The Dutch teen project StayTuned

Peter Ouwerkerk (Netherlands)

The Netherlands is a very rich organ country. In no other country are there more organs per km2 than in this small country at the North Sea. Another fact is that in recent decades almost all organs, large and small, have been expensively restored and are in excellent condition. Especially in the province of Groningen, where almost every small village has a Schnitger organ or an instrument of comparable quality. But what about Haarlem, Alkmaar, Utrecht, Rotterdam, Den Bosch...?

This is in sharp contrast to the fact that fewer and fewer young people are choosing to play the organ as amateur or professional. Fewer and fewer students are registering for organ and church music studies at the conservatories. Due to secularization, a development that is increasing in the Netherlands, many children no longer even know what an organ is, how to play it, how it functions and sounds.

If this development continues unchanged, the future of the organ will be disastrous: the precious instruments will become silent museum pieces, only collecting dust.

But organs must sound! How can we tackle this problem?

There are various initiatives in the Netherlands, and also in other countries, to increase interest in the organ. Most of you will know Organkids.nl. This is an elementary school project where a class of children build a small organ in an hour, including pipes, bellows and keys. When they have finished this job, the children can play on it and learn how an organ works and how the sound is created. After this hour of building and playing, the children visit a 'real' organ. Thanks to the knowledge they gained from building the small organ, they remember much more of the experience with the huge instrument.

Besides this Organkids project there are also many good and unfortunately also less good theater projects with the organ as an important 'actor'. The idea is that with these performances, the children learn that an organ is not just a church instrument, but that it is an instrument that is very interesting and also fun to play.

But then...

Even when a child learns to play the organ, the real challenge comes when they are 12, 13 years old. It is my experience, and that of many other colleagues, that even very enthusiastic teenagers around this age simply stop playing music. What's the problem?

Of course, secondary school is much more demanding than primary school. A lot of homework and also a lot of tests and exams, so that there is not much time left for a hobby like playing classical music.

But there is more to say about this. In his short presentation, Peter Ouwerkerk highlights various issues that are important during this period of puberty, and more importantly: how to deal with them.

Inspired by Annegret Schönbeck's ECPCM lecture in Hildesheim (2019), in which she presented, among other things, the Jugend-Orgelforum as an initiative of the Stader Orgelacademie, and thanks to the time that became available during the corona period, Peter developed StayTuned, a Dutch organ project for teens. With his experience as director of the International Organ Festival Haarlem, he approached it as professionally as possible. In some ways it has grown into a project that is quite different from the Stader Jugend-Orgelforum, as well as from existing teenage projects in Sweden, Norway, England and the United States, among others. But the goal is the same: to inspire organ-playing teenagers not to stop playing the organ during puberty, in the hope that some of them will choose for a professional organ study and thus secure the future of the organ.

In his presentation, Peter highlights some of the most important considerations and choices while working out the project. An important goal of this lecture is to inform organists and teachers across Europe about the project. His aim is to realize a worldwide network of organ projects for teenagers, to inspire and learn from each other. As the lack of young organ players is not an exclusively Dutch problem.

Read more about the project on the Dutch website www.staytuned.nu.