

Kristian Wegscheider: Master Restorer and Organbuilder

Joel H. Kuznik

Mention Saxony to most organists, and they immediately think of the 18th century, Gottfried Silbermann and his catalogue of 31 extraordinary instruments, which are still being played.¹ An amazing testimony! But today one hears more and more of Kristian Wegscheider, widely admired for his dynamic restorations of Silbermann organs as well as those of Hildebrandt, Schmitzer and Ladegast—and whose reputation as a builder is so respected that he was considered for the new organs at St. Thomas, Leipzig and the Frauenkirche in Dresden.

Steven Dieck, president of C. B. Fisk, Inc., credits Wegscheider with being “very helpful in discovering the ‘secrets’ of Gottfried Silbermann and continues to be, not only for us, but also for any other organbuilder. There is no disputing that Kristian and his shop are the experts on the work of Gottfried Silbermann.”

Stefan Engels of Leipzig’s University of Music & Theatre notes that “Kristian Wegscheider is one of the leading organ builders of our time when it comes to the restoration of historic instruments from the 17th and 18th centuries. His knowledge of style, his talent for research, and his ability to relate to the distinct sounds of old organs is unique. It is a joy to experience this artist and his superb work.”

And, as Steve Dieck points out, Wegscheider has an international involvement and impact. “Once East Germany opened itself to the rest of the world, Kristian’s company became a member of the International Society of Organbuilders. Shortly after that, he helped to organize one of the ISO’s biennial congresses held in Dresden. He is currently second vice president of the ISO and again helped to organize the congress in September 2008, which began in Gdansk, Poland and worked its way by train and boat to Stralsund, Germany, where members of ISO visited significant organs.”²

“He continues to share his vast knowledge of the works of Gottfried Silbermann with his many organbuilding colleagues around the world. He has visited the U.S. many times, and was invited to collaborate with Fritz Noack in making a ‘Hildebrandt’ style organ for Christ the King Lutheran Church in Houston, Texas.”

And those who have been fortunate to hear Wegscheider’s restorations or new instruments would add, “This is a builder about whom Americans need to know more.”

Background

Kristian Wegscheider was born in 1954 in Ahrenshoop, a small resort town on the Baltic Coast of Northern Germany. After stints in the army and a year with a furniture-maker, he began his apprenticeship with the esteemed Jehmlich Dresden organbuilding firm, which dates back to 1808 and is associated with the restorations of the magnificent Silbermann cathedral organs in Dresden and Freiberg.

Kristian immediately took an immense interest in historic organs and worked on restorations in Berlin and Leipzig. He became head of Jehmlich’s restoration department and supervised restorations of the 1714 Silbermann in Freiberg’s Cathedral and the 1868 Lütkenmüller organ at the Güstrower Cathedral.

Orgelwerkstatt Wegscheider Dresden

As Wegscheider writes for his firm’s website,³ the creation of his organ workshop in Dresden in 1989 coincided with the fall of the Wall and became possible with the parallel vehement political and social changes. These were indeed complicated times in the GDR, and the emergence of a new private company was no simple venture.



Kristian Wegscheider in his shop

At the time it was not unusual in the GDR for restorations and even the repair of organs to be delayed up to 20 years. In 1987, that gave Wegscheider an idea, often treated perfunctorily and bureaucratically, to create his own workshop specializing in restorations and repair. He overcame numerous hurdles—among other things, getting a trade license and acquiring the space for engaging in a trade, and one couldn’t get one without the other.

In order to bridge the gap, Wegscheider worked for almost a year in the restoration workshop of the Museum of Musical Instruments at the University of Leipzig. With the assistance of friends and with some luck, however, the initial problems were overcome. That was all quickly forgotten, once work began in the spring of 1989 with the reconditioning of an old carpenter’s shop in Dresden’s Neustadt (“new city”).⁴ His first two coworkers were the organ builder and pipemaker Hartmut Schütz, who had also trained with Jehmlich, and his long-time friend and a carpenter, Matthias Weisbach. Requirements were completed in December of 1990, and Wegscheider was able to receive his certification as a master craftsman (“Meisterbrief”).

