

Organ thunderstorm in the Hofkirche in Lucerne - how it happened

from

Wolfgang Sieber, former collegiate and court organist at St. Leodegar Lucerne 1992-2021

The construction of open 32' pipes as part of the Great Court Organ was the first clap of thunder that heralded the coming of the storms, which would shake the foundations of the Court Church for generations to come. In 1651, organ builder Hans Geisler from Salzburg succeeded in manufacturing huge resonating bodies up to ten meters long (i.e. "sounding pipes") with distinct pitches. They sounded like terrifying rolls of thunder. 200 years later, two other visionaries worked in the Lucerne Court Church: Father Leopold Nägeli, at that time a collegiate organist and technician, and organ craftsman Friedrich Haas, who built the organs in the Bern and Basel Cathedrals. Nägeli facilitated the necessary political-formal conditions, and Haas (at that time already in dialogue with father Joseph Heinrich, one of the legendary representatives of the Breitenbach dynasty) proceeded to build an extension of the organ at his own expense – a remote division incorporating the unique rain machine, positioned under the free-standing roof truss of the nave of the Court Church. As of 1862, acoustic rain would patter through the largest of the four ceiling rosettes into the nave.

Thus, Lucerne's "organ storm legend" took its course, as Mark Twain aptly described the spectacle in the Hofkirche in his fictional satirical travelogue *A Tramp Abroad* in 1880. Joseph Heinrich Breitenbach' son, Franz Josef (collegiate organist 1889-1921), popularized the organ thunderstorms (Orgelgewitter) with his daily performances. Along with his obligations as monastery organist, providing ecclesiastical organ services, he was the founder of the Lucerne Organist School, the first institution of its kind in Switzerland, where he also worked as a teacher. Among others, the composers Fritz Brun – the "Brahms of Switzerland" – and Josef Garovi were his students.

The organ thunderstorm tradition, cultivated by the Breitenbachs, became a trademark: their "ear plays" (Ohrenspiele) constituted an integral and unique part of their organ concerts, resulting in a highly personal style. In 1947, the original score of Breitenbach's "Organ Thunderstorm" was performed for the last time. It was not until 1967 that Breitenbach's carefully preserved thunderstorm music was revived a few more times in concert by the composer and organist Josef Garovi. In 1970, it was even recorded for the label FONOGesellschaft Luzern (Edition Cron), seemingly ringing in a comeback. Alas, silence fell and no more thunderstorms could be heard: the rather reserved attitude of church musicians at that time towards this socio-psychologically controversial sound concoction brought things to a grinding halt - until the year 1993...

On June 1, as the new Stifts- und Hoforganist, I launched my composition *Thunderstorm & Organshower*: a gentle storm cloud rose and colored the sky with ever new meteorological sceneries year after year. Guest organists played thunderstorm-like, Bernhard Billeter even conceived and mastered a *New Lucerne Organ Thunderstorm*: unforgettable! Johannes Geffert gave his CD recording played on the Great Court Organ the title *Alpine Symphony*

(*Alpenfantasie*) and recorded several long-lost compositions depicting images of nature. One day after the Chapel Bridge fire (1993), Otto Jolias Steiner performed his composition *Fire Evening (Feuerabend)* making use of a burning globe, the Great Court Organ, news and photo spreads as well as Franz Liszt's *Prometheus*. Finally, Lucerne author Dölf Steinmann (1942-2009) leaves behind a comprehensive account of my *organ storm (Orgelgewitter)* in his book of stories *Nachklang*.

The Association of Organ Friends of the Lucerne Court Church (today Lucerne Organ Friends), founded in 2004, promoted 2005 the public start of the midday thunderstorm, performed every Tuesday just after twelve noon, with video transmissions into the nave, helpers in the back- and foreground, people accompanying interested visitors to the organ loft, or even high up into the attic of the remote station with the rain machine. Each and every year, thousands of thunderstorm aficionados and organ enthusiasts were drawn to the Hofkirche. In addition, I performed individual organ thunderstorms for children, the elderly, private functions from Lucerne, Switzerland and abroad. The "thunderstorm proceeds" supported the evening recitals of internationally renowned organist personalities and the lunchtime thunderstorms formed the economic core of the Lucerne Organ Summer, the Echo Festival as well as other musical events with the "Great Court Organ at the Center".

The newly revived Lucerne organ storms also made way for a more receptive and tolerant attitude towards innovation. Thanks to the help of other organ enthusiasts, I was able to realize my idea of incorporating the historic pipes stored in the attic of the Hofkirche into a new remote division of the Great Court Organ. In 2015, the Echowerk (echo organ), which was financed with private funds, was installed in the front altar area of the Hofkirche and ceremoniously inaugurated with the ECHO Festival. This newly created addition to the organ allows for more subtle control of the instrument's spatial, dynamic and color qualities, thereby enabling Auro-3D sound (an immersive surround audio format). A beacon of acoustic innovation, this (r)evolutionary step – paired with appropriate music – assured the Great Court Organ its place in public life. Works by Reger, Franck, Messiaen, Eben were performed, the compositions of Mendelssohn, Hakim, Langlais, Rütli, Sieber were recorded, concerts ventured into Gregorian, folk, funk, jazz or rap music. Time and again, the Great Court Organ and its rain machine invited everyone to experience extraordinary and exciting music in the church hall.

Over the years, this interplay of music, everyday impressions, nature's manifestations, word and video contributions connected to current events (the organ thunderstorm in memory of Polo Hofer was moderated in Bernese German) has propelled the Great Court Organ out into the vastness of human fantasies and dreams – what an amazing box of treasures it is...

My successor Stéphane Mottoul carries on the tradition of organ thunderstorms as part of his organ summer program.

Frank Sikora, englische Fassung