Transcription as the Performer’s Strategic Tool: The Case of Edwin Lemare and the Organ

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Abstract

The British-American organist Edwin Lemare (1865–1934) enjoyed worldwide fame as a virtuoso in the early 20th century. A prolific composer for his instrument, he was especially noted for his transcriptions. Lemare strove to regain lost territory for the organ – by then often dismissed as a dull and inflexible instrument – in general musical life. He adopted a strategy for this purpose, the key elements of which were the instrument, the performance style, and the repertoire.

Lemare’s artistic medium was the Anglo-American concert organ with its orchestra-imitating sound architecture, and he took himself active part in its development. His ideal of organ performance – ‘orchestral playing’ – included frequent change of tone colour, flexible dynamics, differentiated articulation, and generous rubato. His recital programming was based on a principle of variety, where original works were only one element, together with improvisations and transcriptions, especially of orchestral works. Transcriptions were essential to his strategy, making up for the scarcity of repertoire presumed to be attractive to the audience, and offering opportunities of demonstrating the capacity of the ‘modern’ organ for fine dynamic and colouristic nuance, similar to the symphony orchestra.

Lemare’s strategy for the organ’s emancipation was thus one of adapting and conforming to current tastes, rather than highlighting the unique qualities of the instrument. His success was huge but relatively short-lived; he formed no school, and the ideals of New Objectivity, beginning to gain ground in his later years, represented the opposite of his performance aesthetics.

Introduction

Transcription, the adaptation of a musical work for a sounding medium different from that for which it was originally composed, was for centuries an uncontroversial practice. In the course of the twentieth century much of this changed. In the age of recording, transcriptions were no longer a practical necessity for the dissemination of music, and ideas of the inviolability of the musical work, the obligation to respect composers’ intentions, tone colour as an integral part of a composition, and the importance of authenticity in performance made it difficult to maintain the status of transcription as a serious artistic activity.

One of the last great transcribers was the British-American organist Edwin Lemare (1865–1934). Lemare was probably the most successful organist that ever lived; he enjoyed worldwide fame as a virtuoso and improviser, and the audiences of his recitals could be numbered in thousands. Already in his late teens he was a noted organist, and from the age of 20, he pursued a career as a church musician, holding several positions as organist and choirmaster in Britain from 1886 to 1902. Disagreement with the rector of his parish
concerning, among other things, the extent and character of the music in the service,\textsuperscript{2} caused him to leave his position at St. Margaret’s Church, London, instead taking up his residence in the United States. From that time, his career was exclusively that of a concert organist, touring extensively, especially in North America, Britain, and Australia/New Zealand, and holding positions at concert halls in Pittsburgh (1902–05), San Francisco (1917–21), Portland (1921–23), and Chattanooga (1925–29). Lemare was a prolific composer for his instrument, and he was especially noted for his transcriptions, which constituted a cornerstone of his recital programmes.\textsuperscript{3}

A strategy for raising the organ

Lemare’s extensive production and use of organ transcriptions were part of a strategy of regaining lost territory for the organ in general musical life. In an interview with the Adelaide Advertiser (an Australian newspaper), published in September 1903, Lemare declared: ‘My great aim for the last 10 years has been to raise the organ to its proper position as a solo instrument’ (quoted in Leupold, 1990: 4).

To give the organ its ‘proper position’ meant for Lemare, among other things, to make it attractive to the general public. As he put it in his autobiography, the organist had to ‘cater to the tastes of all’ (Lemare, 1956: 77). This did not mean that his transcription activity was limited to the most popular pieces of the day; ‘raising the organ’ also involved making it respected by Kenner and Liebhaber. There was, furthermore, an educative element in his concert activity, which reached out not only to experienced concertgoers, but also to a musically uneducated public. Lemare’s recital activity made large audiences\textsuperscript{4} acquainted with contemporary and 19th-century orchestral repertoire, but also with original organ works from Bach onward.

Apart from considerations of repertoire, Lemare also saw it necessary to improve the practices of both organ-building and performance. For the organ to be fully recognized as an ‘artistic instrument’, it had to be ‘properly built and properly played’ (Lemare, 1910: 572).

