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Salvator organum

by *Charles Cronin*

On the history of the pipe organ.

Halfway through Luchino Visconti's epic cinema rendering of Giuseppe di Lampedusa's Il Gattopardo, the protagonist, Prince Fabrizio Corbera, decamps with family and entourage from Palermo for Donnafugata, their summer palace. The year is 1860, and after several days in stifling carriages, the party arrives, shattered, parched, and covered in dust. A brass band welcomes them with a hesitant and discordant rendition of the gypsy chorus from La traviata and then accompanies the family's wobbly procession into church, where they thank God for their safe arrival. As they enter, the organist, on an instrument whose air pressure is generated by the manual exertions of an altar boy, plays the principal theme of the overture to La traviata. The scene ends with an exquisite slow pan of the ossified faces of the assembled family, as the congregation chants an interminable refrain.

Today, if an organist were to play a number from a popular musical like *Wicked* during a religious service, we would likely find it outré, even sacrilegious. In part this is because now we associate pipe organs almost exclusively with religious venues and music. Over the past two thousand years, however, organs in sacred and secular settings have played both sacred and secular music, perhaps never so promiscuously as during the decades around the turn of the twentieth century. In the latter half of the century, however, many, perhaps most, of the symphonic organs built for commercial spaces like cinemas and ballparks, along with many for churches, suffered grievous dereliction, often being jettisoned.

Those who deplore the loss of these instruments face long odds to stanch the devastation, given the prohibitive costs of refurbishing and maintaining organs. Happily, Fred Haas, an organist in Philadelphia, is among the dismayed. Over the past two decades, contributions from his

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family's charitable foundation have been the salvation of many symphonic organs in distress. To appreciate the significance of these redemptive undertakings we must first consider the origins of these instruments in the late nineteenth century, and their respective flowering and precipitous decline in the early and latter parts of the twentieth.

The organ is the only classical musical instrument that requires an intermediate source of energy beyond that exerted through the arms, fingers, or lungs of a performer. The piano, for instance, has a complex mechanism ("action") by which a key, once depressed, produces a particular sound. The energy applied by the player is solely responsible for the sound's pitch, volume, and duration. Even the accordion, with a mechanism related to that of the organ, has no external energy source beyond that provided by the player who compresses and expands the instrument's bellows at varying speeds, to sound the fingered pitches and regulate their volume.

The organ's dependence to "speak" upon a source of energy external to the performer has driven the evolution of this instrument, particularly in the twentieth century. Until the late 1800s, assistants manually pumped bellows that produced the requisite compressed air. In an ingenious attempt to harness an alternative energy source, Brooklyn's Christ Church installed in the 1870s a "cold water engine." Pressurized public water, for which churches were not charged, worked its organ's bellows. Other Brooklyn churches followed suit until New York water authorities forbade the use of this technology after noticing the precipitous decline in municipal water pressure on Sunday mornings.

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Because of the external energy source intermediating between the organist and sound, this instrument can produce a volume of sound greater than that of any other instrument. Accordingly, for about a thousand years following the instrument's third-century B.C. origins in Greece, organs were used mainly in civic venues, for festivals and ceremonies in which their loud and steady volume could be heard in open-air gatherings. For the same reason, around 900 A.D. the organ migrated to churches and cathedrals as the only instrument capable of filling these soaring spaces with music and reliably supporting the precarious singing of clergy and, later, congregants.

In the nineteenth century, as performances of operas and symphonic works became increasingly accessible to larger—and paying—audiences, spaces for these performances grew commensurately. These concert halls and opera houses ultimately accommodated performances of orchestral works with over a hundred players; operas requiring full orchestras, principal singers, and several dozen choristers; and virtuosic soloists performing on resounding Steinways with strings under forty thousand pounds of pressure. Outside major cities, however, there were few locations with public performance spaces that could accommodate these sprawling works. Organs, however, were

ubiquitous and, *faute de mieux*, a medium by which provincials—like those in the remote Sicilian town in *Il Gattopardo*—became acquainted with popular new musical works, both sacred and secular.

The augmented instrumentation of nineteenth-century symphonic and operatic works prompted organ builders, initially for the most part in France, to expand the expressive range and volume of their instruments. To create "romantic" or "symphonic" organs, they added ranks of pipes that imitated the sounds of bassoons, clarinets, and other orchestral instruments, as well as ingenious shutters permitting gradations of volume. These enhancements demanded increased pressurized air, requiring the participation of as many as six bellows-pumpers known as *calcants*.

I agree with the music critic who shuns any live performance in which Con Edison plays a part, with one exception: those involving organs with electric blowers. Like the steel frames and electric elevators that made possible the construction of skyscrapers, the electric blower was essential for the development of symphonic organs. Like twentieth-century skyscrapers, colossal symphonic organs were a particularly American phenomenon and, unsurprisingly, even today eleven of the twenty largest organs in the world are in the United States. Nathan Laube, a preternaturally gifted American organist, observes that European organs increasingly incorporate the innovative symphonic-instrument sounds of American organs—something previously unimaginable given the hitherto unidirectional European influence on the development of organs in North America.

Some of these impressive symphonic organs were installed in high-profile religious venues such as New York's Riverside Church. Many, however, particularly in the first half of the twentieth century, were housed in secular venues like cinemas, stadiums, car dealerships, and department stores. Before the incursion of amplified, recorded, and broadcast music, the symphonic organ was the only instrument capable of filling cavernous spaces like Radio City Music Hall with music.

