

Medieval organ culture to the 15th century, an overview

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Pre-10th c

There are but a few early fragments of information, including Pope Gregory's reference to the organ as "symbolic of the sermon" by the 6thc. Later reports, not always considered credible, claim that Pope Vitalian introduced the organ into the church service in 7thc. This was at about the same time as Isidor of Seville was excommunicating organists for being "theatrical people". [Aldhelm](#) (*639-†709) in England possibly brought organ technology from Ireland.

Later the Franks, inheritors of the hydraulis and Greco-Roman organ through the Byzantine organ and its various transformations, dominate the sparse chronicles, most notably with instruments at [Aix-la-Chapelle](#). This organ type converted itself through a period of about 5 centuries into the organ of late-medieval Europe as the Frankish empire dwindled. Documentary evidence is found in [Walahfrid Strabo](#)'s poem, mid-9thc and, in 873, Pope John VIII requested Archbishop Hanno of Freising to send "a good organ and organist to Rome, for the purposes of music education." An organ-builder [Georgius](#), a priest, lived in Venice in the 9thc.

10th c

Social life in Europe was ordered around food-gathering and defense, creating a hierarchical structure. The nobility provided earthly protection and the clergy offered spiritual succor to the vassals who worked the land in this feudal system. Between physical survival and heavenly reward there was little choice, hope for improvement or possibility of escape. The few organs on record belonged to the highest noble classes, and they evoked wonder for any vassals who happened to see and hear them.

Cathedrals and fortresses (sometimes with chapels) became the sacred and secular centers of life, the monasteries providing a refuge that served both needs and also began now to create organ cultures. Of these, the Benedictines were the most securely and longest-established as a Rule.

The first treatises on pipe-scaling appear c900.

In 915 Count Antonio founded a monastery in Canusina, donating gold and silver chalices as well as an organ. In about 992, St. [Oswald](#) donated a bellows organ, possibly a small "2-stop" Blockwerk, to a church, although the terms of the bequest suggest that it was a monastery chapel under his control. This organ appears to have been used only on feast days. Important instruments were known in England, among them [Abingdon](#), [Malmesbury](#) and [Winchester, Old Minster c994](#), as reported by [Wulfstan](#). Other literary evidence comes from [Dunstan](#). Such instruments undoubtedly had pedigrees reaching back more than a century, but we have no record of them.

The crusades had helped to establish Venice, already mentioned in connection with organs in the 9thc, as a focus on the route from England, Champagne, Flanders or the Rhine to the Holy

Land.

11thc

The “millenium” century saw a sudden flurry of organ activity. Aribo describes organ pipes in his treatise entitled *Musica*; another important treatise survives from the Anonymous of Bern, probably written in Fleury. A Benedictine establishment, Fleury Abbey is recorded as possessing an organ at this time.

The most significant contemporary source of information comes from [Theophilus](#), a Benedictine monk living in Frankish territory, somewhere around Alsace, in south western Germany or north eastern France. He described the furnishing of monasteries, including organs with key-sliders, copper or bronze pipes and feeder systems such as the “conflatorium”. [Baldric, Archbishop of Dol](#), later provides literary confirmation of some of these features.

Apart from the limited tenure of Palace Organs, e.g. at [Aix-la-Chapelle](#), chronicles report instruments installed at Augsburg, St. Ulrich 1066, Weltenburg, Monastery 1077, probably early forms of Blockwerk following the prototype of the organ at Winchester, Old Minster.

Smaller organ types also existed, as illustrated in the Pommersfelden Bible from Koblenz c1070. Medieval iconography often links David (in this case playing the harp) with other musical instruments. From the 13thc onwards, he is sometimes shown with an organ rather than a harp. Commencing c1078, the Sarum Rite became favorable to liturgical music, providing a possible catalyst to the development of organ culture.