Three key elements in Lemare’s strategy for the emancipation of the organ can thus be identified: the instrument, the performance style, and the repertoire. They were closely interrelated, a crucial common factor being the organ’s relationship to the symphony orchestra; the adjective ‘orchestral’ was a keyword for Lemare, summing up much of what he deemed desirable in all three areas.

The instrument

In the late 19th century, the marginalization of the organ – a phenomenon dating back to the decline of church music in the latter half of the 18th century – was keenly felt by the organists themselves. But at the same time, the general optimism of the time, related to scientific and technological progress, was not without repercussions in the organ field. It was believed that the organ, thanks to its incorporation of modern technical equipment as well as the development of its tonal design, had the potential of rising from the humble position it had suffered since the decline of church music in the late 18th century. This spirit is expressed in the solemn rhetoric of George Ashdown Audsley, a contemporary of Lemare and an influential author of several books on organ building. Audsley (1921: 2) called upon the
organists to make use of the immense potential of their instrument:

What a wonderful world of tone the organist can live in if he only realizes his birthright – his citizenship in the land of beautiful sound. The organist stands supreme in the musical world – the master of the most stupendous, the most wonderful musical instrument ever conceived by the mind and fabricated by the hand of man. Think of it, O ye Organists, and rise to the level of your birthright!

The main challenge for the organists and organ builders of the day wishing to ‘rise’ in the manner suggested by Audsley, was to find means of remedying the instrument’s stiffness and unchangeability of tone, a serious shortcoming in an age where refined shadings of colour and dynamics were becoming increasingly central to musical performance. By the time Lemare’s career was at its peak, large organs were generally equipped with numerous devices in order to make possible the desired expressive nuance and flexibility characteristic of the symphony orchestra.

These new devices were basically of two kinds:

— swell pedals, opening and closing shutters of swell boxes enclosing one or more divisions of the organ, and thereby enabling the organist to realize crescendi and diminuendi;

— pedals or hand-operated pistons, activating pre-set registrations, and thus making possible quick and effortless changes, dramatically increasing the possibility of colouristic variety available to the organist.

The inspiration from the symphony orchestra on the concert organs of Lemare’s day is evident already in the fact that the names of practically all of its instruments were found on the stop knobs of the organs, sometimes with the attribute ‘Orchestral’. A designation such as ‘Orchestral Oboe’ indicated that the stop – unlike the traditional organ Oboe – was specially constructed to imitate the oboe of the symphony orchestra.

Lemare himself was a driving force in the development of the modern ‘orchestral’ organ; he initiated the building or rebuilding of several large organs and was much in demand as an advisor on large-scale organ-building projects. In 1895, when he had been appointed organist of St. Margaret’s Church, Westminster, London, he immediately began preparations for the building of an innovative three-manual organ for the church, which would be well suited not only to ordinary liturgical uses but also to the playing of transcriptions. The specification was designed for obtaining fine shades of colour and dynamics; to take one example, it included, no less than three variants of the Open Diapason 8’ in the Great division, and two 16’ stops of that name (one metal and one wooden) in the pedal. Orchestra-imitating stops were represented by an ‘Orchestral Flute’ and an ‘Orchestral Oboe’. Not only the Swell division but also the Choir division had swell pedals, and Lemare had, unusually, ordered that the Swell should sound stronger than the Great, in order to ensure smooth gradual change over the entire dynamic range. In order to facilitate registration changes during playing, the organ was equipped with no less than 31 accessories.

Later in his career, Lemare had several opportunities to further develop and refine his concept of the orchestral organ. For the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Auditorium of Chattanooga, Tennessee, where Lemare had his last permanent position as a concert hall organist, he was
involved in the design and realization of a huge four-manual instrument, completed in 1925. Notable features of this organ included:

1) swell possibilities for all manuals, even for the part of the Great organ containing the most powerful stops

2) numerous stops labelled ‘orchestral’ (flute, oboe, clarinet, trumpet, violin, violoncello, and a ‘Viol d’orchestre’)

3) special divisions for string-imitating stops (‘String Organ’) as well for percussion stops (‘Traps’)

The tonal design of this organ, obviously tailor-made for transcriptions of orchestral music, deviated considerably from that of a traditional organ, instead coming close to a theatre or cinema organ.

