

The American Organist

May 2018





ORGELKIDS USA:

AN INTRODUCTION

BY ERIN SCHEESSELE

ORGELKIDS is a Dutch program that empowers the public, including young children, to personally assemble a working mechanical pipe organ. Following our young son's interest in pipe organs, our family has worked since 2015, with the help of various AGO chapters, to bring this innovative program to the States. Here we offer that story.

My six-year-old was frustrated—frustrated at not being able to build his own working pipe organ. So, it was in desperation in March 2015 that I turned to the font of all knowledge and Googled “pipe organ kit for children.” Google rose to the occasion and presented a video of a gentleman serenely assembling a petite organ. He was demonstrating a kit he had designed specifically for children to build a two-octave, two-rank, mechanical-action pipe organ. With no glue or screws, the kit was intended to be reusable, assembled time and time again. It was beautiful. It was perfect. It was in the Netherlands.

“Let’s bring it here,” said my six-year-old, Peter.

Deeper investigation and a heavy reliance on Google’s translate function led us to the organization responsible for the kit, Orgelkids, and its founder, Lydia Vroegindewij. Ms. Vroegindewij founded Orgelkids in 2009 as a pipe organ education and outreach organization to engage the younger generation with the Netherlands’ rich heritage of pipe organs. In 2012, she teamed up with Wim Janssen, the retired organbuilder whom we had first



Elementary school student enjoying his time at Noack Opus 93 during the organ crawl, Corvallis, Oreg.

seen in the video, to design what they call the “do-organ,” an organ designed for people to repeatedly assemble and disassemble, as opposed to more passive demo-organs. With the Orgelkids organ, even young children are welcomed to build a working pipe organ in well under an hour.

The concept of a reusable organ kit as an educational tool was so compelling and Mr. Janssen’s design so elegant in its execution, it seemed well worth investing our time and energy in realizing it as a local resource. This project also appeared to be the right-size educational undertaking for a highly motivated nearly seven-year-old. While this idea percolated, a half-page notice in these pages caught our eye: the Centennial Millennium Fund of the New York City AGO Chapter was seeking grant proposals. Peter was game, and he learned new vocabulary words such as “proposal,” “budget,” “fundraising,” and “grant writing.”

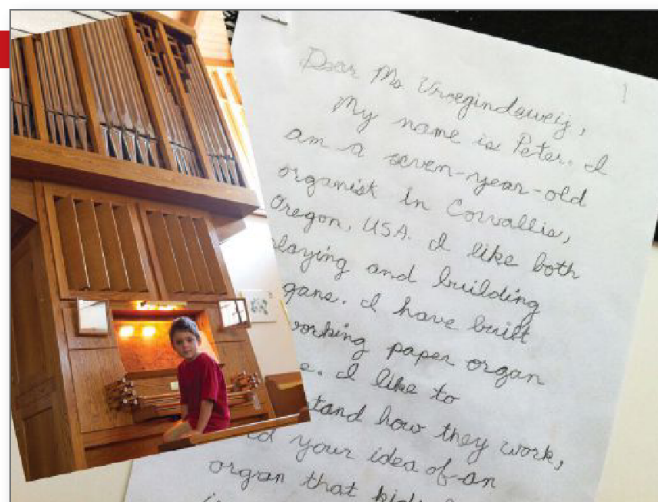
By this time, Peter had been a member of the AGO for a couple of years, and AGO seemed a natural partner in this endeavor. Our nearest AGO chapter, in Eugene, Oreg., had been very welcoming of Peter. He attended his first AGO event as a three-year-old and was invited to perform in the chapter’s annual “King of Instruments” recital as a four-year-old. Therefore, we approached the Eugene chapter with the proposal that Orgelkids can integrate seamlessly with and enhance AGO’s existing outreach curricula. More importantly, from the perspective of my young family, Orgelkids complements and extends AGO’s three existing national outreach programs:



PipeWorks (ages 9–12), Pedals, Pipes & Pizza (PPPs, ages 9–14), and Pipe Organ Encounters (POEs, ages 13 and up).

Orgelkids . . .

