

He said, she said: A conversation with James & Marilyn Biery

Joyce Johnson Robinson

James and Marilyn Biery are two very active composers, performers, and church musicians. Husband and wife, they share leadership of the music program at the Cathedral of St. Paul in St. Paul, Minnesota. They met at Northwestern University, where both studied organ (that organ department, as most know, no longer exists).

Marilyn Biery, who holds bachelor's and master's degrees in organ and church music from Northwestern, and a DMA from the University of Minnesota, served as director of music at First Church of Christ in Hartford from 1986–96; she is now associate director of music at the Cathedral of St. Paul. James Biery, who also holds bachelor's and master's degrees in organ and church music from Northwestern, served as director of music at Holy Trinity Church in Wallingford, Connecticut from 1982–89, and from 1989 until 1996 as organist and director of music at the Cathedral of St. Joseph in Hartford, assuming the position of director of music at the Cathedral of St. Paul in 1996.

Both Bierys are prolific composers (see the complete list of their works on their website, <http://home.att.net/~jrbiery/>). Their works are published by MorningStar, GIA, Oregon Catholic Press, Boosey & Hawkes, Alliance, and Augsburg Fortress. Marilyn has also been a contributor to *THE DIAPASON* (see "The Organ in Concert," January 2005). We visited with the Bierys in St. Paul in July 2007.

Joyce Robinson: How did you get into this? Marilyn, you were a pastor's kid, so you had that early exposure. James, how about you?

James Biery: I was a kid of parents who went to church! (laughter) Actually, my grandfather on my mother's side was a minister, so that's in my blood. We went to church, a fairly little church in Plattsburgh, Nebraska, but it was fortunate enough to have a pipe organ, a five-rank Reuter. It could shake the pews, in its own way, and it made an impression.

JR: How old were you when you got on the bench?

JB: Eleven, maybe ten.

Marilyn Biery: I was eleven. I looked through my diaries and I had the date of my first organ lesson! Isn't that cool.

JB: It's a funny thing, but you get the bug somehow. And it was pretty strong. After I'd seen a real music program in Omaha, and started studying with a real organ teacher, then I really got hooked.

JR: I find it interesting that you, Marilyn, have a doctorate in organ, and James, you went the route of getting a master's and then the AGO's Fellow and Chormaster certificates.

JB: I went through a little period when I thought it was fun to do that. Schooling is not my cup of tea.

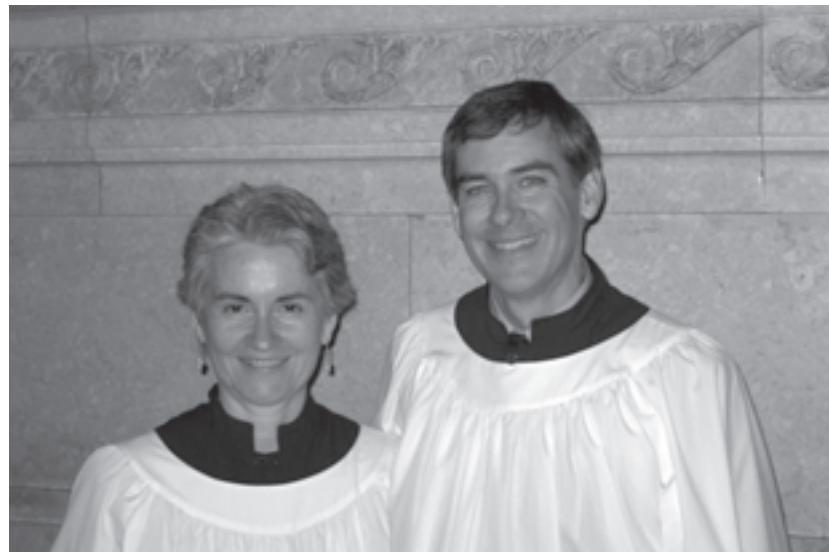
MB: But I like school. James reads books and does all these things on his own—like the [AGO] Fellow and the Chormaster; he did that all on his own.

JB: That's not really true. We had gone to New York at that point, to study with Walter Hilse, improvisation and various things. I enjoyed that.

MB: But he still reads books. I only do if I'm taking a class.

JB: Everyone has their motivators.