The performance style

For Lemare, the mere presence of an ‘orchestral’ instrument was not sufficient; it should also be played in an orchestral manner. This he found to be but too seldom the case; he criticized organists’ ‘stereotyped method of performance’, attributing the lack of recognition of organ recitals in the press to this deficiency (Lemare, 1910: 572).

Registration was of course a matter of prime importance for the improvement of organ performances; Lemare held that a true orchestral sound could be produced by a judicious blending of colours rather than by the novel orchestra-imitating stops in themselves (Lemare 1990: 8). But an orchestral approach to the organ, as defined – and practised – by Lemare, was not limited to the choice of suitable tone colours; it also included dynamic flexibility, differentiated articulation and generous rubato. Lemare described the orchestral way of playing as ‘a more realistic and life-like style, calling for individuality, accent, and soul, as distinguished from the colourless, expressionless, and monotonous interpretations too often heard’ (Lemare, 1990: 7).

A crucial element in the orchestral playing of Lemare was his consummate mastery in handling the organ, which included much more than depressing the correct manual and pedal keys. For his registrations, Lemare used not only the novel playing aids but also traditional changing of individual stops. He preferred the latter method despite its disadvantages from a practical point of view, since it allowed the performer maximum flexibility and freedom in creating sound colour. Early in his career, Lemare, through many years of assiduous practising, developed a unique skill in changing stops unobtrusively while being busy playing with hands and feet – amazed listeners spoke of a ‘third hand’, which would have seemed necessary for executing all such changes (Barden 1990a: 15). The importance that he attached to this particular skill is shown by the fact that, in his article on ‘The Art of Organ-Playing’, he devoted a separate section to exercises in the practical ‘manipulation of stop knobs’ (Lemare 1990: 8–9), an aspect of organ-playing rarely addressed in organ tutors.

The handling of the swell pedal was another very important feature of Lemare’s art, essential to his concept of artistic organ playing. He even recommended, anachronistically, its use in
Bach. The main purpose of the swell pedal – according to Lemare, ‘the only means so far devised of giving any expression at all to the monotonous or “one-toned” pipes’ – was to produce crescendos and diminuendos, often in an ingenious and subtle manner in combination with stop changes (Lemare 1990: 7, 10). But Lemare also put the swell pedal to unconventional uses, such as producing accents and sforzato effects or imitating the attacks of wind instruments (Barden 1990c: 20). Lemare preferred the modern, balanced type of swell pedal, which remained in the position where it was left by the foot – thereby allowing the foot to alternate swiftly between the pedal keyboard and the swell pedal – to the older, ‘trigger’, or ‘pump-handle’ type, where a spring mechanism made the swell box close immediately when the foot was removed from the pedal.

Lemare was famous for his skill in using the keyboards in an innovative way to achieve optimal differentiation of sound colour, especially for bringing out several solo voices at once; simultaneous playing on three (or even four) manuals was a particularly useful skill in performing orchestral transcriptions (cf. Ex. 2b below).

The repertoire

Lemare was highly critical of the programming of organ recitals in his day, and considered failures in that respect a major cause of the marginalization of the organ: ‘I do not wonder that organ recitals are unpopular in so many places, because when I look at the programmes I cannot imagine how anyone could wish to hear them’, he stated bluntly in the 1903 interview quoted above (Leupold, 1990: 4).

For Lemare, the basic principle of programming was variety. His recital programmes show a remarkable consistency over time, being normally made up of four elements – J. S. Bach; 19th-century and early 20th-century original music; improvisation; and transcriptions.11

1. J. S. Bach. At least one original organ work by Bach was a standard feature in Lemare’s programmes, usually a prelude and/or a fugue. Among the most frequently played works were brilliant virtuoso pieces like the ‘Gigue’ Fugue in G major (BWV 577) and the D major Prelude and Fugue (BWV 532), but also the more melancholy Prelude [with or without fugue] in B minor (BWV 544), which Lemare, ignoring the score indication ‘In Organo Pleno’, invariably played ‘in a more or less orchestral way on the soft string-toned stops’ (Lemare, 1990: 11). Chorale-based works seem to have been rare, or possibly absent from the programmes.