12thc

The 12thc gave new impetus to organ activity as economic power migrated from the eastern Mediterranean to western and north western Europe. Towns began to flourish, the new agriculture improved people’s diets, survival was at least more assured now than it had been. Freiburg im Breisgau’s charter of liberties dates from these centuries. It is similar to that of Lübeck and the Hanseatic states around the Baltic and North seas - interestingly where organ culture was also often enough found.

Henry V affirmed principles of freedom for all, against the Bishops’ actions, especially in treating foreigners poorly. This affected the charters for Speyer and Worms - two more southern cities soon to possess organs of note. Organs were very much part of community life - sacred or secular, as a middle high German Poem from c1155 witnesses:

They began to sing sweetly
And dance with swift steps,
With harps and fiddles,
With organs and lyres.

Populations grew and the old feudal system lost its grip. To some extent social controls were taken over by the church, something which indirectly assured more support for organs. Civic autonomy and pride also began to encourage the construction of organs, which are always dependent to a certain degree on affluence.

Strife between popes and emperors sprang up. Organs played an increasing role in these dramas, particularly as authorities disputed the instrument's acceptance into the church. They were objects of pride, symbols of power and, alongside clocks, represented the most advanced technology of their day. With the growing populations of the towns, more of the common people probably came to hear, see and marvel at organs than ever before.

Instruments are known to have existed at [Freising 1158](#) and [Abingdon](#). The monastery at Petershausen had an organ at about this time. Other documentation for organs is found in the Harding Bible (dated 1109); 1114-1130 a letter of Baldric; c1120 by [William of Malmesbury](#) in *Vita sancti Dunstani*; 1146-7 copying of the Eadwine Psalter; a1166 in Aelred's utterances.

This century also marks the earliest chronicles of the possible existence of organ pedals. Some of these instruments, especially those used in folk festivals, must have been the small Portatives mentioned in Gottfried von Straßburg's "Tristan" or Heinrich von Türlein's "Krone".

13thc

Medieval civilization reached its apogee, with Gothic art and architecture as well as the social developments of guilds, civic councils, and monastic life. Intellectual life was dominated by the church, the Benedictines still playing a leading role. Scholasticism, encouraged notably by Thomas Aquinas, led to arguments about the appropriateness of organs in churches. Feudal structures further broke up with the emergence of city-states (especially in Italy) while the [Hanseatic League](#) grew strongly in the north. A consistently chronicled regional organ culture began in northern Europe

In the aftermath of Venice's early start with the instrument, mention of it in Italy is again found in 1287, when the Council of Milan decreed that only the organ was to be used in church; [Ægidius of Zamora](#), head of the Franciscan Order living in Spain, confirms this. [Dante Alighieri](#) also mentions organs in sacred contexts, which suggests that the instrument continued to be played in churches, despite objections. He hints at the use of alternatim. Further peripheral confirmation of the instrument's consolidated use liturgically is found in rubrics that refer to instrumental practice.

The [Rutland Psalter](#) shows a detailed organ with keys played by fingers, probably illustrating the new playing techniques, and an impressive wind confflorium. Other instruments are recorded in 1225 at Erfurt Marienkirche and Erfurt Peterskirche 1226 (1291 destroyed by lightning), and in 1230 at Bonn. However it was the instrument by Conrad von Scheyern at Scheyern Abbey, 1245 that stands out, not only for technical and tonal advances critical to the organ's future development, but also because of the rare detail we have of it. It had the first certainly-known Quint ranks, variable pipe-scalings, differing pipe-forms, and an increase in size over known earlier instruments. Conrad's *Glossarium Salomonis* is traditionally dated 1245. The earliest organ at Lübeck, Domkirche, 1259 was but one of a number to be placed there in the 13th-16thcs.

14thc

Economic decline now came to much of Europe. It lasted through into the 15thc. Exceptions to this included the Hanseatic League. This partially explains the flourishing of organs in the

north, and the international activity of some organ builders (e.g. [Sira Arngrimr Brandsson](#) in Norway and Iceland and “Meister Werner” from Brandenburg). We also hear of organists - [Francesco Landini](#) (c1325-1397), blind Italian organist, organ consultant, composer, philosopher and poet, was one of few of the earliest named organists of consequence.