The workshop officially began operating June 1, 1989, and in September there was a big celebration with friends and colleagues. For this historic event, a narrow-gauge steam train was rented, and the area in front of the shop was transformed into an open-air theatre. When the borders opened that fall, a group of five made a week-long “discovery journey” into the “West” finally to hear and investigate for themselves organs they had often read and heard about, an adventure that just weeks before had seemed impossible.

During this week, the team was able to examine the old instruments of East Frisia (Ostfriesland, a coastal region along the North Sea bordering the Netherlands to the west),⁵ which for them was like an “organbuilder’s paradise.” There they also inspected the shop of the famous Jürgen

Ahrend, contacted the North German Organ Academy, and had discussions with organ experts, musicologists and organists. This all became invaluable in forming their own firm and served as the basis for artistic work. Additional “educational journeys” became a regular experience and took them to South Germany, Switzerland, Italy, and France. How exhilarating this must have been—the new freedom to explore and discover!

Wegscheider: first projects

The first project was a new instrument for the Allstedt Castle Chapel in Mansfeld. The small organ was to complement the Baroque room and conform to old established models of classical organbuilding. The shop was to do something that had never been done in East Germany before—to make an instrument completely from wood, tin, lead, leather and brass without using plywood, aluminum, nitrate lacquer, plastic and prefabricated mechanisms.

Also, this instrument would reflect Wegscheider’s long-held interest in providing two temperaments that can be played interchangeably: meantone for Renaissance music and well-tempered for Baroque. The idea originated in Charles Fisk’s dual-temperament organ at California’s Stanford University (1984),⁶ but this was to be the first such instrument in Europe, with Wegscheider working to improve the result both technically and musically.⁷

This new organ for Allstedt was followed by a number of restorations in the states of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Saxony-Anhalt, Brandenburg and Thuringia, while at the same time there developed partnership work in Saxony. Much of the work, now with seven co-workers, involved restoring damaged organs, some long unplayable due to water damage or wood worms. Other builders had refused to work on them or recommended replacements, but to Wegscheider these instruments were too valuable to be discarded. Congregations, in turn, were grateful for the efforts of their municipalities to preserve these organs.

Expansion

By 1993 it was clear that the company needed new, larger facilities. The company had expanded to ten employees, with only 400 square meters of workspace and with insufficient height to assemble instruments. Finally a carpenter’s workshop was found in Dresden–Hellerau in the old village center of Rähnitz. During the move, the firm continued to work on a restoration of the Silbermann for the Bremen Cathedral (I/8, 1734)⁸ and an identical copy of it for the Silbermann Museum in Frauenstein, so that the dedication of the new workshop in July 1994 could take place in a concert using both organs with the Dresden Baroque Orchestra.

After all this excitement, work continued routinely, but always with interesting projects. One was the extensive renovation of the Schulze organ, with the reconstruction of a 32’ Posaune in Markneukirchen, a town in Saxony known as a center for making musical instruments as well as its Museum of Musical Instruments. Another instance was building a new 20-rank organ inside an historic case in Steinwedel near Hannover, which demonstrated what a builder like Wegscheider with experience in historical models could do.

Langhennersdorf, Nikolaikirche

But the high point of this period was completing the renovation of the organ at St. Nicholas Church in Langhennersdorf, a beautiful village near Freiberg. This Opus 1 by Silbermann’s apprentice Zacharias Hildebrandt (1722) as his *Meisterstück* (masterpiece) was built to certify him as an organbuilder. It is a revelation to hear—exciting, vibrant, present, colorful, and commanding.

But all this came after some blood, sweat and tears. Begun in 1989–90 during the turbulent reunification of Germany, this was Wegscheider’s first big contract and was threatened by obstacles beyond his control. However, he remained determined and continued working piece by piece as the church, which was committed to the challenge, raised funds. What exuberance there must have been at rededication on Reformation Day, 1996!