2. Original music from ca. 1845 onward. Lemare played multi-movement works by, among others, Felix Mendelssohn (the six sonatas), Charles-Marie Widor (several organ symphonies) and Joseph Rheinberger (several sonatas), in addition to minor works by especially French and British composers of his own generation or somewhat older. In his later programmes, his own compositions were prominently featured.

3. Improvisation. Part of Lemare’s popularity rested on his exceptional capacity for extemporizing. He used themes known to (and often solicited from, and provided by) the audience.13 One of his specialities was playing several themes simultaneously; he is reported once to have combined three popular tunes played on the manuals with a fourth added in the pedal.14 An improvisation was invariably part of his recital programmes, often played
immediately before the final piece.

4. Transcriptions. For Lemare, the variety required in a recital programme meant that programmes composed exclusively of original organ music were out of the question:

I have been striving to break down the old conservative idea that nothing but strictly organ music should be played on the instrument. If one adheres entirely to organ music, one’s repertoire is necessarily limited. In many cases the selections are dry (quoted in Leupold, 1990: 4).

The organ, as Lemare saw it, suffered badly from a lack of repertoire. Such a statement may seem strange to anyone acquainted with the enormous richness in the repertoire for the instrument – from the fourteenth century onward. But by ‘repertoire’ Lemare can be assumed to have meant, not music written for the organ in general, but rather original works from the 19th century – especially by the greatest composers – that would have formed a viable counterpart to the typical repertoire of the most important forces in public musical life: the symphony orchestra and the piano. And, despite such major works as Mendelssohn’s sonatas and Liszt’s B-A-C-H Prelude and Fugue, such repertoire was undeniably scarce.

To make up for the lack of original music of the desired kind, transcriptions became a necessity. Transcriptions of orchestral works served the goal of ‘raising the organ’ also in another way, by excellently demonstrating that the palette of timbres and the capacity for fine dynamic nuance in the modern organ was such that it could render even works composed for the full symphony orchestra in a convincing manner. Lemare also saw transcriptions as contributing to a generally enhanced level of organ performance; by studying published transcriptions, the organist would develop ‘a more interesting and artistic style of organ-playing’ (Lemare, 1910: 573).

Also, organ transcriptions had advantages in terms of accessibility and economy. When, in 1917, Lemare argued that the organ ‘should be the musical center of the city [of San Francisco], because it can be heard by the greatest number at the smallest cost’, he certainly had a comparison with the orchestra in mind.  

In the 1903 interview, Lemare declares himself to have been ‘one of the first seriously to fight the cause of introducing modern orchestral works in the form of transcriptions for the organ’. It would, however, be more true to say that he continued and developed a tradition, initiated by William Thomas Best (1826–97), the leading British organist of the late 19th century, whom Lemare had met as a young man and who had encouraged him, although there had never been a regular master-pupil relationship between them. Lemare’s transcription repertoire did not only include his own arrangements but also at least one by Best.

Lemare’s organ transcriptions
Although Lemare was a prolific composer of organ music, with more than 180 published works, including two organ symphonies, his transcriptions clearly outnumber his original works. He claimed to have made more than 800 organ transcriptions (Lemare 1956: 48 and 82); however, Leupold (1990: 5) gives the number of his published transcription to 270 [or more]. A complete picture of Lemare’s transcriptions is yet lacking. Tables 1–3 present
overviews of Lemare’s choice of works for transcription with regard to period, genre, and composer.  

Table 1. Works transcribed by Lemare, period

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<td>Classical</td>
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<tr>
<td>Early to mid 19th century</td>
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<tr>
<td>(composers born 1780–1825)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mid to late 19th century</td>
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<tr>
<td>(composers born 1826–1850)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ca. 1900 (composers born 1851 and later)</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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Table 2. Works transcribed by Lemare, genre

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<tr>
<td>Piano music</td>
<td>37</td>
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<tr>
<td>Orchestral music</td>
<td>30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chamber music</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Songs</td>
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<td>Sacred music</td>
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<td>Unidentified</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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c. Works transcribed by Lemare, composers (the table includes composers represented with two or more transcriptions)

