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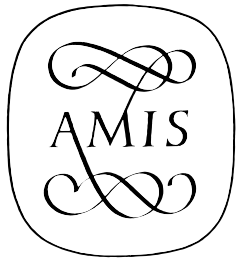

Nicholas Thistlethwaite. *Organ-building in Georgian and Victorian England: The Work of Gray & Davison, 1772–1890*. Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: Boydell Press, 2020. xxii + 552 pp., 99 black-and-white plates, 17 tables. ISBN 978-1-78327-467-3. $99 (cloth), also available as an e-book. Online supplement of 278 pp. available at www.boydellandbrewer.com/media/wysiwyg/Other/Organ-building_Online_Supplement.pdf.

Thistlethwaite's exemplary study, the first devoted to musical instruments in Boydell & Brewer's new series *Music in Britain, 1600–2000*, comes at a critical time, when historical organs are disappearing at an alarming rate (e.g., the magnificent organ at Nantes cathedral, consumed by arson in July, 2020) and important modern builders are failing (e.g., Mander Organs, bankrupt in July, 2020). Without thorough, accurate documentation, knowledge of this legacy will soon diminish irrecoverably, so Thistlethwaite's account of a major nineteenth-century English organ-building firm is both welcome and necessary.

No more distinguished researcher works in this field. The Reverend Canon Dr. Nicholas Thistletwaite is Chaplain to H. M. The Queen, Honorary President of the British Institute of Organ Studies, and recipient of the Medal of the Royal College of Organists. He is a prominent consultant on organ construction and restoration projects and a prolific author whose works include *The Making of the Victorian Organ* (Cambridge, 1990), a valuable introduction to the present volume, which assumes some familiarity with the craft and its vocabulary.

Thistlethwaite's study of Gray & Davison is not so much technical as an historical review, based mainly upon written records, of the once-prestigious firm, founded in London around 1772 by Robert Gray. Robert, said to have been apprenticed to John Crang (according to a document in the Metropolitan Museum of Art), was soon joined by his brother William as "Organ, Harpsichord & Piano Forte Makers." Their extensive output, now mostly vanished, ranged from small chamber organs, barrel organs, and claviorgans to substantial church organs. A square piano of theirs resides in the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History and a handsome grand piano is in the York Castle Museum; two later square pianos by William alone are known, but no Gray harpsichord survives.

Thistlethwaite untangles confusing and sometimes contradictory accounts of Robert's and William's early years, speculating on their training

and locating their various premises with the aid of contemporary maps, insurance records, and other evidence suggesting acquaintanceship, at least, with older builders such as Crang and the Pether family. Robert died in 1796; William carried on the business, joined in the early 1800s by his son John. Father and son repaired and sold pianos as late as the 1820s, but by that time they specialized in conventional organ building. As their reputation spread, commissions from prestigious clients followed.

Thistlethwaite provides specifications of eleven of the Grays' chamber organs dating from 1775 to about 1809; he discusses their tonal and mechanical features and often elegant casework, and notes that after about 1815 the firm produced fewer chamber organs, as the function of these as domestic status symbols declined in the face of the piano's growing popularity. On the other hand, their output of barrel organs accelerated toward 1840 to suit the needs of provincial churches as far away as India that lacked competent organists, a situation largely rectified after mid-century, when "barrel and finger" hybrids became more common until they too were superseded.

The Grays provided conventional organs for churches as distant as Australia, Canada, and the United States, as well as some of the largest and most prestigious instruments in Britain up to their day. Thistlethwaite tabulates specifications of twenty-two church organs by the firm dating from 1782 to William's death, in 1821; another table enumerates John Gray's yearly output from 1822 to 1840 (39 percent of it destined for London clients), which reflects rapid expansion of church construction driven by population growth.

John Gray was joined from 1836 by his son Robert as Gray & Son. Interestingly, Thistlethwaite notes that while their products were forward-looking in some mechanical and tonal respects, John Gray resisted equal temperament; when was it finally adopted? One wonders also about changing pitch standards, but because so many of the Grays' organs have been lost and none of the survivors remains unaltered (among other things, wind pressures and tunings have been changed, and organs were not infrequently relocated from their original homes), we cannot always know their intended sounds with certainty. However, Thistlethwaite analyzes existing contracts that reveal many of the instruments' basic characteristics, allowing comparison with organs by other contemporary builders.