Langhennersdorf Nikolaikirche⁹ 1722 Zacharias Hildebrandt (II+P/21) 1989–1996 Kristian Wegscheider

Hauptwerk

8’ Principal
8’ Rohrflöte
8’ Quintadena
4’ Praestant
4’ Spitzflöte
3’ Quinta
2’ Octava
III Mixtur
II Cymbeln
III Cornett (from c1)

Oberwerk

8’ Gedackt
4’ Rohrflöte
3’ Nasat
2’ Principal
2’ Waldflöte
1’ Sifföte
1½’ Quinte
II Cymbeln

Pedal

16’ Sub-Baß
16’ Posanenbaß
8’ Trompete

Tremulant
Shove coupler II/I
Pedal coupler I/P
Manual compass C, D–c3
Pedal compass C, D–c1

Choir pitch: a = 468 Hz
Modified meantone

Dresden-Loschwitz church

The lessons learned in Langhennersdorf would prove helpful in designing the 1997 organ for a church in the



Dresden-Loschwitz (photo credit: Joel Kuznick)

outlying regions of Dresden-Loschwitz. The organ was conceived as a large one-manual and pedal instrument that would combine the typical stops of Silbermann with other 18th-century Saxon builders in one division, but some stops are also playable on a second manual. The building, virtually destroyed in the 1945 Blitz by an errant bomb, has been restored with spectacular but simple beauty. The church—with its historic altar rescued and restored from the Sophienkirche, where Bach played two recitals (1825 and 1731), and where his son Wilhelm Friedemann was organist (1733–1746)—has its organ sitting center stage in the second gallery.

The impact of this small instrument is remarkable and a joy to hear. Just a day after playing and listening to the impressive Silbermann-Hildebrandt (III/47, 1755) at Dresden's Hofkirche and the imposing new Kern at the Frauenkirche (IV/67, 2006), the sound of this little organ in the suburb of Dresden-Loschwitz moved 45 American organists last September to spontaneous smiles of delight and satisfaction. The stunning immediacy of the sound combined with the brilliance of the ensemble and the colors of individual stops was a joy to hear.

And then listening to Wegscheider himself—on how Silbermann swept into this part of Germany with the fresh bold sounds of France and dominated organ-building, on the speech and design of his pipework, and clarifying differences of temperament in the area—was an informative revelation. The man has a large presence, an expansive expression of speech, and in his eyes the gleam of an inspired creator, all reflected in his restorations and new designs.

**Dresden-Loschwitz:
Loschwitz Church¹⁰
1997 Wegscheider II+P/20**

- Manual I**
 16' Bordun
 8' Principal
 8' Gedackt
 8' Flauto traverso
 8' Viola di Gamba
 4' Octave
 4' Rohrflöte
 4' Flauto amabile
 3' Nasat
 2' Octave
 2' Flöte
 1 3/4' Tertia
 1' Flageolet
 III Cornett (from g)
 III Mixtur
- Manual II (stops from I)**
 16' Bordun
 8' Gedackt
 8' Flauto traverso
 8' Viola di Gamba
 4' Rohrflöte
 4' Flauto amabile
 3' Nasat
 2' Flöte
 1 3/4' Tertia
- Pedal**
 16' Bordun
 8' Octavbaß
 8' Violonbaß
 4' Octavbaß
 16' Posaune

Tremulant
 Manual shove coupler
 Pedal couplers I/P, II/P

Manual compass C–e3
 Pedal compass C–e
 Pitch: a = 440 Hz
 Tuning: modified Valotti
 Wind pressure: 70 mm



Christ the King Lutheran Church, Houston

Houston, Christ the King Lutheran Church

Wegscheider has been involved in several “Bach organs.” The first was in collaboration with the Noack Organ Company at Christ Lutheran Church in Houston, where he served as co-designer.

**Christ the King Lutheran Church,
Houston
Builder: Noack Organ Company, 1995
Co-designer: Kristian Wegscheider
II+P/30**

- Hauptwerk**
 16' Bordun
 8' Principal
 8' Viola di Gamba
 8' Rohrflöte
 4' Octava
 4' Spitzflöte
 2 3/4' Quinta
 2' Octava
 III Mixtur
 II Cymbel
 IIIII Cornet
 8' Trompete
 8' Vox Humana

- Oberwerk**
 8' Gedackt
 8' Quintadena
 4' Principal
 4' Rohrflöte
 2 3/4' Nasat
 2' Octava
 2' Waldflöte
 1 3/4' Terz
 1 1/2' Quinta
 1' Sifflet
 8' Krummhorn

- Pedal**
 16' Principal Bass
 16' Subbass
 8' Octaven Bass
 4' Octava
 16' Posaunen
 8' Trompete

The organ at Christ the King Church follows the example of Hildebrandt, thus adding a Bach organ of a new dimension on the North American continent.