The first of the most serious outbreaks of the great plague spread throughout most of Europe in 1348, and the Inquisition (which had first been instituted in 1231) began to cast a dark shadow. The church regulated its use of organs; high festivals were the main if not only occasions they were played.

Organs inspired a complex emotional cocktail of awe, wonder and joy - textual references as far apart as Einsiedeln in 1314 in a quotation of Magister Rudolf von Radegg relating to the joy the organs gave them here at Christmas

“Exspirat festum, discedunt gaudia nostra; Organa desistunt, et lyra nostra tacet“
("when the celebration is over our joy also finishes since the
organs sound no more and our lyre is silenced.")

and Geoffrey Chaucer:

His voys was murier than the murie organ / On Messedays that in the church gon.
(His voice was merrier than the merry organ, that played on Sundays in the church.)

Instruments were known to have existed at Barcelona, Cathedral 1345, Dijon, Notre Dame 1350, and Halberstadt 1361. Towards the end of the century, the famous Gotland organs, including that at Norrlanda (c1370-1400), were built, some containing rollerboards, critical new technology needed for the larger instruments which were being developed. An early record of an Italian organ comes from Firenze, SS Annunziato 1379. From 14thc- organ builders are chronicled in Frankfurt am Main.

Apart from the permanently installed Blockwerks, now growing in size, smaller organ types such as portatives and positives are also depicted (e.g. Peterborough Psalter). The earliest ms of extant organ music, the [Robertsbridge Codex](#), dates from mid-14thc. If one of Peter Williams’ hypotheses is correct, then organs were simply used to provide clamor, much as bells were. Against this it might be recalled, however, that the organ was used in tuneful, secular, dance music contexts or accompanied chant or other melodic music in liturgical drama - utilizing portatives or positives. It is difficult to know how much the use of organs would change between “external” and “internal” sacred applications or completely secular events. The concept of a “dance portative” may be amusing today, but it was entirely possible then as literary sources much earlier had hinted (an 1184 account of a peoples’ festival in Mainz):

There was playing and shouting,
Pushing and shoving,
Piping and singing,
Fiddles and dancing,
Organs and strings,
Amongst many joyful things.

A 13th Bohemian text might support the clamor theory in an “external” context, but it also implies that the organ was the musical equal to other instrument at the time.

“The people of Bohemia delight in the performance of a dance troupe. Everyone rejoices; singing and happiness resound. There is a beating of drums and a scraping of citharas, and all the while loud blasts of the trumpet ring out. The lyre twangs, and now the dancers twirl round; the chorus proclaims its joy, the organs peal, and the king arrives, laughing with everyone gathered there.”

The century was categorized by technological and tonal development, multiple manuals appeared, even multiple organs (Rastede Klosterkirche - two by 1374), the composition of organ music, evolution of dedicated notation systems and the increasingly international operations of organ builders.

The instrument grew larger and ever more impressive, lower-pitched pipes were introduced, most notably the first known 32's. With this there was perhaps a little more awe, even fear, added to the “clamor, tunefulness and festive” organ equation. It could be that awe and fear were seen as desirable controlling techniques in the course of the Inquisition. This may have been a component in the church’s adoption of the instrument - which received its earliest more notable successes in the medieval north where some of the largest Blockwerks with the lowest (32') sounds were to be found.

And where a Reformation was brewing as it was also around Czechoslovakia - 13th-14th c.

15th c

In 1438 Albert of Habsburg became emperor. Thereafter the Habsburgs held the throne almost continuously until the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806.

The 15th c presents us with a remarkable array of organ types and the further development of notated organ music. Iconographical depictions of smaller organ types are plentiful during the 15th c, including manuscript illuminations, paintings, sculptures and other media, such as the famous *La Dame à la licorne* tapestries. Magdeburg, St. Jakobi possessed a Blockwerk b1400. The most important extant manuscript about organ building is Arnaut de Zwolle’s treatise on organbuilding (c1440), which includes specifications for the organs that previously existed at Dijon, Notre-Dame 1350/1445/1447? and Salins b1440. It relates mainly to the further developing Blockwerk and the compositions of its now impressively-endowed Mixtures.