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<th>Composer</th>
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As seen in Table 1, Lemare transcribed almost exclusively music from the 19th and early 20th centuries. A considerable number of works are by composers more or less his contemporaries. Table 2 shows that excerpts from operas and other music for the stage, together with other orchestral music, make up about half of the transcriptions. In addition, Lemare transcribed a significant number of piano pieces – both classical masterpieces and ‘salon music’ by now forgotten composers (to the latter category belong, among others, Adolf Henselt and Eduard Schütt). For piano pieces (and to some extent, chamber music), Lemare’s transcriptions are similar to orchestrations; he used changes of tone colour to highlight important motives.

Wagner’s operas occupy a special place among Lemare’s transcriptions. This may seem unremarkable, since Wagner transcriptions of different kinds abounded at the time. There is, however, a personal background to Lemare’s preoccupation with Wagner, which began already in his early teens, when, as a student of the Royal Academy of Music, he heard performances of Die Meistersinger under Hans Richter and Parsifal, conducted by the composer (Lemare 1956: 13). In 1894, he visited Bayreuth, where he became fascinated with the voluminous, organ-like depth of the orchestral sound, caused by a combination of Wagner’s instrumentation and the special acoustic qualities of the Festspielhaus. The peak experience was Parsifal. At that time, Wagner’s widow, Cosima, had prohibited performances of Parsifal outside the Bayreuth Festspielhaus, but Lemare, having become acquainted with Cosima in Bayreuth, managed to obtain her permission to perform one act from Parsifal in London, with himself at the organ substituting for the orchestra, playing directly from the orchestral score. Around the turn of the century, Lemare signed a contract with Wagner’s publisher Schott, stipulating that he ‘transcribe everything by the great master that was possible for the organ’ (Lemare 1956: 23). Lemare saw Wagner’s music as the most demanding challenge for the transcriber/performer, and warned organists with insufficient experience to attempt Wagner transcriptions (Lemare, 1910: 573).

Lemare made a clear distinction between using the orchestra as a model for organ-playing and attempting to imitate it: ‘Above all things his [the organist’s] aim must not be to imitate the orchestra (which he can never do), but simply to take it as his pattern in the way of expression and tone-colouring’ (Lemare, 1910: 573). He maintained that ‘a great amount of the most beautiful of orchestral music can, when played on a good instrument, be made most effective’ (newspaper interview, 1903, quoted in Leupold, 1990: 4). This effectiveness was produced by the imitative powers of the organ, in combination with a spiritual dimension peculiar to the instrument. In 1917, Lemare said in a newspaper interview: ‘There is that in an organ which passeth understanding. It is persuasive, spiritual and golden. It is never merely pretty’ (quoted in Barden, 1990d: 17).
Lemare’s transcriptions (if his paraphrases of popular songs, often serving as encores, are disregarded) do not generally take many liberties towards the original; his main intention, at least as far as the orchestra transcriptions are concerned, was generally to render the original score as faithfully as possible, in a manner that would prove ‘effective’ on the organ. This is a logical course, considering that the purpose of such transcriptions – following the tradition from W. T. Best – was not to give a personal comment on works already known to the audience, but to present orchestral music to people unlikely to be able to listen to the original versions. Rather than adapting the music to the traditional way of handling the organ, he made combined use of his stupendous playing technique and the unprecedented possibilities of timbral and dynamic variety offered by the concert organ of his day, to create a truly orchestral impression. 

A few examples of Lemare’s transcription techniques will serve to illustrate Lemare’s approaches to some of the challenges offered by the task of adapting the orchestral score to the organ – including the choice between the two goals, not always compatible, of keeping close to the original and producing an ‘effective’ version for the organ. The examples are taken from his transcription of Brahms’s *Tragic Overture*, in which Lemare not only indicates some of the original orchestral colours in the score – as he often did – but also gives more or less precise indications for their realization in registration. The published transcription can thus be assumed to reflect reasonably well Lemare’s own realization in concert – although, to judge from descriptions of Lemare’s playing, it cannot be excluded that Lemare’s concert practice involved even more complexities of registration and playing than the published version.


a. Orchestral score.
b. Lemare’s transcription.

