one conclude that his cousin, Johann Sebastian Bach, knew this copy, as he knew about copies of other French composers? In any case, Pachelbel seems to have been familiar with the advice given by Nivers in his *Premier Livre d'Orgue* concerning performance, by means of the tablature of Johann Valentin Eckelt (1692), an important source for Pachelbel and Froberger.⁷

⁵ Johann Gottfried Walther, *Musikalisches Lexicon oder musikalische Bibliothek*, Leipzig, 1732

⁶ Herman Zietz, *Quellenkritische Untersuchung an den Bach-Handschriften*, Hamburg, 1969

⁷ Preface to Joh. Pachelbel, *Complete Works for Keyboard Instruments*, Boston, Wayne Leupold, 1999, published by Michael Belotti

The organ and registration

The instruments played by Nivers were fairly modest. At Saint-Sulpice the young musician had to wait until 1663 before being able to have at his disposal an instrument worthy of his talent, with 22 stops, three manuals and pull-down pedals. This organ was altered, modified and enlarged in 1675 by the addition of a Clairon and a Voix humaine. A conventional pedal coupler was provided, and an 8' Flûte and a Trompette⁸ were also added. The 'new' instrument was to offer Nivers a range of tone-colour conducive to experiment and enabled him to develop his art, thus fully opening up the path to classicism.

Between 1636 and 1665, the respective dates on which Marin Mersenne's *L'Harmonie universelle* (this work reproduces the registrations suggested by Charles Racquet) and the *Premier Livre d'Orgue* by Nivers, no table of suggested registration was published. Only the titles and styles of the music enable one to deduce what kind of registration might have been employed by Louis Couperin and by two anonymous composers.⁹

Nivers was thus the first to publish a table of prescribed 'mélange des jeux' in which the fine tonal effects required for the performance of his organ versets may be found. His estimate for a small chamber organ for the Sisters of Mercy at Gentilly¹⁰ has also survived. However, one may conclude that his organ works were obviously not intended only for the instruments to which he regularly had access, because his notes on the 'mélange des jeux'

⁸ Le grand-orgue de Saint-Sulpice, *Flûte Harmonique*, Nos 59 et 60, published by the Association Cavallé-Coll, 1991

⁹ Nicole Gravet, *L'orgue et l'art de la registration en France du XVIe siècle au début du XIXe siècle*, Paris, 1960; reprint by Ars Musicae, 1996

¹⁰ Estimate published by Pierre Hardouin, *Additif à connaissance*, No 53, *Connaissance de l'orgue*, 1993, cited by Philippe Lescat, preface to the *Troisième Livre d'orgue*, Nivers, facsimile, Fuzeau, 1994

end with the comment that 'nevertheless, one may modify all of them and use other stops at the organist's discretion and according to the disposition of the organ'. In this recording, I have taken some liberties with the registration in order to adapt it to the organ of Saint-Michel-en-Thiérache; I have also consulted the suggestions for registration indicated by composers such as Lebègue (1676) an anonymous text occurring in the *Deuxième Livre d'orgue* by Lebègue (1678), Gigault (1685), Raison (1688), Boyvin (1689), Chaumont (1695) and an article by Joseph Sauveur entitled *Application des sons harmoniques à la composition des jeux d'orgue*,¹¹ realising full well that some of these writers were partly making copies of their predecessors' work.

In his preface to the *Premier Livre* (Observations on the playing of organ music), through which one can catch a glimpse of how exacting he was in terms of expression, Nivers provides explanations about tempo and rhythm, the ideal position for the hand, ornaments and trills, clean playing and smoothly-flowing notes, accompanied by highly personal tables of ornamentation.

