

Designing a new façade for a historical instrument

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Bild 00 Titel

In order to understand some of the challenges the design of the new façade for the Steinmeyer organ in the Nidaros Cathedral presented, we have to take a quick look at the history of the instrument.

The huge organ with 127 stops was built by the German company Georg Friedrich Steinmeyer in 1930. It was installed on floor level in the northern part of the transept where now the Wagner organ is situated.

Bild 01 Prospekt 1930

The instrument took up that entire part of the church and used the façade of the Wagner organ which at that time had not yet been restored.

In 1960 the organ was relocated to the west wall of the cathedral. Because there was much less space available there only 85 stops were used. Many of the big 16' foot stops were removed. Parts of the organ were installed in the triforiums left and right of the rose window and 21 stops were used to build a choir organ.

Bild 02 Prospekt 1960

In 1994 the Wagner organ was restored and naturally its original façade was removed. This left the Steinmeyer organ standing more or less naked in front of the west wall.

Bild 03 Prospekt 1994

One goal of the restoration of the Steinmeyer organ was to restore the original stop list and once again to have all the divisions at one central location. Of course this presented huge problems regarding the required space and the arrangement of the existing windchests. After many years of discussions and planning it was agreed to again place the instrument at the west wall, but the view of the rose window and the portal in the west wall had to stay unobstructed.

The big challenge was to arrange the different parts of the organ in a logical and accessible way without seeming to take up a lot of space in the cathedral.

Bild 04 Horizontalschnitt unten

Our concept consisted of two main bodies left and right of the portal containing the swell boxes for the second and third manual.

As you can see in this picture, a third of the volume of the swell boxes is hidden between the pillars. This results in a generous passage to the main portal and the visible part of the organ is greatly reduced.

Bild 05 Horizontalschnitt unten mit Durchgängen

The backs of the swell boxes are at a comfortable distance from the west wall to allow visitors entering the cathedral through one of the three portals to experience the full width of the building. Because the sides of the case are flush with the pillars the passage and the view in the side aisle are unobstructed - the organ is hardly noticeable from there.

Bild 06 Horizontalschnitt oben

These two swell boxes are almost 6 metres high and the windchests inside are arranged on two levels. They are linked by a bridge that goes almost all the way to the west wall. The gap of 50cm at the back conducts the cold air from the rose window down behind the organ in order to improve tuning stability.

On top of the swell boxes and the bridge the windchests of the Rückpositiv, the first Manual and the Pedal are distributed.

Bild 07 Solo - Fernwerk

The Solo division, with loud reed stops in the English style, is for acoustical reasons located in a separate swell box in the triforium near the transept.

The Fernwerk is the only division that has not changed in any way since 1930 and is still in the tower at a height of over 30 metres.

This brings us to the new façade of the Steinmeyer organ. The objective was to create a magnificent and monumental case without it being overwhelming in the cathedral.

Bild 08 Linien

The façade was designed with freestanding pipes as was custom for a lot of instruments of the time period that the organ was built in. It consists of the 32' Contra Violone of the Pedal and of various other stops of the Pedal, Great and Positive.

The case is formed of simple shapes and clear lines which show its contemporary roots and clearly set it apart from the historical style and decorations of the cathedral.

The façade is characterised by three large arches. One ascends to the peak of the main portal, one descends around the rose window and a third, horizontal one, gives the organ its concave shape. This gives the organ a sculptural quality that fits

harmoniously into the high space and establishes an inviting effect on visitors to the cathedral.

To enliven it, the façade is made up of seven slightly projecting towers, and the pipe lips vary the basic ascending arch of the case. The 32' pipes directly next to the cluster piers produce an almost flowing transition between the building and the instrument. The visible part of the organ case is made of high-grade oak. The dark grey varnish leaves the grain of the wood visible and both creates a transition between the black of the floor of the cathedral and the grey walls, and emphasises the silver façade pipes. The case has a simple design which gives it a sculptural appearance. It is divided by highly visible horizontal joints and smaller joints around the panels. To allow the sound to be emitted from the swell boxes, the panels at the front have grilles. To animate the view from below, the ascending arch of the case in front of the portal is divided into individual steps corresponding to the façade pipes.

The façades on the sides vary the forms of the main façade and close the organ towards the side aisles. The Solo in the triforium is also painted grey and disappears behind the columns there.

Bild 09 Prospekt gerendert

During the planning phase we drew the exterior of the organ case in 3D and rendered it, so the client and we ourselves could have a better impression of what the organ will look like when it is finished.

After the organ has been completed we always enjoy comparing the rendering with a photograph and are time and time again astonished at how accurate it mostly is.

Bild 10 Prospekt Foto

After the organ had been taken apart in 1960 and more or less scattered around the cathedral, we are very happy that we were able to reassemble the instrument at one location in the cathedral and give it a contemporary outfit some 50 years later. Of course we hope it will now stay this way for at least the next 100 years - until the next anniversary of the Constitution of Norway.

Thank you very much for your attention.

If you have any questions, feel free to ask.