Tragische Ouverture
von
Johannes Brahms.
(Op. 61.)

Transcribed from the full score
Edwin H. Lemare.
The overture opens (Fig. 3) with two staccato chords for the full orchestra. At the second of these chords, an extended timpani roll begins, during which the first theme is presented by the strings, with horns added for the last two notes of each of the two phrases. Such changes of instrumentation in the course of a single phrase are not normally reflected in transcriptions. But Lemare produces a corresponding variety of colour by playing the horn notes on the main manual, registered with ‘soft 8’

The rendering of the timpani roll poses a special problem. Trying to imitate it by simply repeating quickly the same note does not work in this low register, where the pipes need time to be able to speak. In situations like this, Lemare either uses octave tremolo – which allows keeping the original pitch – or a trill on an adjacent note, which, while producing a deviation from the original, better conveys the mystical, ominous character of the timpani roll. Here he actually uses both methods, first octaves and then a trill. The reason for the change may be a practical consideration: whereas the octaves occupy both feet, the trill only requires the use of the left foot (heel and toe), making the right foot free for the swell diminuendo beginning the following bar. As the example of the horns shows, Lemare’s unrelenting ambition was to make the organ version convey as far as possible not only the dynamics but also the timbral nuances of the orchestral original. Sometimes, however, the complexity and variety of the orchestral score forces even Lemare to exclude certain parts present in the original (see Ex. 2).

Ex. 2. Brahms, Tragic Overture, bars 117–122.

a. Orchestral score.

![Orchestral score](image)

b. Lemare’s transcription.
At the entrance of the second theme of the exposition (Ex. 2a), we find the main melody played by first violins (1), an arpeggiated accompaniment by second violins and violas (3), and a slowly moving, regular bass line in long note-values by celli and double basses (2). In addition, there is a dialogue of overlapping phrases between the horns (4), and clarinets and bassoons (5). In the high treble, the flute and the oboe, in octaves, share a motive (6), which in a similar way overlaps with the main theme. In Lemare’s transcription (Ex. 2b), the melody (1), the accompaniment figures (2) and the bass line (3) are unproblematically assigned to the right hand (manual I), the left hand (manual III), and the pedal, respectively. In addition, Lemare uses manual II for the flute melody (6), also played with the right hand. The dialogue between the horns and the clarinet/bassoon (4, 5), however, is nowhere to be found in the organ score. It would seem that the technical possibilities are not quite exhausted here, since in other transcriptions, Lemare not infrequently uses the right foot for rendering an orchestral part in the tenor region. Such an addition, however, would be pointless here, since the dialogue of the two wind groups would have been lost anyway. Harmonically, hardly anything is lost by the exclusion of these parts.

Ex. 3. Brahms, Tragic Overture, end.
a. Orchestral score.

b. Lemare’s transcription.

The concluding bars of the overture (Ex. 3) offer an interesting case of deviation from the original dynamic indications. After a long descent in diminuendo, the music quickens again in
bar 423; staccato triplets are introduced in the low strings, embarking on a crescendo, which reaches the final ff at the first of the four staccato D minor chords immediately preceding the final chord.

Lemare completely ignores the crescendo indication, indicating ff already from the start of the triplets. On the other hand, he emphasizes the final chord, without any justification in Brahms’s score, by indicating sfff and, more important, prescribing the addition of the full high-pressure division by means of a coupler (II–IV), which gives an extremely powerful effect. In short, he replaces the transitional orchestral dynamics with more organ-like, terraced dynamics. This departure from the letter of the original score is clearly a matter of choice – the crescendo would have been perfectly realizable on the kind of organ for which the transcription was intended – and it can be seen as a case where Lemare’s ambition to realize the orchestral score as faithfully as possible yields to his overarching goal of making the transcriptions sound ‘effective’ on the organ.

