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A New Organ Outreach: Orgelkids USA



Introduction

Orgelkids entices the public to engage with the pipe organ in an entirely new and powerful way by inviting them to build a working pipe organ. Here we recount highlights from Orgelkids' inaugural year in the United States, illustrating Orgelkids' innovative capacity to engage the public in venues where they would least expect to encounter a pipe organ, in applications where its identity as an organ is almost secondary, the purpose being to drive new interest and awareness.

Lydia Vroegindeweyj founded Orgelkids, a pipe organ education and outreach organization, in 2009 in the Netherlands to engage the younger generation with the Netherlands' rich cultural heritage of pipe organs. In 2012, she worked with Wim Janssen, a retired organbuilder, to design and build a reusable kit which empowers anyone, even young children, to build a working, two-rank, two-octave mechanical-action pipe organ in as little as 30 minutes. Orgelkids USA launched in 2016 as an all-volunteer educational nonprofit organization with the mission to help facilitate the growth of a nationwide network of these independent organ kits. We shared our story of bringing Orgelkids to the States and the role the American Guild of Organists (AGO) played in that effort in the recent May 2018 issue of *The American Organist*. That article also outlines our more traditional in-school Orgelkids Encounters, "The Pipe Organ: From Construction to Concerts." In this article we share a couple of our public impromptu Orgelkids outreach endeavors in everyday places like shopping malls, debut a time-lapse video of an Orgelkids workshop hosted at a museum, and discuss the kit's characteristics that make it an ideal ambassador for the King of Instruments.



2017 was a year of putting the kit through its paces. Orgelkids kits work across a spectrum of group sizes and time budgets, from small, tightly choreographed groups to being at the mercy of heaving throngs in a public space, resulting in deep multi-faceted and impactful experiences or fleeting, cursory interest, but new awareness nonetheless. We have been exploring the kit's ability to meaningfully engage (and educate) the public in a variety of venues: public schools, outdoor markets, Bach in the Subway, and Maker Faires, Organ Unleashed at the steps of Montreal's Notre Dame Basilica, adult education programs, museum workshops, and pre-concert workshops. We offer the following vignettes from our inaugural year as proof of concept.

As this was the kit's first foray in American public, we were unsure how it would be received. We were pleasantly surprised by how many families stopped to engage with the organ building process and how parents gave their children the time necessary to complete the process. The organ was assembled, played and disassembled twice before the concert resumed in the mall's food court. The kit worked its magic and children eagerly queued for their turn to insert a pipe, lay in a key, or hook up a tracker. Several families got the "full effect" by transitioning from the concert to the construction and vice versa.

Music Education at Science Fairs: Seattle mini Maker Faire

In September 2017, Seattle AGO presented Orgelkids at the mini Maker Faire at Seattle's Museum of Pop Culture, thrusting the Guild into the "DIY" zeitgeist. Maker Faires are a family-friendly celebration of creating and inventing; faire goers are active participants, moving from booth to booth exploring skill set after skill set. At this particular faire, participants could try 3D printers, virtual reality hang gliding, dismantling electronics, driving robots, soldering computer boards, even starting fire by rubbing two sticks together. The King of Instruments was right at home amid the hubbub and high-tech options (coincidentally, our neighbors in the adjacent booth were building kites with carbon fiber frames, flawed scrap from a manufacturer that supplies organbuilders!).

Intrepid AGO members took turns manning the Orgelkids booth and sharing Orgelkids with the Seattle "makers." Spread across two tables, the kit's pieces offered plenty of opportunity and flexibility to engage a lone builder or a conglomeration of groups. People of all ages, arranging and installing the pipes, would stand shoulder to shoulder with strangers assembling the frame. Fairegoers would build the organ, play it, and then we would break it down for the next group.

People engage with Orgelkids in a variety of ways for a variety of reasons. As a pile of pretty wood, Orgelkids allows people to project their own interests onto it, where an intact instrument might intimidate. At the conclusion of one build, a group of teenage boys coolly strolling past the Orgelkids booth glanced back dismissively at the completed organ, being played by its builders. But they stopped dead in their tracks when I called out to them, "Wanna take it apart?" They were hooked and stayed to take it apart and rebuild it.