Fritz Noack and the Noack Organ Company were selected to design and build the organ. Noack is an American builder born and trained in Germany and uniquely situated to bridge the Saxon past and the Texan present. Kristian Wegscheider of Dresden, restorer of important Silbermann organs, accepted appointment as a design consultant; Reinhard Schaebitz of Dresden, voicer in the restorations, assisted in the voicing; and most of the metal pipes were built near Dresden in the workshop of Günter Lau. The result is a wonderful instrument which not surprisingly, but quite remarkably, evokes the look, feel, and sound of an

18th-century Saxon organ. One can imagine Bach's walking in, sitting down without missing a beat and, as was his custom, pulling all of the stops to see whether or not the instrument has “good lungs.”

This Bach Organ possesses attributes commonly found in organs built today in historical style—tracker action; mechanical stop action; keys suspended below the pipe chests; a flexible wind supply provided by bellows; flat rather than radiating pedalboard; narrower, shorter manual keys; no pistons or combinations; and tuning in a historic temperament. The Saxon style imposes a series of additional design characteristics. The entire organ is housed in one case, rather than in compartments for each division according to the Werkprinzip; the case design and beautifully executed carvings employ 18th-century Saxon conventions; and the case is built of pine and painted (blue-green, red, and gold leaf). The Oberwerk to Hauptwerk coupler is activated by shoving the Oberwerk manual forward, and the Oberwerk does not couple to the Pedal. The pipe scalings are taken from Hildebrandt's, and the principal pipes have a high tin content rather than lead.¹¹

Stuttgart, Musikhochschule

Another “Bach organ” was built by Wegscheider for the Musikhochschule in Stuttgart, which has a large collection of historic prototypes. One can see an overview at <<http://www.mh-stuttgart.de/studium/orgel/ueberblick/>>.

**Stuttgart: State University of Music and Performing Arts
2006 Wegscheider
II+P/21**

- Hauptwerk**
 8' Principal
 8' Rohrflöte
 8' Viola di Gamba
 8' Quintadena
 4' Octave
 3' Quinte
 2' Octave
 2' Terz (from 2') [listed as 2' but actually 1 3/4']
 III Mixtur
 8' Trompete
- Positiv**
 8' Gedackt
 4' Spitzflöte
 4' Flauto dolce
 2' Gemshorn
 II Cymbal
 8' Vox Humana
- Pedal**
 16' Subbass
 8' Principalbass
 4' Octave
 16' Posaunebass
 8' Trompettenbass

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Petrikirche, Freiberg (photo credit: Wegscheider)

Manual compass: C, D–d3
Pedal compass: C, D–f
Pitch: a1 = 466 Hz
Tuning: Modified Pythagorean

In the winter 2005–06 issue of *Spektrum*, Prof. Jürgen Essl writes:

In the fall of 2006 organ music of Bach will ring out. Then the long-anticipated “Bach organ” will supplement the university’s instrument collection. The Dresden organ builder, Kristian Wegscheider, received the commission to build an organ of 21 stops on two manuals and pedal according to 18th-century Thuringian and Saxon models. It is intended to be the ideal instrument for presenting Bach’s organ music with its choice of stops, its style of construction, its keyboard range, its speech and intonation.

Kristian Wegscheider is an undisputed expert in this area, and it would be hard to find a more first-class organ. Naturally there is no absolute “Bach Organ.” Johann Sebastian Bach, as is well known, played on many organs and was frequently active as consultant and examiner. The composition of the organ is therefore also no copy of an existing historical instrument, but an approximation of the Bach sound world in a variety of ways. The new organ is based on Bach’s expert opinion of existing instruments of similar 18th-century size, e.g., (Gottfried) Silbermann and Trost, on the compositional characteristics of his organ music, the restoration experience of the organbuilder and last but not least on the size of the room.¹²

Essl added in an e-mail to the author, “Indeed there were a large number of special problems for which Kristian had a good solution and fought hard to get the right results.”