Final remarks
Lemare’s strategy for the organ’s emancipation was basically one of adapting and conforming to current tastes, rather than highlighting the unique qualities of the instrument – even if he acknowledged that the organ possesses such qualities: ‘the tones of a fine organ have a more far-reaching effect than those of any other instrument or combination of instruments’ (Lemare 1956: 71). Transcriptions figure prominently in his programmes, and one guiding principle for the whole enterprise – instrument, performance style, and repertoire – was imitation (although Lemare, as we have seen, was not comfortable with this term). On the other hand, the educational purpose of his concert activity to which Lemare confessed – on the first page of his autobiography, he speaks of the artist’s ‘endeavor to educate the public in the best he has to offer’ (Lemare 1956: 3) – included the presence of original organ works in recital programmes, even though the proportion of original music and transcriptions varied according to circumstances.36

In a short perspective, Lemare’s strategy seems to have been successful, at least as regards his own achievement, aptly summarized by his biographer, Nelson Barden: ‘Never before or since … has the pipe organ generated such public enthusiasm’ (Barden 1990d: 21). On the other hand, this enthusiasm was too closely linked to Lemare’s person and his own unique abilities to influence the position of the organ more generally in musical life. Although Lemare did express his ideas in writing (Lemare 1910, 1956, 1990), he was not active as a teacher and was thus unable to form a ‘school’ of followers.

Even more significantly, the ideals of New Objectivity, gaining ground in his later years, represented the exact opposite of his own. Lemare died a representative of an outdated performance aesthetic, and his life’s work – in particular his transcription activity – was largely looked upon as an example of the decline of the art of the organ, rather than contributing to ‘raising’ its prestige.

Today, more than seventy years after Lemare’s death, the situation is different. Lemare’s transcriptions, as well as his original music, are being published and recorded anew.37 This can be seen as a sign of a new climate, more generous to the musical ideals of Lemare’s time – often referred to as ‘late romanticism’ – than that prevailing in the generations following his
own. But the change goes farther than that: not only are ‘historical’ transcriptions re-entering
the organ concert repertoire, but transcription of orchestral works for organ is today again a
living practice. We are confronted with an increasing number of published – and recorded –
new organ transcriptions of large orchestral works, even of complete symphonies (something
that Lemare never did). In an age when original orchestral music is almost instantly available
to all by way of recordings, transcriptions do not serve the same practical purpose as in the
days of Best and Lemare. Neither is it likely that new transcriptions will serve to ‘raise’ the
organ in the manner presupposed by Lemare, or that they are being written with such a
purpose in mind. Rather, the rebirth of organ transcriptions can be seen as reflecting a current
aesthetic attitude, questioning the viability and artistic relevance of a concept such as
‘original’. A consequence of such a position is that a transcription, whatever its degree of
fidelity to the original, is recognized as a work in its own right, to be judged on its individual
artistic merits.

Notes

1 ‘Transcription’ as a musical term is used in several different senses; for the kind of activity referred to here, the
New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians prefers ‘arrangement’, while reserving ‘transcription’ primarily
for ethnomusicology (Boyd, 2001; Ellingson, 2001).

2 For details of this conflict, see Barden 1990a: 20 and 1990b: 14.

3 For an extensive biography of Lemare, see Barden 1990a–d.

4 The audiences of Lemare’s organ recitals often numbered several thousand; in 1927, he played a concert in San
Francisco for 10,000 listeners (Whitney, 2003: 29)

5 Audsley (1921: 23), while listing both the Oboe and the Orchestral Oboe in the category of ‘Orchestral Reed-
Tone’, states that the Oboe is ‘not … strongly imitative in its tonality’.

6 For a detailed specification of the St. Margaret organ, see Bicknell 1996: 278–9.

7 For a detailed specification of the Chattanooga organ, together with an account of its conception and Lemare’s
role in this, see Ochse, 2001: 256–62.

8 The term ‘traps’ alludes to ‘the group of percussion instruments especially in a dance or theater orchestra’

9 The coupling of ‘orchestral’ and ‘life-like’ is also found in another article by Lemare, where he declares
orchestral playing as a general goal for organists: ‘The orchestral and more life-like style of organ-playing is the
goal at which to aim’ (Lemare, 1910: 573).

10 This skill (of changing stops in the course of playing) should be distinguished from the principles of
registration (=the art of choosing stop combinations), a topic frequently treated in organ tutors.