The century also saw major installations at Hagenau, St. Georg 1491 (Alsace) by Friedrich Krebs, another at Weimar, Castle Church in 1492 by Hieronymus Keyholtz of Bayreuth and yet another at Bamberg, Cathedral in 1493 by Conrad Rottenburger. Leonhard Mertz was active around Frankfurt am Main in the late 15th c.

These organs have all disappeared, but other organs today still contain pipework, casework or other components surviving from the 15th c, such as Sion 1435; Altenbruch, St. Nicolai 1498. Ostönnen, Andreaskirche and Krewerd, Hervormde kerk still partially date back to the 15th c. The organ previously at Basel, St. Peter (Münster) 1482-96, built by Hans Tugi, was emulated in a new instrument at Basel, Predigerkirche 1985.

One of the most important technological achievements, stop-separation, is found on innovative instruments of the time, such as those still existing at Rysum c1425-57 and Bologna, San Petronio 1474. Other notable organs were constructed at the turn of the century, some, or fragments of them still existing today. They include

Old Radnor, St. Stephen c1500
Kiedrich c1500-20
Salzburg, Fortress Hohensalzburg 1502-
Alkmaar, Grote of Sint Laurenskerk 1511

Collections of 15thc organ music illustrate two main approaches: “organisare”, making polyphony over a tenor pattern, and “intabulare”, arranging vocal models for the keyboard. Organists learned to create music over tenor patterns, as exemplified in the 1452 *Fundamentum organisandi* of Conrad Paumann, included in the [Buxheimer Orgelbuch](#) c1455. This large compilation contains many arrangements of vocal models, as well as free preludia. The Italian [Codex Faenza](#), c1430, demonstrates how organists created a free upper voice over plainsong in the tenor, presenting us in the process with the earliest surviving liturgical organ music. It also includes intabulations of vocal polyphony in the same two-part texture. The earliest free preludes are found in the 1448 *Tablatur* of Adam Ileborgh of Stendal; the rubrics to these five short pieces refer to the use of pedals. There is little else; the 1431 collection of Ludolf Wilkin of Winsem entitled “*Predigtsammlung*” contains a few pieces.

Antonio Squarcialupi (1416-1480), Italian organist at Firenze, S Maria del Fiore (Cathedral), organ consultant and composer, was an important figure, especially for his surviving collection of early organ music. The 15thc *Codex Squarcialupi* is named because it was a collection in his ownership; no composition of his has survived.

The 14th and 15thc were seminal to the development of later organ cultures throughout Europe, creating many watershed innovations for the instrument’s technology and use. Like vines cultivated from a common source, national schools grew in diverse and complex ways from the roots of late-medieval organ building and playing. Yvonne Rokseth evokes the joy and wonder aroused by organs of this era, devoting her scholarship to records of early organs and editions of the music composed for them:

"Normally a curtain made of precious metal covered the organ. We get the impression of a giant altar or shrine. But on Feast-days, when music was allowed, the curtains are drawn up, the wing-like doors which stand in front of the glistening fields of pipes are opened. At this point the golden carvings and decorated pipes, encased in the blue and red housing, are seen in all their radiance. The organist seats himself at the keys. The ornamental stars and planets at the top of the organ case begin to turn and the figures appear to come to life. A wonderful, and quite remarkable theater has commenced in the Gothic Cathedral with its columns pointing heavenward, its colorful windows, its multitude of chapels and hanging tapestries. The priests move toward the altar to the sounds of the organ. The *Te Deum* is sung, as in antiquity, antiphonally between priests and people - it was always done this way at those happy and joyous festivals of the people."

(Translation by Patricia Sue Fitzsimmons, University of Rochester, 1978).