

THE PARIS OPERA'S CAVAILLE-COLL ORGAN AND THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA

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(...)

It is to Giacomo Meyerbeer, that we owe the organ's inclusion in lyric drama. For it was Meyerbeer who first put religion on the stage and who included an organ part in the scores of his religious trilogy, *Robert le Diable* (1831), *Les Huguenots* (1836) and *Le Prophète* (1849). In fact, Meyerbeer himself had to rent an organ for the premiere of *Robert le Diable* because there was none in the old Paris Opera in rue Lepelletier. Frederic Chopin was "enchanted and amazed" with its effect in the opera. The most famous moment for the organ in French opera was created by Charles Gounod in the Church Scene of *Faust*. This masterpiece was premiered at the Theatre Lyrique on March 19, 1859, and presented 57 times by the end of the year when the theater was closed. The Theatre Lyrique reopened on a new site in 1861 and by 1868 *Faust* had been given no less than 240 times.

What organ was used for these performances? The answer may lie in an anecdote related by Marcel Dupre concerning Cavaille-Coll's being summoned by the director of the Paris Opera because the new organ could not be ready for the premiere of *Faust*. According to Dupre, the genial organbuilder offered to install a temporary organ which was almost finished in his workshop. When the director replied that he had no money, Cavaille-Coll insisted on his taking the instrument free of charge and the director gave him free admission to the theater for the rest of his life - sharing a box with Berlioz and Meyerbeer! The great organbuilder's quaint reminiscence has become confused in subsequent retellings - it would have been the director of the Theatre Lyrique, not of the Opera, who dealt with Cavaille-Coll-and a two-manual, eight-stop Cavaille-Coll organ was installed in that theater in March of 1864. In 1869 *Faust* was transferred to the Opéra (or Theatre Imperial de l'Opera) where the organ was the two-manual, ten-stop Cavaille-Coll organ which had been installed in July 1860. Meanwhile, a new opera house was being built. The now familiar Paris landmark was designed by a 35-year-old then-unknown architect, Charles Garnier, whose plans were chosen from among those of 171 competitors. In spite of the three acres of ground which it covers-making it the largest theater in the world-the Paris Opéra seats only 2,158 persons. (Milan's La Scala seats 2,800 and New York's Metropolitan Opera House, 3,800.) Its stage, 118 feet high by 174 feet wide by 85 feet deep, is said to be the highest and widest in the world and can comfortably accommodate 500 persons.

For this opera house Cavaille-Coll built a two manual and pedal organ of 18 stops-six stops on each division. It contained 1,032 pipes and cost six times more than the previous organ in the old house (25,000 francs). (Cavaillé-Coll's philanthropy becomes questionable now that his financial records have been published!) The new organ was in place, but unused, for the gala opening of the Opéra on January 5, 1875.

The specification of the Paris Opéra organ is as follows:

RÉCIT	GRAND-ORGUE	PÉDALE
Bourdon 16	Octave 4	Contrebasse 16
Principal 8	Quinte 2 2/3	Soubasse 16
Bourdon 8	Plein jeu	Basse 8
Flûte harmonique 8	Bombarde 16	Bombarde 16
Prestant 4	Trompette 8	Tuba magna 16
Doublette 2	Clairon 4	Trompette 8
Tirasse Grand-Orgue		
Compass: Manuals, 56 notes: C-G Pedal, 30 notes: C-F		
Wind Pressure: Flues, 6" (15 cm) Reeds, 83/4" (22 cm)		

The mechanism and pipe chambers were situated behind the last two boxes on the right side of the stage and the organ spoke into the hall and stage through openings in the boxes. A system of mirrors permitted the organist to see the conductor. "In order to overcome as much as possible the instrument's unfavorable placement, Cavaillé-Coll introduced stops of large scale and high pressure, so as to compensate by intensity for the multiple sonority of a great cathedral organ."²

Louis Vierne played the organ in 1895 when, at a Sunday afternoon concert, he performed the organ part in Widor's Third Symphony for organ and orchestra. He wrote that the instrument was so voiced that when playing anything above pianissimo it was utterly impossible to hear what the orchestra was doing. It was necessary to proceed blindly from mezzo-forte and to rely on an assistant beating time at your side... Up close the effect was deafening; the impression in the hall was that of a cathedral organ. The result was not due to chance. Père Cavaillé, to whom I confided my astonishment after having played the instrument, told me that he had taken everything into his calculations to obtain such an effect. "It's no fun for the organist, I know, but it was not for his pleasure that it was voiced but for that of the listeners seated out in the hall." And those who remember the impression felt at the entrance of the organ in the church scene from Faust and upon hearing the magnificent fortissimo C-major chord in the marriage scene in Lohengrin must agree that old Cavaillé-Coll did not do badly, whatever bizarre means he employed.³

Unfortunately, Cavaillé-Coll's Opus 432 is presently silent. Though still in place, it has not been used for years: the console has been vandalized and all of the stopknobs have been broken off.

NOTES

1. Marcel Dupré, *Marcel Dupré raconte ...* (Paris: Éditions Bornemann, 1972), p. 32.
2. Charles Nuitter, *Le Nouvel Opéra* (Paris: Hachette, 1875), pp. 237-38.
3. Louis Vierne, *Mes Souvenirs* (Paris: Les Amis de l'Orgue, 1970), pp. 119-20.