MB: So I needed a class—a regimen and a schedule. Actually, I started my doctorate in conducting; I didn't want another degree in organ. I started it in Connecticut; then we moved, and I thought that I was going to finish it in conducting, but at that time they didn't have a doctorate in conducting in Minnesota, believe it or not. The state with St. Olaf and such places, yet a conducting doctorate just didn't exist! So when I moved here, I was



Marilyn and James Biery, May 2006



The Bierys in 1989



Cathedral Choir, Christmas 2003

for one very short semester looking at the orchestral program, but decided pretty quickly that I wasn't interested in being an orchestral conductor. I switched back to organ. It was a good thing. It was fun.

JR: You'd both been in Connecticut in separate positions. When you came to Minnesota, was it just you, James, taking this job?

JB: Yes.

MB: He was nice. I said I'd be happy to move if I could just go and not have to work, because I was in the middle of the degree, and at that point I had decided that I was going to be a director of choral activities in a college. That was my career goal. I wasn't thinking "church job." We agreed that we would move and figure out if we could live here on his salary, and I'd go to school and find something else. There was a budget for an assistant position, which they had before, so he started interviewing people as soon as he got here; and along about November, said, "let's just hire Marilyn." So it was a temporary thing and I just never left.

JB: It worked out nicely because we went through the process—we advertised the position, we were interviewing and auditioning, and I had a committee. We reached a certain point where one of the people on the committee said "Why aren't we just hiring your wife?" But it was better that it didn't come from me; rather, it came from the parish.

MB: So I did that part-time for three years; when I finished the degree in '99, the pastor said, "please put in a proposal to increase your hours to 20 hours a week." At that point it was perfect to just keep it at 20, because our daughter was

ten. It was so nice to work in the same place. We knew we could work together, and in fact we've done things together almost our whole married life. The building needs two people; in fact, more than two people.

JR: But you knew that working together would succeed.

MB: Oh, yes. We've done it for years. When we were students together, we'd do things together, and then before I finished my degree we were in one church and we used to do some things together. We've been together for 30 years. I've always helped out at his churches, and he's always helped out at mine. I always knew we'd enjoy working together. I just like being in the same room with him all the time! (laughs) I like to hear him play the organ and we like to do things together.

JR: James, you are director of music at the cathedral, and Marilyn, you are associate director. Are you the entire music staff?

JB: Well, yes and no. We have music staff at the diocesan level too. Michael Silhavy is in charge of diocesan events. We are also fortunate to have Lawrence Lawyer as our assistant in music, helping with a multitude of musical and administrative duties.

JR: Who does what?

JB: In order to cover everything that happens in the building, there really are four of us who are regularly employed here.

MB: Who are actual musicians and not administrative.

JB: We're talking about organists and directors.



Bierys in Hartford, September 1993



Grigg Fountain and James Biery, Northwestern University, 1974



Cathedral of St. Paul

MB: For diocesan events, where the bishop comes, we have Michael, who's next door, who does those, with our help. But he can ask anybody in the diocese, so if he knows that it's a really busy time for us, he can ask someone at the seminary to come in and play for an ordination Mass. Michael doesn't get involved with anything on a parish level. There is a separate choir he conducts, which is mostly volunteers, about 60 or 80 people. We do the day-to-day work, but we get involved when he asks us. Michael used to work at GIA years ago, then he moved to the cathedral in Duluth, then moved down here as the worship center director. We've known him for almost twenty years.



James and Marilyn at the Cathedral of St. Paul



Marilyn in Connecticut, 1987



1981 Toledo competition winner

We do four weekend masses with organ; there is another one with cantor only, just a sung Mass. Right now all three of us are going to be at the choir Mass, which is our high Mass. We both play the organ, we both direct; Lawrence Lawyer, our music assistant, at this point doesn't do any directing, but we're hoping he will. We have the Cathedral Choir at the 10 am Mass and we both switch off and do everything—if we're not playing, we sing. I do another weekend Mass, and we rotate, and he'll do two Masses a weekend and Lawrence does one. The St. Cecilia Choir is the kids' choir, and all three of us do that. You can listen to sound bites of that on the web. (See <www.cathedralsaintpaul.org/calendars-sounds.aspx>.)

JR: What's the size of your main adult choir?

JB: 30–35.

MB: It fluctuates. There are nine section leaders, and then we have 20 or 25 really good volunteers. The main core is 30.

JR: How many children's choirs are there?

JB: One.

MB: We started branching off by using the older girls for some things, so we've developed a group of six or eight older girls that we call the Schola. We also invented something new for the boys, because a lot of them are home-schooled kids. So they come with their families.