- is designed to capture interest at a younger age than AGO's existing programs.
- lowers the threshold for participation: PPPs and POEs have the prerequisite of prior piano experience. Orgelkids has no requirements for its audience beyond curiosity.
- is mobile. It comes to the audience rather than vice versa.
- can integrate with the existing programs, becoming part of PPPs and POEs, or it can stand alone.



AGO member Peter Scheessele wrote to Orgelkids founder, Lydia Vroegindeweij, asking for permission to bring her program to the States.

Given this potential, the Eugene chapter's board, under the leadership of Jane Knobel, agreed to collaborate on bringing Orgelkids to Oregon, serving as advisors and fiscal sponsor to our efforts.

With Eugene AGO's cooperation in place and ideas for potential funding, the next step was to approach Orgelkids in the Netherlands. Peter wrote to Ms. Vroegindeweij, outlining our fund-raising plans and asking if he could work to bring her program to the States. She promptly replied, "Yes!" It was like Christmas morning around the breakfast table for Peter and his younger brother, Simon, when Mr. Janssen's hand-drawn plans arrived.

2016 was a year of fund-raising. We set a fund-raising goal that would commission the first two Orgelkids organs in the U.S. and cover startup costs. A grant from the New York City's AGO Centennial Millennium Fund kicked off our fund-raising efforts. That, combined with additional support from the San Francisco and Seattle AGO Chapters' Special Projects Funds, met two-thirds of our fund-raising goal. The purpose of these three funds,



Tuned to A440, Orgelkids USA plays well with others, but enjoys the occasional duel, too.

chaired by Keith S. Tóth, Helen Pereira, and Marion Anderson, respectively, is to do the work of the Guild by supporting innovative programs that promote the pipe organ to the general public, and the Orgelkids organ does just that. We raised the final third of our startup funds with a social media campaign reaching organ enthusiasts from eleven states, good old traditional lemonade stands, and a not-so-traditional virtual busking campaign. We were awarded our first funding in January 2016 and by January 2017 we had reached our fund-raising goal.

The appeal and broad application of Orgelkids was apparent early in our work, leading us to broaden the scope of our efforts to not just procure an organ for our local community but rather to serve as a pilot program for the States. In mid-2016 we launched Orgelkids USA as an independent all-volunteer educational nonprofit organization with 501c3 tax-exempt status. Ms. Vroegindeweij serves on our board. Orgelkids USA's mission is to help facilitate the growth of a network

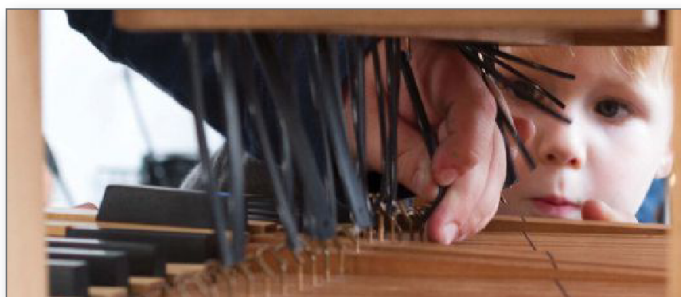


Which of these instruments can be assembled by children from the audience prior to the concert? Orgelkids USA can make concert-going both intergenerational and interactive. (Amore Concert, March 2017)

of independent organ kits nationwide. As a pilot program, we have laid the groundwork for such growth: we have identified and engaged world-class organ builders, resolved transportation and insurance logistics, developed a curriculum, and put the States' first organ to work, providing proof of concept as we grow Orgelkids USA's outreach portfolio.

2017 was a year of putting the kit through its paces. Uses for Orgelkids cover a spectrum, from small, tightly choreographed groups to being at the mercy of heaving throngs in a public space, from deep multifaceted and impactful engagements to fleeting, cursory interest (but new awareness nonetheless). We have been testing Orgelkids in every possible setting for meaningfully engaging the public with the pipe organ: public schools, outdoor markets, summer music camps, choir retreats, Bach in the Subway, Maker Faires, Organ Unleashed at the steps of Montreal's Notre Dame Basilica, adult education programs, and museum and prerecital workshops.

