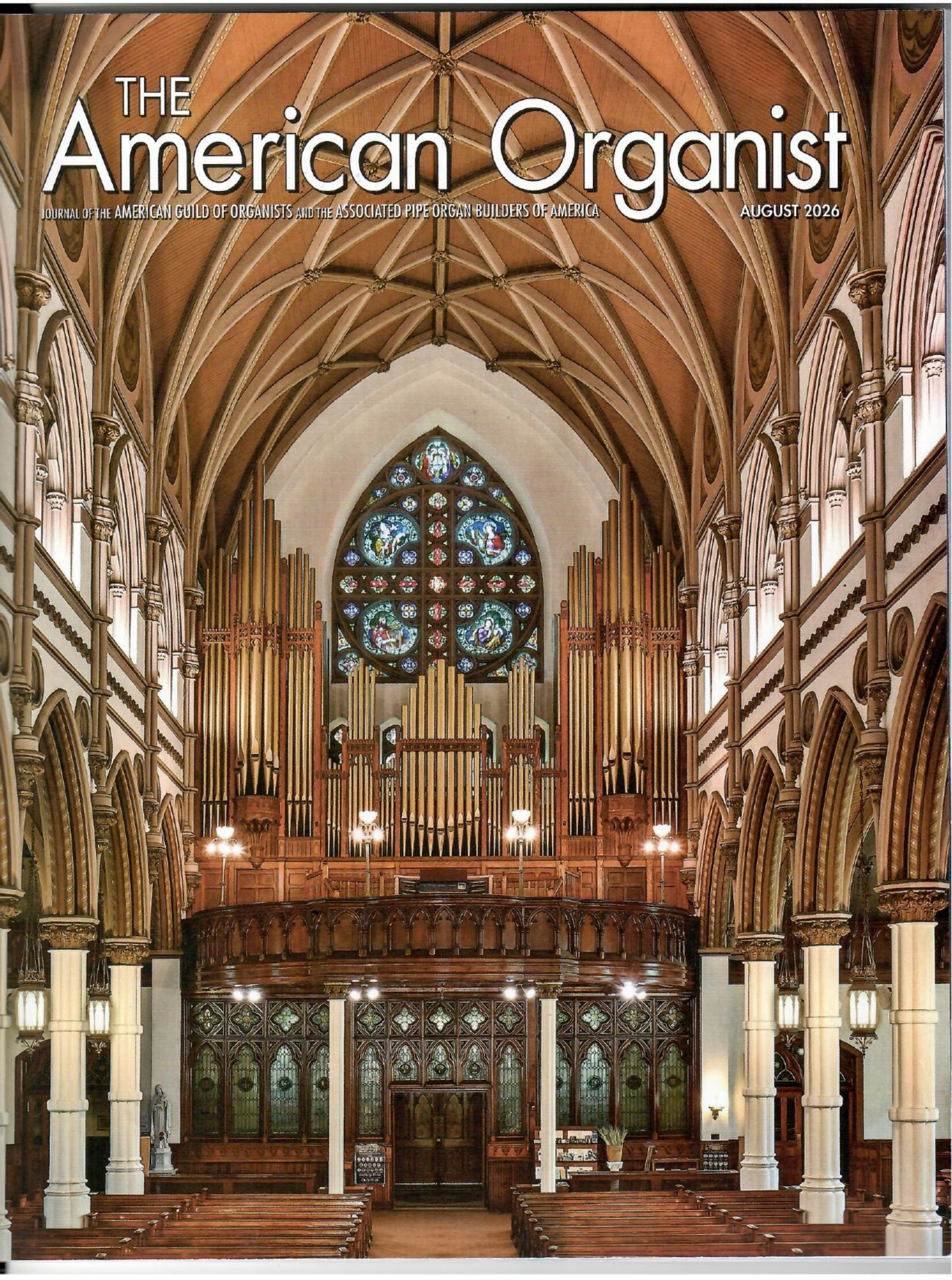
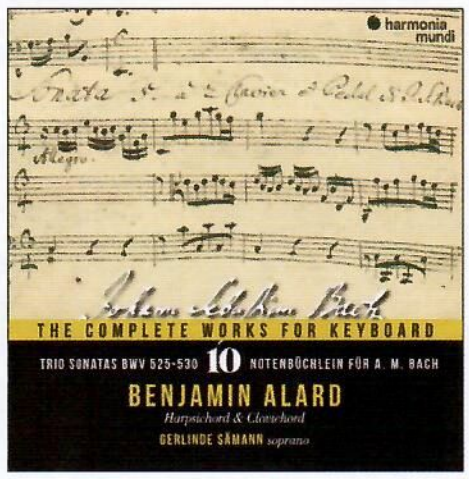
THE American Organist

JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN GUILD OF ORGANISTS AND THE ASSOCIATED PIPE ORGAN BUILDERS OF AMERICA

AUGUST 2026





JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH: THE COMPLETE WORKS FOR KEYBOARD, VOL. 10 (TRIO SONATAS, BWV 525–530; NOTENBÜCHLEIN FÜR A.M. BACH). Benjamin Alard, harpsichord and clavichord; Gerlinde Sämann, soprano. Harmonia Mundi, 2025. Some 20 years ago, Peter Sykes and I set out to perform the complete keyboard works of J.S. Bach. We called the project "Tuesdays with Sebastian." It consisted of 34 Tuesday evening concerts over two years, using different venues in the Boston area. Program structure was a challenge. We were glad to omit transcriptions and works of spurious authorship. Some collections—*The Goldberg Variations*, *The Art of Fugue*—demand an evening to themselves, whereas others—the trio sonatas, the six partitas—can be tough on the average listener without some contrast.