JB: We just really didn't have the heart to turn them loose when their voices changed. One family, just the sweetest people, asked if there was something we could do. My first answer was no, I'm sorry, it's a treble choir. Then I thought about it for a week or two, and talked to the person who was then running it with me, and we decided to figure out a way to deal with this. We're doing the *Voice for Life* program, the RSCM program, which is very nice. So at first we occasionally had them sing on some things, but it's gone even beyond that now. We had three of these boys with changed voices last year, and they were doing some things on their own, too.

MB: We had them ring handbells—if you listen to one of our pieces that's on the website, his *O Come Divine Messiah*—that's everybody. That's our daughter.

ter playing the oboe, and the main chorus singing the whole thing; the Schola sings the middle section, and the boys are ringing the bells. We're doing two pieces this year where we taught them the bass line—I'm sure one of them's going to be a tenor—but James taught them how to read the bass line.

JB: Another wonderful thing as you know with *Voice for Life*—they have some musical skills, rudimentary, but in some ways, better than some of our adult singers.

MB: They learned the bass part of an *Ave Verum* of Byrd, and then of the Tallis *If Ye Love Me*, and *With a Voice of Singing*. The girls who were trebles sang the soprano part with the adult choir, and the boys—I put them in with the basses, and the basses loved it. Some day, some choir director in some church somewhere is going to thank us because she'll have these three boys who then, grown-up, will still have it in them.

As cathedrals go, and I could be wrong about this, we have one of the more active parishes in the United States. But it's just like any kind of city church—the parish, for the children and for the parish choir in a building like this, is usually smaller than in suburban churches. We have 30 kids in the choir, which we think is really good. I'd love to have 50!

JB: The parish tends to be more singles and folks who move in and out—a large turnover; some families too.

MB: For a while, our biggest parishioner group was the 29 to 39 single female. We had a lot of young professional women in the choir.

JR: How do you divide the conducting and accompanying tasks?

JB: One thing that we discovered along the way is that for the most part it doesn't work to switch off conducting and organ playing in the middle of a concert. (chuckling) We used to do that, and it just makes things harder. There's something about the continuity and how to budget time and that sort of thing. So we did stop doing that a few years ago. Working backwards from that, the one concert that we do every year is around Advent/Christmas. It will work out that whoever is conducting that concert will do a lot of the rehearsal through November–December. But that's the exception.

During most of the year, we just split things up—sometimes it's back and forth in a rehearsal, sometimes she'll take half of the rehearsal and I'll take the second half—it depends what we're doing.

MB: He sings baritone, and I sing soprano. You know the Allegri *Miserere*, the one with the high Cs—right now we only have one person in the choir who can sing the high Cs. So it means that he has to conduct, because I have to sing those. My voice tends to be better for the Renaissance things; I don't have much vibrato, and it's a small, light tone. During Lent I do more singing with the choir, because we do more Renaissance works then, and he'll do most of the conducting, whereas we need him more for pieces of other periods, so then I'll conduct more of the things we need him to sing on; if we have brass and such and it's a big celebration that needs improvisation, we're more comfortable having him at the organ and me conducting. The things needing a lot of filling in or improvisation—he tends to get those. The last deciding factor is whoever's not sick of something. Sometimes I'll say, "I conducted that last time, you do it"—it's more a matter of what would be most fun to do next time.

JB: One thing that sets us apart from 99% of the rest of the world is that neither of us likes to have an anthem marked—with all the breathing, and the interpretation. And then everybody has it marked, we sing it the way we did last time, and the time before that, and the ten times before that! That just drives us both nutty—because every time we bring out a piece, you have different singers, things are always a little different, you have a little different idea of how the piece should go, or maybe you've actually even learned something about it! Part of it sometimes is boredom—you know, "I've done this piece five times in a row, it's time for you to do it." It drives our singers nutty, because most of them come from other choirs where you have markings in your part, and you can expect that the conductor will do it that way. And people who have sung with us for 11 years will say, "But I have marked a breath there"—well, we don't want a breath there this time! (laughter)

JR: Since both of you are composers, how do you handle pieces you've written? If you wrote an anthem, do you play it, do you conduct it?

JB: That's a great question, because sometimes if you've written a piece, you learn more if you're not the one who conducts it. I think frequently we might do it that way. If it's a piece that I've writ-

ten, that I want to try out, I will have her conduct it, because then I'll find out how clear I have been in the notation—there are written indications that somebody else will interpret totally differently from the way I think it should be.