In our first year, we conducted five Orgelkids Encounters in public elementary schools. The Orgelkids program, being hands-on and interdisciplinary, is very attractive to both grantors and collaborators. In our first year of operating (from November 2016 to November 2017) Orgelkids USA secured three grants from the cultural coalitions of the Oregon Cultural Trust to fund Orgelkids Encounters, "The Pipe Organ: from Construction to Concerts," in local schools.



A young child is just the right height to attach trackers at the Seattle chapter's mini-Maker Faire, September 2017.



Have organ, will travel. Simon Scheessele, age seven, hauls an Orgelkids USA kit to UPS to be shipped to AGO regional conventions in Salt Lake City and Montreal, summer 2017.

Briefly outlined, an Orgelkids Encounter consists of (a) introduction and context of organs in the week(s) prior to building. Students learn the history, culture and composers of the pipe organ. (b) Students then build the pipe organ across two class periods and play and explore their creation for an additional week in music class. The fine materials and craftsmanship of the Orgelkids USA organs are innately evident to the children, conveying both the trust being given to the students and the dignity of the instrument they are constructing. Children are typically thrilled and eager for their turn to heft the fine-grained pieces. (c) Soon after the in-class build, each class goes on an organ crawl. The expressions of awe and wonder when the students hear the first notes from the organ they built are repeated when they step through the sanctuary's doors and into the presence of what, to you, would be a modest two-manual organ, but to the students is certainly the *largest*

organ ever. Yet, even as they re-hinge their jaws, they are striding toward the behemoth with the comprehension and confidence of a builder. (d) Encounters culminate in an invitation to a local concert, sometimes featuring "their organ." That their instrument is making music in the hands of a professional musician, accompanying other instruments, firmly establishes that what they built was not a toy but truly the King of Instruments . . . in miniature. And the music being performed, most likely unfamiliar, will be that much more engaging and accessible. That the Orgelkids USA organ is tuned to A440 is a critical component of this outreach, taking the educational moment and allowing us to directly tie into the music and musicality of the pipe organ, collaborating with ensembles and either dueling or dueting with full-size organs. (e) The final component of the Orgelkids Encounter is the take-home materials. Along with the invitation to a specific recital, we send the students home equipped to deepen their new interest in pipe organs with a list of local resources: ongoing recital series as well as pertinent radio programming: Roger Sherman's *The Organ Loft* and Michael Barone's *Pipedreams*.

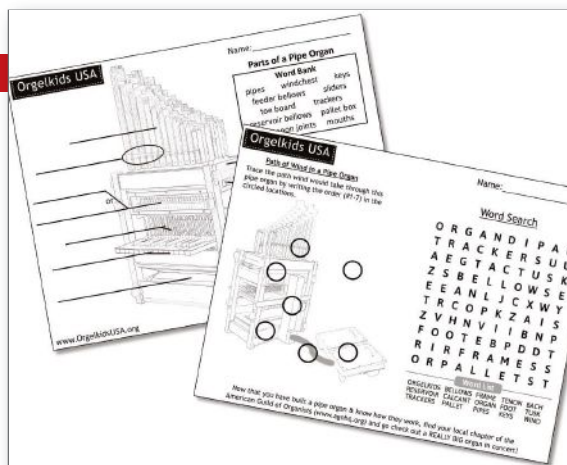
We've been told by a parent this resource list is on their refrigerator door!

Eugene chapter member Richard Guy and Springfield, Oreg., public school teacher Dana Mahoney pieced together the original multifaceted Orgelkids Encounter that benefited immensely from the involvement of the Eugene AGO Chapter. During the in-class build, each of the five stations (pipes, frame, windchest and trackers, wind, keyboard) was manned by an AGO volunteer to assist the children. Barbara Baird hosted the Springfield students at Beall Hall at University of Oregon, and Julia Brown hosted them on their organ crawl at First United Methodist Church, Eugene. Like subsequent Orgelkids Encounters, this one culminated in an invitation to attend an organ recital. However, given that transportation can be an impediment for this particular population and may have precluded these children from attending a cultural event across town, the grant included an ingenious workaround to get children to the recital: funding to bus not only the students but also their parents and siblings to the Eugene chapter's weekend recitals, "King of Instruments" in January and "PipeScreams" in October 2017.