French keyboardist Benjamin Alard has undertaken a similar project with permanence in mind. He is recording the complete keyboard works on the Harmonia Mundi label. His approach is encyclopedic, guided by chronology. Volume 1 focuses on Bach from ages 14 to 20 and includes works by some of his influencers: Frescobaldi, Böhm, Pachelbel, and Grigny, among others. By volume 5 we are in Weimar, 1708–17. Each volume contains multiple discs, usually three, but occasionally two or four.

Volume 10 contains the trio sonatas and the Little Notebook for Anna Magdalena. Over three discs, the focus is on Hausmusik, or music in the home.

Disc 1 contains the trio sonatas. In keeping with his Hausmusik theme, Alard plays these on harpsichord and clavichord, rather than organ. Both instruments are fitted with pedal pull-downs by Quentin Blumenroeder.

Sonatas 1, 2, and 5 are played on a harpsichord built by Philippe Humeau (Barbaste, 1993), after Carl Conrad Fleischer (Hamburg, 1720). The Adagio middle movement of the E-flat Sonata has particularly gorgeous ornamentation. All the sonatas are exquisitely audible, making judicious use of both the lute and four-foot stops. Alard has a way of making inflection without ever losing tempo. There is no phrase, no gesture, no transition that is unheard or uncared-for. This is very intentional playing: compelling, deliberate, and sincerely felt.

Sonatas 4, 6, and 3 are played on clavichords by Émile Jobin (Boissy-l'Aillerie, 2018), after Christian Gottfried Friederici (Gera, 1773), and Jean Tournay (Noville-les-Bois, 1996), after David Tannenberg (Lititz, Pa., late 18th century). To cope with the sensitivity of clavichord action in these complex, demanding pieces is no mean feat. Sonata No. 3 in D Minor is particularly riveting, with only minor evidence of the unwieldiness of it all. Bravo Benjamin!

Discs 2 and 3 are dedicated to the Notebook for Anna Magdalena (1725). Intended for instruction rather than publication, the Notebook contains not only keyboard works, and not only works by J.S. Bach. There are vocal works, and pieces by C.P.E. Bach, Christian Petzold, Gottfried Heinrich Stölzel, Georg Böhm, Bernhard Dieterich Ludewig, François Couperin, and Johann Adolph Hasse. For these pieces, Alard uses a clavichord by Johann Adoph Hass (Hamburg, 1763), from the collection of the Musée Instrumental de Provins. The clavichord builder was a contemporary of the composer, despite their nearly identical names.

It is always a risky business using an antique instrument, and indeed one notices the occasional squeaky key or buzzy bass note (low B, B-flat, and A were particularly dangerous). My guess is that the microphone(s) were placed to the right of the instrument, as the treble seems always nearer than the bass. For the arias, Alard is joined by soprano Gerlinde Sämann, whose clear, clean voice might seduce one into thinking we were listening to Anna Magdalena herself. In the vocal works, though, there is a strikingly drier room acoustic, and the clavichord is so muted as to seem in a different room altogether.

The miniatures—minuets, musettes, polonaises, marches—are a particular delight in this recording. They are rarely heard in the hands of a professional, and Alard's artistry, sensitive touch, and rhythmic clarity bring them to life in a new way.

There are also major works in the Notebook: early versions of French Suites 1 and 2, and early versions of Partitas 3 and 6. The early version of Partita No. 6 in E Minor, BWV 830, is no less audacious than its later incarnation. Of all Bach's suites, this one is the most complex and edgy. Its dramatic, chromatic first movement ("Prelude" in the Notebook, "Toccata" in its later version) demands both flair and control. The dense, unpredictable Sarabande could be music from another planet. The Gavotte's irreconcilable rhythms sound easy in Alard's hands. The relentless syncopations of the Courante and the awkward, angular theme

of the Gigue only add to the bizarre nature of this partita. Alard's playing is commanding and compelling. You will not be able to check your messages while hearing this.

There is an intimacy and genuineness to these discs, as would befit a recording of Hausmusik. Yes, it's a recording, but aspects of live performance are evident. One hears the occasional page turn, the noise of key action, and at the very end of the Gigue, the distant tolling of church bells. Is it midnight? We are bewitched. Thank you for leaving that in.

To record 60 hours of music is a herculean undertaking. Benjamin Alard is more than halfway through the project. I cheer him on!

CHRISTA RAKICH