MB: He tends to write more choral things right now, and I tend to do a few more organ pieces. So he tends to play my organ pieces, more than I do.

JB: Another thing I like is if it's a piece that we're trying out, I would prefer to just listen, or if it's accompanied, just sit at the piano or organ, and not be in charge.

MB: I generally tend to do more of the conducting in his pieces, too. When we celebrated our tenth anniversary at the cathedral, we had decided that I would do all the conducting. In fact, the program says that I did all the conducting. But then there were two pieces, which aren't marked in your program, that at the last minute we decided Jim should do, partly because of the makeup of our sopranos—he always conducts the *Ubi Caritas*—and they're more used to him.

JB: It kind of breaks the rule of what I was just saying. In that case, they're kind of used to doing it in a certain way. We had to do all these things in a short rehearsal time, so—

MB: It was easier. The other piece was *Ave Maria*, and the sopranos needed me, so at the last minute we decided to switch, and he conducted those two pieces, and I did the rest of the conducting. We have a recording of that. We also have done hymn festivals, with Michael, where we put our two choirs together.

JB: Michael is very interested in hymnology. He has a gift for being able to put things together in interesting ways, and he can also write a really nice script for a program like that.

MB: For one of our Christmas programs, we had a set of poetry commissioned, *Near Breath*, which is really wonderful, from Anna George Meek, one of our section leaders. The whole program was based around that, and she intertwined the music we were doing.

JR: The cathedral is quite a presence—for instance, you've had the Minnesota Orchestra playing here, doing the Bruckner symphonies, and those were conceived for a cathedral-type ambience.

JB: We are really excited about that. Osmo Vänskä, that's his baby.

JR: Is that something you originated?

JB: No, he was behind the whole thing. He came to us with his proposal to do this. The performance is done two or

Fratelli Ruffatti invests its time and money in research to make a better pipe organ.

We've been working for years with noted institutions in Italy and Germany, inventing and testing new ideas for making better and more efficient pipe organs.

Considering that your new pipe organ is one of the biggest investments you'll ever make, what does that mean to you?

Fratelli Ruffatti

Your international investment firm.



The Bierys in Connecticut, 1985

MARILYN & JAMES BIERY 4 HANDS 4 FEET FOR ORGAN

Contact: Center Church, 60 Gold St., Hartford, Ct. 06013 or (203) 265-4436

Biery ad (artwork by Tom Colletta)

three times, only once in the cathedral, but the cathedral one is the “main” performance—it’s the one that gets broadcast, and so forth.

MB: There are organizations that use the building a lot—Philip Brunelle uses it a lot for VocalEssence. Every time they bring over a boy choir group, they use the cathedral; I’m not sure why not the Basilica of St. Mary in Minneapolis, except that probably we seat more people.

JB: I think also he has sort of a Minneapolis group, so it’s an outreach to come over to “this” side.

MB: It’s just too much of a cavern for a small sixteen-voice group. We’ve had other groups like the National Lutheran Choir try it, and they ended up over at the Basilica of St. Mary too, because the room’s too wide, too big. You can have too much acoustic.

JR: Did either of you formally study composition? James, you reportedly taught yourself—studying organ literature and orchestral scores.

JB: Marilyn thinks that’s how it started out, and I think she’s right!

MB: We used to play duets. When we started out as players, we wanted to play organ duets and we still do—we do two-organ things now too—but there isn’t much repertoire out there that’s really very interesting.

JB: We got bored in a hurry. So I just started looking around for different things to do, and the transcription idea was appealing, and it ended up being intensive score study.

MB: I’ll never forget his very first

piece—his parents had died and he was in a situation where the church was full-time but it didn’t take up his whole day. And we lived nearby and I was gone most of the day.

JB: At times it was very, very busy, but then there were other times when, frankly, there wasn’t that much to do.

MB: I remember coming home, and he had said to me earlier, you know the famous *Make Me a Channel of Your Peace*—he said, kind of on a dare to himself, “I think I could write something on that text and I think I could get it published.” He’d never written anything before except little choral sentences or whatever. I came home from Hartford one day, and he said, “I wrote a piece today.” And that kept happening for a while. I’d come home and say, “What did you do today, dear?” “Oh, I wrote a piece.” (laughter)

JB: One day, she came home, and I said, “I wrote a Christmas piece, only it needs words. No hurry!”