An Orgelkids USA organ kit in the process of assembly at the Seattle mini Maker Faire.

In these public settings where the builder encounters Orgelkids unexpectedly, it is a delight to witness the determination young children bring to this task of hooking up 24 trackers, or sorting and aligning 48 pipes. Ms. Vroegindewey observed that children photographed building Orgelkids are often not smiling — they are in deep concentration, completely absorbed by the work at hand, even amidst the hustle and bustle of a public space.

I am happy to report that after Seattle AGO members had helped deploy Orgelkids in both a mall and again at the mini Maker Faire, members finally had the opportunity to enjoy the kit themselves at a chapter meeting in October. AGO member David Nichols said, "It was as much fun as it looked when the kids did it!"

Deconstruction at an art exhibit: THINGS COME APART

It has been rewarding having Orgelkids on hand to deploy when inspiration strikes, which is precisely how Orgelkids came to be rubbing shoulders with a Smithsonian traveling exhibit. Our local museum had been looking for an opportunity to incorporate Orgelkids into their programming. When the Benton County Museum was selected to be one stop on a 12-city national tour for Todd McLellan's Things Come Apart exhibit, we saw the perfect opportunity. The Things Come Apart exhibit consists of photographic compositions of everyday items broken down into their components. In keeping with the exhibit's theme of discovering how things work through disassembly, we would turn the Orgelkids experience on its head for children to learn how pipe organs work by taking one apart. The resulting "deconstruction" would then be set artistically and then photographed.

On December 28, 2017, we offered two workshops and a mini concert in the time between the workshops. Registration was capped at 10 children per workshop, which took place in the museum's annex. After walking through the exhibit, identifying the instruments featured, considering some of the artist's aesthetic and design considerations, the workshop participants headed to the annex, where they promptly encounter the Orgelkids pipe organ, fully assembled. The children explored the intact organ, taking turns playing and pumping, and then the disassembly commenced. Working in pairs, the children decided how they wanted to arrange their components in the style of the Things Come Apart exhibit, their contribution to the overall composition. Once all 133 pieces were arranged and photographed, the

children were then tasked with getting the Orgelkids organ concert ready. Craig Hanson treated the workshop participants, their families and museum visitors to a mini-concert in the gallery. Builders were invited to try their calcanting skills. The youngest participant was a four-and-a-half-year-old, and she totally held her own with the big boys. She is pictured at the conclusion of the video with her composition: https://youtu.be/ozLiJ_02G50

These workshops are an example of the kit's identity as a pipe organ being secondary to the purpose of the event. Inviting children to replicate the creative process behind the exhibit could have been achieved using any number of objects. However, in using Orgelkids, we were able to interject the King of Instruments into the proceedings.

Pedagogical Ponderings

A flexible build. The kit's versatile format adapts well to different group sizes and time budgets. For the purposes of crowd management either in the classroom or in the streets, the kit can be broken down and grouped into five systems: pipes, wind, windchest with tracker action, frame, and keyboard. We present those parts fully disassembled, jumbled up and out of order, because building something by wrestling with the various components truly imparts a deeper understanding of how it works. For example, sorting and arranging 48 pipes requires the builders to confront the form (open or capped pipes, long or short pipes) and consider the resulting function (pitch). However, if time is of the essence, the pipes and keyboard can be presented already arranged in order, leaving only their insertion into the organ. If there is no time to allow for assembly or disassembly, the assembled organ still teaches and informs. With exposed trackers and a windchest with a Plexiglas front, a majority of the mechanisms are visible. The toeboard, loaded with pipes, is quickly lifted to expose and demonstrate how the sliders select the ranks.

Work before pleasure. In any venue, as the build wraps up and the moment of truth is upon us, I do two things: 1) I try to remember to watch the crowd of faces around the organ — without fail there are expressions of delighted surprise when their newly assembled organ sings its first notes. But my inner pedagogue requires I delay that moment by 2) surreptitiously making sure the sliders are 'off' before they play. The calcant is pumping and the first eager child has stepped forward to play and... silence? You can see the problem solving going on in the builders' brains as they use their new understanding of how the machine was pieced together, and not two seconds pass before some child has identified the problem, "The sliders need to be pulled out!" (Every once in a while, you'll hear "It's not plugged in,"... equally a teaching moment.)