The firm became Gray & Davison soon after John's daughter married the businessman and Bach enthusiast Frederick Davison, formerly a

partner in the progressive organ-building company of Hill & Davison. A year after this marriage, in 1839, Robert Gray left the business; thereafter Davison oversaw expansion of its operations into a new custom-built factory with a branch in Liverpool. Davison also prompted modernization of the firm's tonal designs and workshop methods, impelled by a vogue for French-inspired concert organs. To accommodate the technical and tonal demands of increasingly popular orchestral transcriptions, Gray & Davison introduced several "improvements," including new registers and mechanisms that Thistlethwaite discusses; these innovations in turn led toward the so-called German system, intended to facilitate performance of organ works of Bach. Thus the firm entered a new era, influenced by Britain's increasing openness to Continental fashions, at least in concert music.

Thistlethwaite sees Gray & Davison's Germanic "New Model" emerging in the 1843 organ for St. Paul's, Knightsbridge. Among its modern features were a full C compass for all ranks, an expanded Great division and independent Pedal, addition of solo orchestral stops such as the novel Keraulophon, and generous Mixtures (although details of many Mixture compositions are lacking). Anomalously, for organists still unfamiliar with use of a pedalboard, a separate short-compass manual played St. Paul's Pedal stops.

Through the 1850s and '60s, under Davison's leadership the firm's organs progressed along these lines, with introduction of new voices especially among the reeds, more couplers, better-engineered Swell enclosures, experiments with different wind pressures provided by water-powered blowers, and overall increased expressive capabilities especially in large, civic concert organs. Thistlethwaite discusses instances of these developments, drawing mainly on written accounts since so many instruments have been lost or radically altered.

Demand for Davison's organs remained fairly stable into the 1870s, but as sole proprietor personally responsible for the firm's debts, he seems to have become averse to risk, so the firm's organs settled into a fairly standard "house style," to use Thistlethwaite's words. After acquiring the decayed business of the late Thomas Robson and incorporating as a limited company in 1877, Gray & Davison faced increasing competition from more adventurous rivals such as Henry Willis. Davison's now mostly unremarkable instruments failed to attract much attention, and the company's output contracted in the 1880s. A few notable commissions still came in,

but only three new orders arrived in 1885 and none in 1886. Henceforth the firm survived mainly on rebuilding and maintenance work.

Following a period of declining health, Frederick Davison essentially became incapacitated by 1885, whereupon his nephew Charles, who had managed the Liverpool branch, became managing director in London. Charles Davison oversaw the firm's last important work, including a four-manual concert organ for Portsmouth Town Hall and a well-regarded ecclesiastical instrument commissioned by the Duke of Newcastle for the "miniature cathedral" at his estate in Clumber, Nottinghamshire. But as Thistlethwaite makes clear, these successes came too late to save the firm. Among other problems, an important employee was found to be working illicitly on his own account and was dismissed a month after Frederick Davison died, in November 1889. By that time the company's liabilities had risen to the point that operations could not be sustained, consequently Gray & Davison went into liquidation in 1890, the terminus of Thistlethwaite's account. (Charles Davison continued some operations until his own death, in 1906; later companies operated under the Gray & Davison name until around 1970, with diminishing success.)

As far as the evidence allows, and without excessive detail, this well-indexed book comprehensively covers the business history of Gray & Davison and the musical and mechanical characteristics of their organs, including data not previously found in the National Pipe Organ Register. Its value is enhanced by the massive online supplement, consisting of annotated work lists (indexed by location) and transcriptions of documents cited in the main text. Together, these accounts, and an extensive bibliography current through 2015, fill a gap in the history of British organ building and set a high standard for others to follow. One could wish for an audio supplement offering music recorded on surviving instruments, but as noted above, most have been so altered that they may no longer sound as their makers intended, and so could give a false impression. It is better to leave well enough alone and focus instead on further technical documentation of what little remains intact.

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