By empowering young children to build what can be a complex instrument, they can take pride in their accomplishment and discover that the pipe organ *is* accessible to them and, indeed, welcomes them. The objective of Orgelkids is to instill in children who encounter and construct the Orgelkids kit a sense of entitlement to all things organ: its composers, music, and culture. You can find a more in-depth description of in-school Orgelkids Encounters at OrgelkidsUSA.org.

For extracurricular outreach, the power and value of Orgelkids is twofold. First, Orgelkids can serve as an informative resource to those already engaging with the pipe organ and interfacing with the AGO, enriching those experiences (see above). Orgelkids is also opening new doors for exciting innovative outreach to engage the public in venues where the public would least expect to encounter a pipe organ, in applications where its identity as an organ is almost secondary . . . guerrilla outreach, if you will, the purpose simply being to raise awareness. If the multifaceted in-school encounter above seems daunting, then guerrilla outreach may be for you. Some of my favorite implementations have been low energy, simply laying Orgelkids out for the public to figuratively trip upon. You can read about some of our inaugural year's guerrilla tactics in *Vox Humana*, the new online journal and AGO affiliate.

The success of Orgelkids in public is due in part to its wide appeal that extends well beyond the rare pipe organ-playing child. Orgelkids appeals to children 4, 8, 16, 32, and 64 years old. It appeals to the deconstructionist as much as to the builder. Orgelkids entices the tinkerer as much as it calls to the musician. (Possibly more so, as it certainly doesn't resemble an instrument when one first encounters it!) The Orgelkids organ is an excellent ambassador for the King of Instruments as it makes pipe organs accessible by reducing the ancient, sometimes-imposing instrument down to its mechanical basics.



Worksheets for Orgelkids Encounter participants

The Orgelkids program is growing. When we first made contact with Ms. Vroegindeweij in 2015, there were only two kits in existence, available for rent around the Netherlands. There are now approximately nine organ kits scattered around the Netherlands and Belgium. The Royal Canadian College of Organists (RCCO) is launching Orgelkids-CAN with eight kits, the first national, top-down implementation of Orgelkids. Orgelkids USA commis-

sioned its first two organ kits from U.S. builders. The Hawaii AGO was the first chapter to commission an Orgelkids USA kit, and the Los Angeles and Long Beach chapters were the first to commission a kit jointly, a collaboration facilitated by their AGO district convener, Peter Bates. Orgelkids USA Opus 1e is destined for Portland, Maine, to work alongside Kotzschmar Jr. as ambassadors for the Kotzschmar Organ in Merrill Auditorium.

You can add Orgelkids to your outreach repertoire. While having two organ kits to rent out around the country was workable for the Netherlands, it does not work well for the U.S. We do rent out an organ for introductory visits to a region, but shipping to share this resource at the national scale is not a long-term solution, as the one most benefiting from that arrangement would be UPS. As a pilot program, our mission is to help grow an independent network of kits across the U.S. We invite you to join our effort, be part of the growth and work to bring this resource to your community. AGO chapters are the natural curators of Orgelkids kits for their communities. We want to get Orgelkids out to AGO chapters, introduce them to the kit's potential as an educational outreach tool, and generate enthusiasm to invest in a local or regional kit. The simple implementation of Orgelkids makes it a boon to any organization whose mission is to promote community appreciation and understanding of, and engagement with, the pipe organ.

The niche exists and the need to engage both the young and unaware is real. Peter is not unique, if one is allowed to say such things about one's offspring. Other mothers, eager to support their young child's intense interest in your marvelous mechanical musical machines, encounter a dearth of resources and have turned to Google. I know, because now Google leads them to Orgelkids USA, and in the near future we hope we can direct them to the AGO chapter nearest them that has added Orgelkids to their repertoire. Having an Orgelkids kit readily available enables you, dear reader, to interject your favorite instrument and its music into everyday life. You have long known what a marvel the organ is, and now with Orgelkids you can share that wonder with the public more easily.

For an in-depth look at Orgelkids USA with videos and recordings, see the forthcoming article in Vox Humana, an AGO affiliate publication, at Voxhumanajournal.com

Erin Scheessele, PhD, serves as the volunteer executive director of Orgelkids USA. She can be reached at erin@OrgelkidsUSA.org.