Orgelkids is a gentle introduction to an imposing instrument. Some Orgelkids Encounters conclude with a visit to a full-size organ. While the new organ builders are in awe of the enormity of the instrument, they also approach the organ with a heightened comprehension. Given the students' prior organ building experience with Orgelkids, their first audience with a full-size pipe organ sidesteps what must normally be an intimidating moment because with comprehension comes confidence. Orgelkids builders, once they have re-hinged their jaws, stride down the aisle asking, "Where does the calcant pump?" as they are ready to power the behemoth! The groups are always a bit crestfallen when we explain that most pipe organs are now winded by electric fans with the mere flip of a switch. (If you think the historically-informed organbuilding movement has reached its zenith, just you wait. When the Orgelkids generation comes of age, calcants will again enjoy job security!)

In reducing the ancient, sometimes-imposing instrument down to its mechanical basics, Orgelkids makes the King of Instruments accessible. The objective of Orgelkids is to instill in children who encounter and construct the Orgelkids kit a sense of ownership to all things organ. 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. As part of all Orgelkids events, the newly

minted organbuilders walk away armed with the webpage of the local AGO chapter and invitations to local organ concerts and radio programing, equipped to follow their new interest in pipe organs.

Next Steps

Educational opportunities we will be testing in 2018 include offering Orgelkids as a hands-on workshop BEFORE a concert. A local music festival has programed some pipe organ music and will be inviting their regular patrons to bring their grandchildren for a pre-concert workshop to construct Orgelkids. A prelude performance featuring the Orgelkids organ within an ensemble and sparing with the full-size organ will serve as a bridge from the hands-on activity to the concert to follow. Any performance incorporating an instrument that the audience built will have an additional claim on the audience's attention, an intellectual investment. Orgelkids has the potential to make concert going more interactive and intergenerational. We will be evaluating how Orgelkids changes up the audiences' demographics.

Curriculum development. We are partnering with Nick Krissie, a national-award winning science teacher, to develop STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) curriculum aligned with the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) using the Orgelkids kit. Earlier this year Mr. Krissie used Orgelkids to teach the NGSS "Crosscutting Concepts" and will be writing up that lesson plan (with funding from a local Kiwanis International chapter). We expect to be able to commission additional lesson plans covering further NGSS concepts as funding becomes available. STEM lesson plans tap the rich interdisciplinary aspects of the pipe organ and may serve as an introduction to the organ for schools without music programs.

Orgelkids, as an international program, is very much an "open source" platform, in that we encourage and welcome anyone to contribute to the pool of shared knowledge and curriculum. One example: we are compiling repertoire that is less than two octaves (you get bonus points if it's Bach).

Orgelkids is Growing

While we have been having fun building Orgelkids' outreach portfolio, our long-term goal is a national network of independent Orgelkids kits. Orgelkids' simple implementation and broad appeal makes it a boon to any organization whose mission is to promote community appreciation and understanding of and engagement with the pipe organ. We rent out our kit for introductory visits to help cultivate interest and funds to commission a kit to be a local resource. AGO chapters and other organizations whose mission includes pipe organ outreach and education are commissioning kits and adding Orgelkids to their pedagogical tool kit.

The Orgelkids kit is a workhorse with a flexible format and, once armed with it, we believe curators will be looking for reasons to trot it out. Orgelkids USA's kit engaged over 700 children and adults in its first twelve months. A significant number of those encounters were impromptu in nature, occurring in public and secular venues, independent of organ-specific events, and encouraging the public to spontaneously engage with the King of Instruments.

Orgelkids USA was incorporated as a 501c3 not-for-profit, all-volunteer organization in 2016. Our mission is to serve as a pilot program, bringing Orgelkids from the Netherlands to the USA and help grow Orgelkids into a nationwide program with a network of independent kits available across the States. Erin Scheessele is the Volunteer Executive Director. [Learn more.](#)