Freiberg, Petrikirche

Another recent collaboration, this time with Jehmlich, was the restoration of Silbermann’s largest two-manual organ, at the Petrikirche in Freiberg, completed and rededicated in July 2007.¹³ It is an instrument with pizzazz, brilliance, and clarity, while individual stops retain character and color. It also happens that the best CD that effectively reflects Wegscheider’s work is a recent release of a recording at the Petrikirche on the Syrius label, *Johann Sebastian Bach, Vol. 4*, with works from the early Weimar period played with verve, imagination, and excitement by Helga Schauerte (Syrius 141433, €22.00; <scam06@wanadoo.fr>; the Organ Historical Society carries other recordings by Schauerte).

Freiberg: Petrikirche
1735 Silbermann
1959, 1993/94 Jehmlich Brothers
2006–07 Wegscheider, together with
Jehmlich Orgelbau
II+P/32

Hauptwerk

16’ Principal
8’ Octav Principal
8’ Viol di Gamba
8’ Rohr-Flöte
4’ Octava
4’ Spitz-Flöte
3’ Quinta
2’ Octava

2’ Tertia (from 2’) [listed as 2’ but actually 1½’]
IV Cornet (from c1)
IV Mixtur
III Cymbel
8’ Trompette
16’ Fachott

Oberwerk

16’ Quinta dena
8’ Principal
8’ Gedacks
8’ Quinta dena
4’ Octava
4’ Rohr-Flöte
3’ Nassat
2’ Octava
1½’ Quinta
1’ Sufflöt
Sechst Quint Altra (½’, 1½’ from c1)
III Mixtur
8’ Vox humana

Pedal

32’ Groß-Untersatz
16’ Principal Bass
8’ Octaven Bass
16’ Posaune
8’ Trompete

Tremulant
Manual compass: C, D–c3
Pedal compass: C, D–c1
Manual coupler II/I
Pedal coupler P/I

Tuning: 462.5 Hz
Temperament: Neidhardt II
(for a small city), 1732

In summary, restorations include organs by:

Gottfried Silbermann
Niederschöna, 1715/1993, I/14
Bremen Cathedral, 1734/1994, I/8
Jacobikirche, Freiberg, 1717/1995/2006, II/20

Reinhardtsgrimma, 1731/1997, II/20
Tiefenau, 1725/1997, I/9
Dresden Cathedral, 1755/2002, III/47, jointly with Jehmlich Orgelbau
Petrikirche, Freiberg, 1735/2007, II/32, jointly with Jehmlich Orgelbau

Zacharias Hildebrandt
Langhennersdorf, 1722/1996, II/21

Friedrich Ladegast
Biederitz, 1868/1997, II/12
Hohemölsen, 1851/1998, II/24
Merseburg Cathedral, 1855/1866/2003, IV, 84, joint with Eule/Bautzen and Scheffler, Frankfurt/Oder
Pomssen Wehrkirche, 1671/2000/2007, I/13

Wegscheider’s firm has built to date thirty new organs including:
Silbermann Museum, Frauenstein, copy of Bremen positive, 1994, I/8
Güstrow Cathedral, 1996, I/15 registers with bass drums, bells, cymbelstem, 2 cuckoos, drum, nightingale
Dresden–Loschwitz, 1996, II/20
Bremen Cathedral, 2002, I/8
Cologne–Michaelshoven, 2003, II/28 (in the style of Silbermann/Hildebrandt)
Stuttgart, Musikhochschule, 2006/2007, II/21, Bach Organ
Sacrow-Potsdam, Heilandskirche, 2008/2009, II/17 registers

Current work includes:
Fritzsche-Treutmann-Organ in Harbke (restoration in cooperation with Dutschke-Organbau), completed 12/07 and dedicated 5/08
Altarpositiv, Kreuzkirche in Dresden, dedicated 5/08
Stellwagen Organ in Stralsund St. Marien (1659).

