

GOTHIC-MEDIEVAL ORGAN TYPES

Three main classifications exist. Size, purpose and ownership were all determining factors.

[Portative](#)
[Positive](#)
[Blockwerk](#)

In general -

- 1 smallest was the easily-transportable organetto ("portative," "ninfale") which had a single rank of pipes, a compass of only about 1-2 octaves, and extremely limited potential for sounding more than one voice since it was played with one hand (right) while the other (left) pumped its single bellows. This was the most likely organ type to be owned by a musician rather than an institution. Organettos were played particularly by itinerant musicians and those who performed in outdoor processions or e.g., miracle plays.



(Type e.g. "Memling portative" into Google and further examples will appear)

Or go to:

www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/m/memling/3mature4/26nomus.html

[Positive](#)
[Blockwerk](#)

- 2 somewhat larger were table organs and small positives which generally had a single manual with one or, rarely, more ranks and a compass of up to 2-3 octaves (pedals for these were a rarity in this era); they were played by one person using both hands on the keyboard with one calcant operating two feeder-bellows. These organs could be moved (with some effort, needing 2 or more people), and were typically



found in the residences of the wealthy, sometimes played by well-bred ladies. They were not normally owned by the musicians who played them.

[Portative](#)
[Blockwerk](#)

•3 the largest were the Blockwerks that were permanently installed, typically in swallow's nest or gallery situations. They had multiple ranks - from 3 or 4, sometimes up to around 50 - compasses of 2-3 or more octaves and went through a process of stop-separation commencing around early 15thc. One player could use both hands, or even feet where pedals were provided, and thus play two or possibly more parts (up to 10 parts from 2 hands and 2 feet on the organs which had developed out of them by the time of Schlick in early 16thc). They often required many calcants, e.g. 26 bellows needing an (allegorical?) "70 strong men" at Winchester c994, or around 20 bellows/20 calcants at Halberstadt in 1361 according to M. Praetorius. These organs were mostly owned by well-endowed churches, monasteries and sometimes also the private chapels of the wealthy (such as the Duc de Berry at Bourges). They were normally played by religious and never owned by musicians.



It is sometimes conjectured that the Rückpositiv may have evolved from the convenient placing of a positive in a gallery alongside a Blockwerk (first divisions of this name were identified around 1455/1458 at Delft, Oude Kerk and Zwolle, Onze Lieve Vrouw also in 1455).

[Portative](#)
[Positive](#)
[Blockwerk](#)

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And in case your were wondering ... [animals playing the organ?](#)