



The Tonhalle Zürich in 1895

The Tonhalle of Zürich, Switzerland, should not be confused with the Town Hall in that city. One is the Concert Hall and the other the Rathaus (German). This apparent confusion is only brought about by a glib translation to English from the German, but often leads the unsuspecting tourist on a wild goose chase. The two buildings are about a kilometre apart and on opposite sides of the River Limmat in this bustling and historic city.

In mid-19th century Zürich there were insistent calls for a permanent professional orchestra. After a few initial difficulties, the first orchestral association was established in 1862. An old corn house on the Sechseläuten meadow in the Zürich suburb of Bellevue was converted into a concert hall in 1867. After the Swiss Music Festival held in Zürich in 1867, interested parties succeeded in harnessing audiences' enthusiasm to found a stock company in 1868 with the aim of

promoting musical life with a permanent orchestra: the Tonhalle Society Zürich, which is organised as an association and continues to support the Tonhalle Orchestra Zürich to this day.

The history of the Zürich Tonhalle organ is long and complex. It reflects over a hundred years of Swiss organ building history. In 1872 Johann Nepomuk Kuhn built his opus 20 as the first organ for the Tonhalle. According to

musical thought at the time, an appropriately sized organ should stand behind the orchestra to enable proper performances of large-scale choir works. Favourites of the time were grand works like Bach's St. Matthew's Passion and Handel's Messiah.

However, with time, the original concert hall proved unsatisfactory. The new, and current, Tonhalle was built in 1895 and was planned and built specifically as a concert hall from the outset by the then very well-known Viennese architects Ferdinand Fellner & Hermann Helmer.

The 1455-seat hall, located at Claridenstrasse 7, Zürich, was inaugurated by Johannes Brahms, who conducted his *Triumphlied*, Op. 55 for the opening on 19 October 1895. The architects had become especially experienced in acoustics, having already built the Zurich Opera House and many theatres and concert halls in Europe, and this hall is considered "acoustically superb".

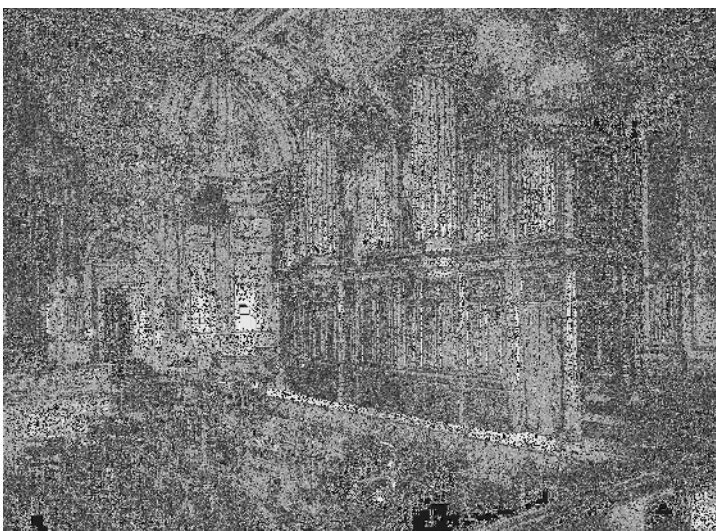


In 1939 the Tonhalle became part of the building complex known as Kongresshaus Zürich.

The son of Johann Nepomuk Kuhn, Theodor Kuhn, now had the task of moving the organ from the old to the new hall. Of course, this gave occasion to a certain amount of touching-up of the instrument's outer appearance as well as its interior workings (II/P/33).



In 1927 there followed a further modernisation and considerable enlargement of the organ (III/P/70). In time for the National Exhibition of 1939 the organ was again modernised to bring it up-to-date through being equipped with a new electro-pneumatic adjustable combination system.



In the mid-1980s the Tonhalle Society Zürich decided on a new organ for the concert hall. It is a very fortunate thing that the old Kuhn organ was saved from being broken-up and disposed of. Initially it was dismantled and stored, then ultimately installed in the magnificent suburban Neumünster Kirche, which required a new instrument to replace its Kuhn organ of 1940.

The façade of the discarded Tonhalle organ proved to fit perfectly into this 1840 building.