The organ music of Nivers

Certain preludes are particularly free and almost improvisatory in style, (those from the third volume are remarkably eloquent). They seem at times close in spirit to the German and Italian aesthetic exploited by Froberger in his magnificent Toccatas. However, the most striking stylistic aspect was the introduction by Nivers of 'choreography' derived from the music of Lully. The increasing influence of secular music made itself felt by an increase in the use of dance-rhythms. Later, André Raison pointed out that it was necessary 'to observe

¹¹ *Histoire de l'Académie royale des sciences*, Paris, 1704

the characteristics of the piece to be played and to ask oneself whether there is any relationship between a saraband, a gigue, a gavotte, a bourrée, a canarie, a passacaglia or chaconne, forging them into a cohesive entity [...] making sure that one plays in the same style as if playing the harpsichord, except that trills should be executed more slowly because of the sacred character of the building'.¹²

Composers of this period were able to incorporate almost any kind of idea in a French suite, and in so doing play down the contrast between sacred and secular, courtly music and music for the Church. Performers could choose individual movements and link them together as they thought fit. I wanted to set apart the three suites for organ without plainchant *alternatim* - while being fully aware that the organ suites were intended to be adapted to the hymn that was sung¹³, being free to determine the choice and order of the movements, to draw a comparison with dance suites. I think that this approach, based on the style of the individual pieces, will provide cohesion to the varied succession of the movements, and broaden the scope of this recording.

This view of dance suites written by contemporaries of Nivers could be extended to the inclusion of a lyrical adagio taken from a church sonata or an operatic recitative. Dance rhythms are associated with scenic recitative at the apogee of Lullian *tragédie lyrique*. It is precisely in his music in declamatory style that Nivers demonstrates his genius, especially in the Benedictus from the *Messe* - a sublime meditation, justly considered to be one of the finest moments in the French organ repertoire, even before the Tierce en taille first appeared.

¹² Preface to the *Livre d'orgue contenant cinq messes* d'André Raison, 1688

¹³ With the exception of Magnificat: The Magnificat is to be played by the organ in the tone of the antiphon and answered by the choir in faux-bourdon. Unknown source, 1630

Nivers showed a particular fondness for the modes corresponding to sacred music. In his attempt to retain a characteristic flavour of Gregorian chant, for meditative arias he employed rhythmic figures almost like neumes. Above certain notes he placed indications of added values - notated rubato, as it were - of the kind used by Messiaen in the 20th century. Similarly Muffat, who was a disciple of Lully, states: 'One must be aware of the appropriate tempo for each piece [...] and vary the duration of certain notes to obtain greater beauty'.¹⁴

With singers in mind, Bacilly explains that this entails 'ornamentation of French vocal music with discernment and infinite tenderness'.¹⁵

Nivers suggests that 'certain accents, and suggestions of languor cannot be notated, they can only be expressed when one sings [...] In order to make the notes flow properly, one should refer to the art of singing, because in these cases the organ should strive to imitate the voice'.¹⁶

In churches, the organist's role was above all linked to the liturgy, and mainly intended to function in alternation with plainchant. It was prescribed by the *Caeremoniale parisiense*.¹⁷ The following quotation is cited by Norbert Dufourcq:¹⁸

The music is concise [...] and the Church is unwilling to allow lengthy developments. But brevity was also appreciated outside the Church at this time.

¹⁴ Georg Muffat, *Florilegium primum*, Augsburg, 1695, *Florilegium secundum*, Passau, 1698

¹⁵ Bénigne de Bacilly, *L'art de Bien chanter*, Paris, 1668

¹⁶ Nivers, *Dissertation sur le chant grégorien*, 1683

¹⁷ Martin Sonnet, *Caeremoniale Parisiense ad usum omnium Ecclesiarum Collegiarum, Parochialium et aliarum Urbis et Diocesis Parisiensis*, 1662

¹⁸ Introduction to the *Troisième livre d'orgue* by Nivers, published by the Société française de musicologie, Paris, Heugel, 1974

According to Nikolaus Harnoncourt, 'French composers [...] interspersed their operas with short movements of an ephemeral nature. The followers of Lully contented themselves with pieces as short as possible, the melodies being kept extremely simple, like witticisms in which every unnecessary word was avoided.'¹⁹

However, the art of Nivers, as was the case with his contemporaries, went beyond miniature forms. Nivers was an industrious labourer who composed more than three hundred organ versets, the improvisatory character of which does not exclude refined but clear expressivity, even down to the most minute detail.

In his preface to Grigny's *Livre d'orgue*,²⁰ Nicolas Gorenstein noted several comparisons between Grigny and Nivers, particularly regarding their Offertoire settings. 'If it is quite obvious', wrote Gorenstein, 'that Grigny studied [Couperin's] *Livre*, it is no less evident that when comparing Grigny's *Livre* with those of his predecessors, one particularly stands out - it is the *Deuxième Livre* composed by Nivers.'