Notes

1. Frank-Harald Gress, *Die Orgeln Gottfried Silbermanns* (Dresden, Michel Sandstein Verlag, 3rd edition, €38.00). Available from <www.silbermann.org>. CDs: Querstand recordings available from OHS.

2. <www.internationalorganbuilders.com>.

3. <www.wegscheider-orgel.de>. This background section is largely a paraphrase translation of Wegscheider’s words. There are also several articles, one of which explicates his ideas, entitled “Gedanken—Ziele—Wünsche” (Thoughts—Goals—Hopes), December 1998.

4. Across the Elbe River from the Altstadt (“old city”), where the restored Zwinger Museum, the Hofkirche (Cathedral), and Frauenkirche.

5. The organs have been recorded by Harald Vogel in two volumes available from <www.organeum.com>; Vol. I is available from Gothic. Vogel has also written a book *Orgellandschaft Ostfriesland* (1997; €30.00; #OC-09620), which has this description: “This fundamental work on the organ culture of East Frisia provides deep insight into the development of organ building and organ music in the coastlands bordering the Netherlands. During the past thirty years, East Frisia has become an European center for organ culture. Visitors come from all over the world to experience the wonderful sounds of the many original instruments. Here, it is possible to hear Gothic music played on a late Gothic organ, Renaissance music played on a Dutch Renaissance organ, North German Baroque organ music played on a Schnitger organ, and late 18th-century organ music played on a Rococo organ.”

6. <www.cbfisk.com/do/DisplayInstrument/instId/85>. Fisk’s Opus 85, Memorial Chapel, Stanford University: description, stop list, and discography. The organ uses well-tempered and one-fifth comma meantone, with which Harald Vogel was helpful. An enlightening article by Jonathan Ambrosino on Martin Pasi’s organ with dual temperament for the Omaha Cathedral can be found in

Choir & Organ, December 2006; <www.pasiorgans.com/pdfs/nd06Ambrosino.pdf>.

7. On his website Wegscheider has an article (page 9ff.) on the use and design of an instrument with two temperaments, “Zwei Stimmungsarten in einer Orgel—Möglichkeiten der Realisierung” (Two Temperaments in an Organ—Possibilities of Realizing).

8. Rohrlöte 8’, Principal 4’, Flöte 4’, Nassat 3’, Octave 2’, Sesquialtera 1½’, Quinte 1½’, Sifflöte 1’, Tremulant. Choir pitch: currently a1=464.6 Hz. Original temperament unknown; since 1995 well-tempered (Wegscheider). Gress, pp. 95–97 with photo.

9. Bruce Stevens, *Historic Organ Study Tours* (Saxony, Germany, brochure 2007), p. 45.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

11. Information on the Bach organ at Christ the King can be found at their website, which includes several sound files <www.bachsocietyhouston.org/organ.htm>.

12. <www.mh-stuttgart.de/studium/orgel/bach/>. Die Hochschule bekommt ihre “Bach-Organ” (The College Gets Its Bach Organ); with photos and drawings.

13. <www.petri-nikolai-freiberg.de/>.

Joel Kuznik has served as a college organist and professor, a church musician, a pastor, and as a business executive on Fifth Avenue, Wall Street, and at MetLife. After several years of retirement from business, he revived writing for professional journals, something he had done since his college days. After attending the Bachfest 2003 in Leipzig, he again began writing articles and reviews. With over 60 pieces in print ranging from reviews of concerts and festivals, travelogues, books on church music, concert hall organs, CDs and DVDs, he was recognized and named to the *Music Critics Association of North America* (MCANA) in May 2005. He is also a member of the American Bach Society and serves on the board of the Bach Vespers at Holy Trinity in New York City, where he has lived for 32 years.

His organ teachers were Austin C. Lovelace, Frederick Swann, Ronald Arnatt, David Craighead, Jean Langlais, Marie-Madeleine Duruflé-Chevalier, and Anton Heiller. As a member of the AGO, he has served as dean of the Ft. Wayne chapter, on the executive board of the New York City chapter, and on the national financial board. He holds a BA summa cum laude from Concordia Sr. College (formerly at Ft. Wayne), a Min.Div and STM from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, and an MM from the Eastman School of Music.

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John Weaver



Frederick Hohman

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