The instrument was, however, much too deep and the electro-pneumatic systems in the console and windchests were not wanted, so a new technical construction with mechanical slider windchests and a reduced stoplist (III/P/52) was implemented. Through this, all the truly high-quality stops from 1872 and 1895



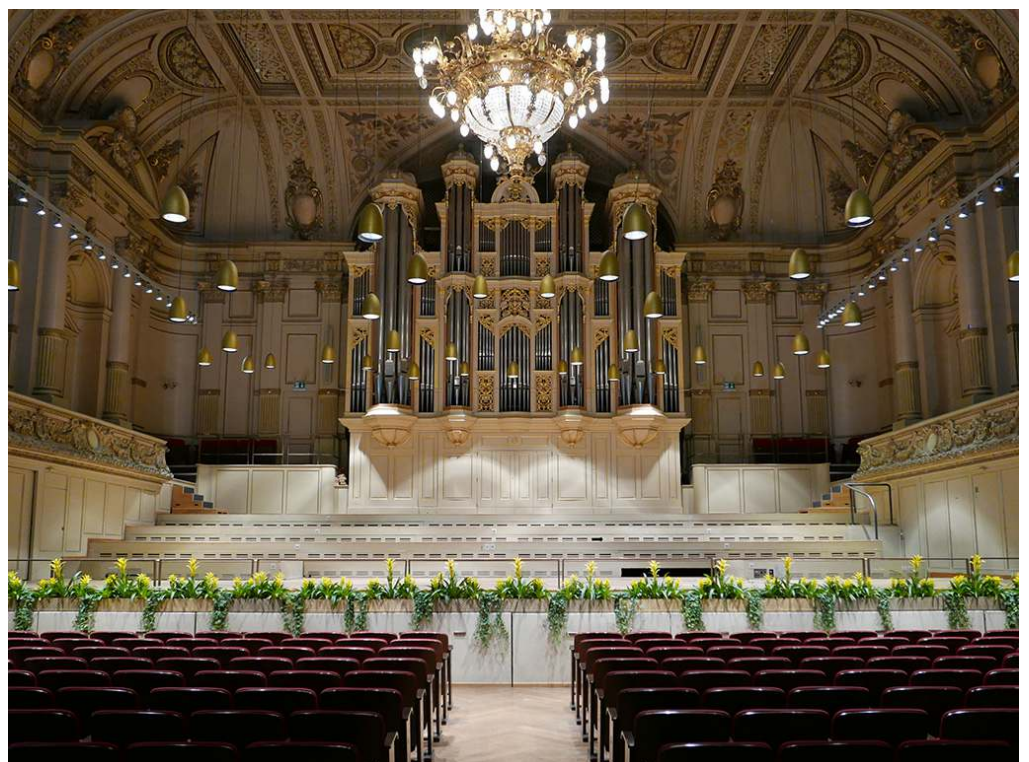


could be re-used. The old tonal colour of the organ was particularly suited to the resurgence of romantic organ music which had, in the meantime, regained popularity.

This organ provides wonderful service in the large Neumünster Evangelical Reform Church in the Weinegg section of District 8, Zürich, not far from the University Botanical Gardens. There is a monthly organ concert in this church, often featuring the church's own orchestra and other chamber and orchestral ensembles from Zürich

In 1988, in place of the Kuhn organ, the Tonhalle received a new large concert organ (IV/P/68) by the German organ builder Kleuker & Steinmeyer. The organ was based on a design by Jean Guillou and was funded by means of a private donation. The

new case was planned by Hansrudolf Zulauf to be reminiscent of the old Kuhn façade. In this four-manual instrument there was an ensemble of extraordinarily characteristic voices, which together formed a particularly powerfully dramatic plenum. This was an organ conceived for the intended interaction with the symphony orchestra, the reproduction of solo organ works as well as for accompanying and other civil tasks. Perhaps one of the more striking stops, unseen behind the façade pipes, was the horizontal (en chamade) oboe. Apart from being something of a rarity in organ building, this was an extremely expressive stop. In the Pedal division were two 32' stops. The Recit division was in the tradition of Cavaille-Coll, with gentle basic voices right through to powerful reeds and mixtures. There was a later installation of a new Swell box by the Dutch company Van den Heuvel.



Kleuker & Steinmeyer organ in 1988

The organ had two consoles: one mechanical and built into the organ case; the other fully electric and freely movable to suit the requirements of the performance. A multitude of player aids were built in to the instrument, including three programmable crescendos and a replay system.