L'Offerte en fugue et dialogue (Offertory) is the central movement of the *Messe du Deuxième Livre*. The music already anticipates a concertante-like dialogue between the Positif and the Grand Jeu. Not only is it a highly organised and exceptionally well-inspired movement, it is also the first model of its kind in the repertory of the French classical organ. Before the last part of the *Offerte*, Nivers inserts a kind of jubilant chaconne in simple triple time in the central dialogue sung by the choir and played as if by the orchestra at the opera - then, just before the solemn conclusion, he employs an unexpected, rather serious kind of style, in compound quadruple time. Such contrasted forms and expressive resources, akin to those used at the theatre (a dramatic conception already existing in Italian music,

¹⁹ Nikolaus Harnoncourt, *Musik als Klangrede Wege zu einem neuen Musikverständnis*, Salzburg & Wien, 1982

²⁰ Nicolas Gorenstein, preface to Grigny's *Livre d'Orgue*, Collection Organa Gallica, Fleurier (Switzerland), Triton / Schola Cantorum, 1994

particularly Monteverdi), were an ideal medium for transporting listeners towards a spiritual world and for inciting them to devotion. The effects sought by Nivers depend on both the French penchant for ceremony and an Italianate inclination towards pathos. This kind of model had an obvious influence on his successors.

Nivers did not resist the Italian style. In fact a certain degree of Italian influence clearly is clearly to be observed in *Fugue de chromatique* [sic], corresponding to the setting of *Aeternum fac cum sanctis tuis* from the Te Deum, doubtless attributable to the aesthetic of Frescobaldi, and derived via Froberger, who is known to have been in Paris in 1652.

The third verse (*Castae parentis viscera caelestis*) is missing from the setting of the Hymn *O solis ortus cardine*. I have taken the liberty of borrowing one from the *Premier Livre*, modifying it slightly but respecting the plainchant text.

In view of the majestic character and length of the *Amen* from the Magnificat in the *Premier Livre*, I decided to play it on the *plein jeu*, in place of the more customary *petit plein jeu*.

The style of Nivers (or that of his disciples) is remarkably evident not only in the *Livre d'orgue* by Marguerite Thiéry,²¹ but also in the *Livre d'orgue* attributed to Geoffroy.²² In Thiéry's *Livre d'orgue*, some of the versets have been borrowed from Nivers' *Deuxième Livre*. The *Livre* attributed to Geoffroy constitutes a precious document for the study of continuo realisation and provides us with substantial examples of music to be dialogued between organ and

²¹ *Livre d'orgue* dit de Marguerite Thiéry, ca 1670-1683; the manuscript is preserved at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. L'Organiste liturgique, no 25, Fleurier (Switzerland), Schola Cantorum, 1958

²² *Livre d'orgue* (ca 1690) attributed to Jean-Nicolas Geoffroy (1633-1694), Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris. Published by Jean Bonfils, Paris, Heugel, 1974

singers. It is worth pointing out that the presumed Geoffroy scrupulously follows the advice given by Nivers in his *Observations* from the *Premier Livre d'Orgue*.

Although it is hard to resolve some of the problematical questions to do with details of performance, particularly in the restitution of ornaments²³ - following in the first place the advice of Nivers himself, and being guided by Jean Saint-Arroman's research²⁴ - in this recording I have tried to convey my admiration for the art of Nivers. My own idea of how the music should be performed is of course only one of many possible solutions. At the end of the anonymous manuscript called *Manière de toucher l'orgue dans toute la propreté et la délicatesse qui est en usage aujourd'hui à Paris*,²⁵ the author clearly states that there was no single way of playing the organ at this time.

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²³ Jean Saint Arroman, *L'approche de l'agrémentation des pièces d'orgue*, preface to the *Motets à voix seule, accompagnés de la basse continue*, Nivers, 1689

²⁴ Jean Saint Arroman, *L'interprétation de la musique française, 1661-1789*, I, *Dictionnaire d'interprétation*, II, *L'interprétation de la musique pour orgue*, Paris, H. Champion, 1983 and 1988

²⁵ The manuscript is to be found at the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Paris. Its presumed date is the second half of the seventeenth century.