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Silent movies in the early twentieth century were accompanied by sounds and musical works whose subject or character reflected that of the projected images. An organist might accompany a regatta scene with "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" and might play the same tune, sardonically, in a minor key and at a funereal pace, to accompany film footage of the Titanic leaving Southampton. With the availability of ample electricity, the cinema and symphonic organs' sonic range expanded further to include ranks of pipes capable of imitating not only the sounds of many orchestral instruments but also mechanisms to sound percussion instruments like gongs, drums, and bells, which the performer could play remotely from the console, activating machines that struck, plucked, or perhaps shook an actual instrument.

The chambers of the Aeolian organ that Pierre du Pont installed in the ballroom at Longwood Gardens contain a nine-foot Weber piano equipped with a vacuum action that plays the piano's keys as they are engaged remotely by a player at the console. Like du Pont, other Gilded Age magnates—Carnegie, Ford, Mellon, Rockefeller, Tiffany, Vanderbilt, Frick, et al.—demonstrated their supreme wealth and, arguably, refinement by acquiring, along with Duesenbergs and yachts, symphonic house organs, particularly those built by the Aeolian Company in New York. They hired organists or engaged mechanical roll players (much like player-piano rolls) to play their instruments at dinners and balls.

Paradoxically, electricity, which enabled the development of the symphonic organ, was also responsible for its degeneration. The number and use of these instruments peaked in the first decades of the twentieth century. The same era witnessed the development of the electric amplifier, radio broadcasting, electric sound recording, and, most devastating, "talkies." By the 1930s, these technologies had become widely adopted, particularly in urban areas in the United States and overseas. Electric amplifiers and broadcasting made possible the wide dissemination of the sound of any instrument, so the volume of the symphonic organ was no longer the primary means by which to fill outdoor and vast indoor spaces with music. House organs (and upright family pianos, more numerous by far) were abandoned in the pursuit of the passive enjoyment of electric sound recordings played on the Victrola. In the 1930s, the addition of synchronized soundtracks in formerly silent motion pictures precipitated unemployment not only for actors whose voices directors found unmarketable, but also for hundreds of musicians who had artfully underscored the visual imagery of "silents" on cinema organs.

Since organs require constant and costly invigilation and maintenance, many, perhaps most, of the unplayed house organs—as well as instruments in cinemas and other commercial venues—fell into desuetude and were subsequently demolished or salvaged for parts later in the twentieth century. While many church organs also suffered negligence, with the virtual elimination of the organ from secular and commercial venues, the instrument again became principally associated with religious spaces and music.

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Because organs are far more idiosyncratic (and less numerous) than other instruments, they acquire reputations based on their size (roughly, number of pipes), condition, sound quality, and the aptness of the space in which they are housed. In a happy coincidence, the two largest symphonic organs are in or near Philadelphia and the Haas family's Wyncote Foundation. Fred Haas was aware of the abject condition of Atlantic City's Boardwalk Hall organ and the Wanamaker organ in the Philadelphia department store now owned by Macy's. With Wyncote's financial support, the Wanamaker organ has been essentially fully restored and again delights customers when played twice daily. Likewise, the Boardwalk organ, on which free recitals

are regularly performed, is well on its way to full restoration.

There have been other organ restoration initiatives: David W. Packard's replacement of the discarded organ in his Stanford Theater with a cinema organ cobbled together using salvaged materials from several defunct instruments, and Longwood Garden's restoration of Pierre du Pont's sprawling house organ. Fred Haas's mission and ambition, however, are not limited to resuscitating a single instrument associated with a particular location. His objective is not only to refurbish and preserve some of the finest extant instruments, but also more broadly to offer contemporary audiences, long inundated with amplified and synthesized music, the opportunity to hear the pneumatically produced—and incomparably majestic—sound of symphonic organs in sacred *and* secular spaces. His recent and ongoing restorations include organs at Santa Fe's Mexican Museum of Art, Ca' d'Zan—the former Ringling family house in Sarasota, Florida—and the Church of Bethesda by the Sea in Palm Beach.

While symphonic organs will never be as ubiquitous and popular as they were once, Haas's philanthropic response to the cri de coeur to preserve dying instruments has been an antidote to the prevailing indifference, even antipathy, of individuals and institutions owning instruments they regard as white elephants. In the 1970s, when the New York Philharmonic accepted renovation funds (and a name) from Avery Fisher, it sold its four-manual Aeolian-Skinner instrument, replacing it with an electronic organ kept out of sight. There are no plans to install a pipe organ in the newly renovated (and named) David Geffen Hall—perhaps its appearance might have off-putting religious overtones.

The landing of the staircase of the Frick Collection houses another impressive Aeolian-Skinner four-manual symphonic organ. It has been silent for decades and is now almost certainly in parlous condition. None of the plans for the renovation and expansion of the Frick Collection campus, now underway, involves restoration and playing of the instrument that once delighted the founder of the collection, his family, and his friends.

Despite discouraging indications like these, and the fact that the symphonic organ's heyday is long past, Haas's restoration projects have largely accomplished his goal to ensure ongoing and widespread awareness and appreciation of these instruments. Through his initiatives we can again wonder at not only their impressive appearances, but also, and far more importantly, the glorious sound of the music produced by instruments once destined for scrapyards.

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