Tonhalle Zürich before building renovations began in 2014

Once again time and tastes have dictated a change, and the Tonhalle Society Zürich has commissioned another new organ for the Tonhalle. The new organ (III/P/78) is currently being built by Kuhn Organ Builders Ltd at their Männedorf factory, a half-hour train ride from Zürich city along the stunning Zürichsee lake. The organ is expected to be completed in the autumn of 2020. There is another significance in this new organ, because apart from an interruption of about 10 years, Kuhn Organ Builders will then have been a partner of the Tonhalle in Zürich since 1872. The new organ will utilise electrical key action, electrical stop action and slider windchests.

The joint principal wishes of the Tonhalle Society Zürich and Kuhn Organ Builders is to have an organ that is suitable for both accompanied and solo performances with the Tonhalle orchestra and with visiting orchestras, soloists and choirs. In the case of solo performances, the organ should be

capable of appropriately presenting the classical organ repertoire. Furthermore, the organ should be suited to the presentation of modern organ music and speak with its own artistic voice. The way that they will approach these goals is to build broad tonal differentiation in the foundation stops.

Based on a design by Christian Schmitt (Stuttgart), with 74 to 80 stops the present specification has been developed in close cooperation between the organ consultants, Christian Schmitt, Martin Haselböck (Vienna), Peter Solomon (Zürich) and Kuhn Organ Builders Ltd. Architectural works are by Architekturbüro Diener & Diener, Zürich, Denkmalpflege [preservation of monuments]. The great organ contrasts with the German Romantic orchestral division and a French inspired Récit. These two swell organs are situated in the ideal place, directly above the orchestra. The great organ is one level higher. The solo division is located behind the great organ and is designed to be a "floating" division, i.e. playable on all keyboards.



The larger pedal ranks are positioned sideways and at the rear wall on the lower level, the smaller pedal ranks level with the great organ. The pedal organ comprises twelve stops and is completed by the orchestral pedal in a swell box with another seven stops. Altogether, the specification will make this new instrument of a similar size to the preceding organs.

The reed stops will be realized in German, French and English styles. The Aeoline 16' and the Clarinette 8' are free reeds. The Flauto turicensis, with its unique sound and design (the pipe mouth is circular) is a Kuhn Organ Builders' development. It is the first time this type of pipe rank has been built in Switzerland.

Following a detailed discussion, the expert committee decided on a three-manual console. It is more compact than having four manuals, and in orchestral operation enables better sight of the conductor. Great concert organs are often equipped with a second, attached console in addition to the mobile console on the podium. Experience clearly shows that in practice the mobile console is almost without exception the one that is used. For this new organ there will be no integral console, allowing a lower case of the front and permitting the organ to be installed further back into the organ niche as planned.

The design of the case is currently in progress and is dictated by the restoration of the Tonhalle concert room (Grosser Saal). The room is being

returned to its polychromatic state of 1895 and the rules laid down for the protection of historic monuments indicate a historically sympathetic design for the organ case. The height of the structure, which is greatly reduced by removal of the mechanical action console, will give a wider view into the original organ niche. The new case has been designed by Christoph Jedele.

Apart from the obvious musical aims, the new Tonhalle organ will solve other vital questions: the case work of the organ will once more be logically fitted into the aesthetics of the room, the organ will have its own place in the organ niche, the orchestra gets more room on the podium, and the already excellent acoustics of the hall will be rendered even better. The Kleuker and Steinmeyer organ with Jean Guillou's remarkable specification has been dismantled and will find a new home in the Cathedral of the Assumption in the Bay of Trieste seaport city of Koper, Slovenia. The decision to build a new organ in the Tonhalle will make winners out of several interest groups.

*Bruce Duncan*

Information for this article has come from the author's visits to Zurich and from many internet sites, including [www.tonhalle-orchester.ch](http://www.tonhalle-orchester.ch), [tonhalleorgel.ch](http://tonhalleorgel.ch), [www.alte-tonhalle-orgel.ch](http://www.alte-tonhalle-orgel.ch) and the resources of Kuhn Organbuilders Ltd. and their web site [www.orgelbau.ch](http://www.orgelbau.ch).

Translation errors may be attributed to the author.