MB: “—but I want it for my rehearsal next week.” (laughter) He said “I want to do it for our Christmas program,” and could I do some text? He showed me the tune, and I sat right down and wrote something, and we got that published pretty fast. He always says “I don’t need it right away—but could you do it tomorrow?”

JR: Do you have any compositional process, or do you just hear a tune going through your head and take it from there?

JB: Grief.



James Biery, age 13, playing his sister Jane’s wedding, 1969

MB: Grief and angst and paranoia—both of us. He’s just as bad.

JB: Everything’s a little different. So I don’t know if there really is any “process.” Choral music is different from organ music.

MB: We do things without the keyboard, sometimes. But I always use it, as I need to.

JB: I have found that the things that I’m most proud of and happiest about are pieces where the bulk of the whole thing has been done at one session—like in one day. It takes weeks or months to finish it and flesh out all the details, but I do find that the best things are done at one sitting.

JR: Do you have a keyboard hooked up to “Finale” at home?

JB: We do.

MB: He just built us a “virtual organ.” He ordered the pedalboard and the keyboards, and he has it hooked up—which organ are we playing right now, whose is it?

JB: It’s a Casavant organ, from Champaign, Illinois.

MB: It’s a great little practice instrument. Our basement’s small. It beats an electronic. It sounds just like a real organ.

JB: I can play that thing for hours on end and not get sick of it, which is saying a lot. I never have run into any electronic where I could do that. It has the advantage of being connected to the computer.

MB: We can compose on it. I’ve just started using it. I’m not as computer-happy as he is; I love to use it once it’s all set up, but he has to show me and then I’m fine.

JB: It has been interesting to grow with this technology, because I always used to write things out, paper and pencil, first, and then gradually move to the computer program. I found as the years have gone by that the computer portion of that has crept in earlier and earlier in the process. In fact, it’s right at the beginning now; even if I do write things on pencil and paper, generally there’s a computer file to start with.

MB: It looks nice, and my handwriting’s terrible, and for me I just put everything in after I plunk away, and then I can fiddle with it.

JB: We have our laptops, and once you get a piece to a certain point, you can just sit there and listen to it, and change things around, and you don’t have to be anywhere near a keyboard.

MB: I’ve been doing more words lately—organ music and more texts. The one I’m happiest with is my setting of the Beatitudes—everybody wants to sing them, and there just are not many choral settings that don’t get pretty redundant.

JB: It’s a hard text to set. The form doesn’t really lend itself too well. She did a strophic hymn that’s inspired by the text, to get around that problem. And I think it’s really very nice.

MB: That took a year. But anyway, Jim has a piece based on it, too, with descant, and middle stanza parts.

JR: Tell me about *Stir Up Thy Power, O Lord*, which is a nice anthem for a small choir.

JB: That anthem is almost entirely in unison. In fact, it could be done in unison. It’s kind of surprising. We have a composer friend who heard the premiere of that, and he has a very sophisticated ear, and one of his comments at the end was that he wasn’t really quite aware that it was almost all unison! I thought that was a very nice compliment.

JR: Congratulations, you got ASCA-PLUS awards in 2006 and 2007.

JB: Yes. It is really a nice little program, because it recognizes composers who have pieces that are actually being performed, but in places that don’t generate performance fees, namely in churches. I fill in an application, then I Google my name and try to find all these places where things are being done, and it’s amazing! But they’re all at church services, or occasionally recitals and things.

MB: College choirs do his *O Sacrum Convivium* a lot, and *O Holy Night*.

JR: Marilyn, let me ask you about your new music championing. You wrote an article for THE DIAPASON about MorningStar’s Concert Organ series, and last I looked it has three dozen titles in it. Is it doing well?

JB: The publisher is not pulling the plug on it, so I think that’s a good sign.

MB: I’ve been so disappointed all along in the way people are NOT interested in new music—we’ve noticed it in our own things, and I’ve noticed it a lot with organ music. I am disappointed in the lack of widespread interest in simply supporting these composers.

JB: My theory is that the problem is that there was a period where there was so much avant garde music and music that was just plain hard to listen to, and so many people got turned off to the idea of new music. It’s too bad, because many composers are writing very easy-to-listen-to music now. If anything, I’d say that’s the preponderance of what’s being written.

MB: I think it’s coming back.

JB: I don’t think the market has caught up with the new trend yet.

MB: And it’s hard to get things published.

JB: And organists—well, churches—tend to be on the conservative side, so that enters into the picture too.

