

## **In service to the church:**

**The *neue Sachlichkeit* and the organ chorale prelude in Norway**

**A study of *Pro organo* (1951-1958) by Rolf Karlsen and Ludvig Nielsen.**

**David Scott Hamnes, 16 January 2010**

### **Layman's summary**

The term *neue Sachlichkeit* is established in a variety of fields, including visual art, literature, film and architecture, to contextualise style tendencies in cultural expression. *Neue Sachlichkeit* (sometimes known as new objectivity or new realism) has also been interpreted in Northern Europe to involve an historicist, idealised compositional style in church music in reaction to what was seen as immoderate 19<sup>th</sup>-century romanticism or sentimentality.

David Scott Hamnes has investigated how the organ chorale prelude, as presented in a Norwegian collection of 323 historical and 20<sup>th</sup>-century chorale preludes entitled *Pro organo* (1951-1958), has been the medium through which the *neue Sachlichkeit* composition style was realised and made accessible to Norwegian organists. This collection of church service music was compiled and edited by leading Norwegian organists and composers Rolf Karlsen (1911-1982) and Ludvig Nielsen (1906-2001). Hamnes seeks to show why *Pro organo* is of particular importance and how it represents the philosophy of the *neue Sachlichkeit* in music written for the Lutheran established Church of Norway in the middle decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and how the compilation challenged the then contemporary Norwegian organ music tradition through what was then called the 'pure style' in music. Strongly influenced by Per Steenberg's radical, historicist *Koralbok* of 1949, *Pro organo* embraces both historical and contemporary material composed specifically for the collection, including 262 works by Karlsen and Nielsen.

An important focus of the study is centred on how that the compilation *Pro organo* presents a clear manifestation of *neue Sachlichkeit* style ideals through the provision of clear, brief, moderate organ introductions of high quality to congregational hymns, and hence constitutes a major landmark in the history of Norwegian liturgical music for the organ. In this study, the chorale prelude provides a microcosmic element for musico-liturgical study. Of particular importance to the compilers were fidelity to the chorale tune, minimal sentimentality, technical moderation and concision, with the use of imitative and other compositional techniques drawn from historical practices. In the context of *neue Sachlichkeit* style ideals, Hamnes questions the extent to which contemporary works were modelled on historical precedents and furthermore, examines the ways in which the 20<sup>th</sup>-century works by the compilers develop historical style principles into a new compositional language.