

Joseph Merklin

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(b Oberhausen, 17 Feb 1819; d Nancy, 10 July 1905). French organ builder of German birth. His father, Franz Joseph Merklin (1788–1857), was also an organ builder. Joseph worked first with Haas in Berne in 1837, and then with Walcker in Ludwigsburg where he met his future brother-in-law Friedrich Schütze, with whom he was in partnership from 1853 to 1870. After two years spent working as a foreman for Korfmacher in Linnich, near Aachen, he settled in Ixelles (near Brussels) in 1843, and exhibited with great success in the national exhibition, Brussels, in 1847. Merklin purchased the prestigious Parisian firm of Ducroquet in 1855. New premises were built not far from the workshop of his rival, Cavaillé-Coll, and the two builders were to engage in serious, sometimes bitter competition for the succeeding 40 years. Large Merklin instruments of this period, e.g. St Eugène-Ste Cécile in Paris and Murcia Cathedral in Spain, still used Walcker-like cone-chests, but his organs gradually became an aesthetic foil to the still-developing Cavaillé-Coll style, and the firm prospered. In 1870 the Franco-Prussian War forced Merklin into exile in Switzerland, but he returned two years later to set up a shop in Lyons, in addition to the one in Paris. He was naturalized in 1875.

The prestigious contract for St Eustache in Paris (1879) was a turning point in the firm's fortunes. In 1884 he completed the first of many organs with electro-pneumatic action, for the Brotteaux Reformed Church in Lyons. He moved back to Paris in 1894, and henceforth included tubular-pneumatic actions in certain organs built in partnership with Joseph Gutschenritter. The latter succeeded him upon his retirement in 1899, Pierre Schyven having already taken over Merklin's Belgian operations in the mid-1870s. Subsequently, Merklin's son-in-law Charles Michel and later the Swiss firm of Kuhn continued to operate in Lyons (for several decades under the name Michel, Merklin et Kuhn), where a remnant of the firm still exists.

The German branches of the Merklin dynasty produced organ builders well into the 20th century: Albert August (Alberto) Merklin (1892–1925) worked for Walcker in Spain and published a treatise, *Organología*, in Madrid in 1924.

Significant organs include those built for the cathedrals of Arras, Blois, Boulogne-sur-mer, Bourges, Geneva, Guadalajara (Mexico), Havana, Moulins (extant), Oran, Rouen and Soissons, St Epvre, Nancy (extant), and S Luigi dei Francesi, Rome. Many smaller instruments were built for Paris, Lyons and the provinces; the firm being particularly well-represented in the north of France.

Although ultimately overshadowed by Cavaillé-Coll, Joseph Merklin's level of production was comparable, in terms of quantity as well as in artistic and technical viability. In general, Merklin organs retained subtle German influences in the individual timbres, in tonal power from tart reeds and cornets and in openly progressive technical innovation. In other respects he remained fundamentally true to the Daublaine-Callinet line of thinking, readily specifying free-reed solo voices while downplaying the use of overblowing stops in chorus structures. Eschewing the standard Cavaillé-Coll 'Thunderstorm' (*Effet d'orage*) pedal, he often supplied a cumulative pedal for all reed/mixture vents. In smaller organs he used double sliders instead of double pallet boxes with vents, and several stops could be borrowed from one manual onto another.

The broader characteristics and evolution of Merklin's scaling, voicing and design principles, however, have yet to be studied systematically. Ostensibly, Merklin's reputation ultimately suffered from his foreign origins (for he cannot be seen as emanating from the venerable classical French tradition, save via the tenuous Dallery–Daublaine–Ducroquet lineage) and, above all, from the retrospectively minor stature of his 'house organists' (Vilbac, Batiste, Hocmelle, Dallier). In addition, his work has suffered massive rebuilding and tonal modification, and this has tended unfairly to veil the vital role he played in French organ history.

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