11 This section is based on examples of Lemare’s repertoire and programming given in Barden’s biography of
Lemare (Barden, 1990a, b, c, and d), and to a certain extent also in Lemare, 1990. Barden gives nine complete
recital programmes, spanning Lemare’s entire career, and mentions ca. 100 different notated works (68 with full
title) played in concert by Lemare.
Lemare’s interpretation of Bach’s ‘Gigue’ Fugue (recorded on a Welte-Philharmonie roll; cf. footnote 22) is available on http://www.orgel.com/music/lemare-e.html.

A standard formulation in his recital programmes in San Francisco read: ‘Mr. Lemare will be glad to improvise on a theme submitted by the audience. Themes should not exceed three bars, should be written plainly, and handed to an attendant during the intermission’ (Lemare 1956: 67).

The tunes serving as themes were The Sailors’ Hornpipe, British Grenadiers, and Rule Britannia in the manuals; Auld Lang Syne in the pedal. This feat was reported in Musical Opinion (Nov. 1912) by Harvey Grace, a prominent British organist and pedagogue (Barden, 1990: 18).


The huge difference between the number of transcriptions mentioned by Lemare and the figure given by Leupold, may have several explanations. It is possible that Lemare exaggerated his output, or that the majority of the transcriptions were never published but used only by himself (he may even, in some cases, have extemporized from the original score [cf. the account of the performance of the first act of Parsifal at St. Margaret’s, below, and footnote 15]).

The tables are based on two sources: a ‘List of Compositions by Edwin Lemare’, appended to his autobiography (Lemare 1956: 118–122), and the transcriptions by Lemare republished in thirteen volumes by Wayne Leupold Editions, USA (1990–95). Taken together, these sources number 159 works, to which should be added 45 transcriptions, or paraphrases, of hymns, folk songs, and popular songs – with or without known composers – which have been excluded here. Since the information given in the ‘List of Compositions’ is very scarce, it has not been possible to determine the original setting of all works included there. One transcription, for which it has not been possible to identify the composer (only surnames of composers are given in the ‘List’), has been excluded from the tables, which therefore comprise 158 works.

The relatively high proportion of works by composers born in the early 19th century is to a large extent to be ascribed to the many Wagner arrangements (see Fig. 2 c.).

The performance took place on March 1, 1898, at St. Margaret’s Church, Westminster, where Lemare served as organist at the time (Barden 1990a: 19).

It is possible that a similar contract was signed with Simrock, Berlin, for transcribing the works of Brahms and Dvořák (for both of these composers, Lemare’s first transcriptions were published in 1896).

A sounding example of Lemare performing one of his own transcriptions is available on http://www.orgel.com/music/lemare-e.html. The work in question is Saint-Saëns’ Danse macabre, recorded on a Welte Philharmonie organ roll. Although this type of organ did not have quite the same qualities of orchestral sound as the large concert organs for which Lemare wrote his transcriptions, the recording is an impressive document of Lemare’s ‘orchestral’ art of organ playing.

Sources to musical examples: orchestral score, Johannes Brahms, Major Works for Orchestra (CD SheetMusicTM); organ version, The Organ Music of Edwin Lemare, Series II (Transcriptions), Volume V: Brahms, ed. W. Leupold (Wayne Leupold Editions, Inc.).

A ‘noted organist’ who was present at a rehearsal with Lemare is reported to have counted 204 registration changes in the course of a Wagner transcription (Lemare, 1956: 105, quoted in Leupold, 1990: 4).
This melody is registered with only a 4-foot flute stop (sounding one octave higher), which serves to emphasize the high register of the flute while at the same time excluding the oboe part played one octave below. The original’s combination of pitches could easily have been realized without any added difficulty of playing technique, by combining 8-foot and 4-foot sound in the registration. Lemare probably made this choice in order to increase the contrast in sound colour between the different voices, even at the expense of literal adherence to the original score.

Lemare is reported to have made a last-minute change to the programme of his first recital in Boston in 1901, excluding all transcriptions, for fear of unfavourable comments from the severe music critics of that city’s newspapers (Barden 1990a: 14).

Twelve volumes of Lemare’s original organ music and thirteen volumes of his transcriptions have been published, beginning in 1990, by Wayne Leupold Editions, Inc.

References