MB: I think that the more original you are as a composer, the harder it is for your piece to get published. One composer I was working with for so long wrote this incredible organ duet and other pieces that were so amazing, and one response from a publisher was, “it’s a magnificent piece of music, but it simply won’t sell.”



1184 Woodland St. SW, Hartville, Ohio 44632
330-966-2499 www.keggorgan.com



James Russell Biery, age 15, in Capehart Chapel, Offutt Air Force Base, 1971



James Biery, mano a manual

was fun, but there are limits to what you can do with that.

MB: The registration time is immense. It takes a good five or six hours just to register pieces, and then if you're lucky you've got four or five hours the next day to work all the bugs out. It takes a lot of time. So we tend to play duets here, simply because it's easier—it's our instrument, we can register them over a period of a couple months, or whenever we feel like it. We've given up on the touring because it takes so long. If we were going to do something, we would have to allow three full days of just practicing. We can do it in two, but it's hard.

JR: One last question—how do you keep a general balance in life, physical health along with everything else?

JB: I bike ride. It helps.

MB: I've been riding a couple times a week. And the Y's right down the street.



James and Marilyn in Milwaukee, 2006

We walk a lot—walk and talk. In winter it's hard to get out, because the wind is so bad and it's hard to walk. That's when we're better about going to the Y. But we eat as healthfully as we can, so we try to do as much as we can. The mental health—I have no clue!

JB: Neither of us has ever figured out how to be well rounded!

MB: Well, we're two perfectionists, and we tend to be very precise, and it's not easy to work with that. Our choir does really well with it, but in an office

situation that can be hard for people who aren't as interested in getting details done.

JR: Do you have any other hobbies?

MB: I'm the parent organizer for our daughter's swim team, so other than that, no, just exercise and eating right, and wine! And keeping up with our daughter. When she leaves, I don't know what we'll do. Internet stuff.

JR: Thank you!

Unique Opportunity

In 1889 Theodor Kuhn completed work on a 24-stop organ for the protestant church of Zurich-Unterstrass. He constructed the instrument adhering to the traditions laid down by his father Johann Nepomuk Kuhn, one year after our company founder's death. The organ was dismantled in 1911 and transferred to western Switzerland.

The restoration work of 2005–2006 embraced a thorough overhaul of the technical systems with the aim of returning the instrument to a new and functionally reliable condition. The slight changes to the stop-list which the organ underwent over the years were reversed through reconstruction, thus returning the pipework to its original condition. For the design of the case several options – historic or modern – are possible.

A tonal documentation of the instrument was produced during four concerts given in our workshop. The CD can be ordered free of charge via e-mail or phone.

This organ offers a unique opportunity to purchase an authentic instrument in German-Romantic style built in 1889.



The instrument in its original place in Zurich-Unterstrass

German-Romantic cone chest organ

I. Manual C – f³

| | |
|----------------|--------|
| 1. Bourdon | 16' |
| 2. Principal | 8' |
| 3. Gamba | 8' |
| 4. Dolce | 8' |
| 5. Gedeckt | 8' |
| 6. Octav | 4' |
| 7. Flûte harm. | 4' |
| 8. Octav | 2' |
| 9. Mixtur 4f. | 2 2/3' |
| 10. Trompete | 8' |

II. Manual ① C – f³

| | |
|---------------------|-----|
| 11. Liebl. Gedeck | 16' |
| 12. Geigenprincipal | 8' |
| 13. Flauto dolce | 8' |
| 14. Salicional | 8' |
| 15. Aeoline | 8' |
| 16. Voix céleste | 8' |
| 17. Fugara | 4' |
| 18. Flûte d'amour | 4' |
| 19. Oboe | 8' |
| Tremolo | |

P. Pedal C – d¹

| | |
|-------------------|-----|
| 20. Principalbass | 16' |
| 21. Harmonikabass | 16' |
| 22. Subbass | 16' |
| 23. Flötenbass | 8' |
| 24. Violoncello | 8' |

① swell

Couplers: II-I, I-P, II-P

Cone chests
Mechanical key action
Mechanical stop action
5 permanent combinations

PDF-download with more detailed information:
<http://www.orgelbau.ch/conechest>

CD for free

Ask for the tonal documentation on CD free of charge.

 **Kuhn**

Phone +41 43 843 45 50 Fax +41 43 843 45 51 Mail kuhn@orgelbau.ch Internet www.orgelbau.ch