

# Virgil Fox (The Dish)

AN IRREVERENT BIOGRAPHY OF THE  
GREAT AMERICAN ORGANIST

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*Based on a memoir by Ted Alan Worth*

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## Chapter 2 — Enter Virgil

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My idyllic life continued for some time, until one afternoon, after choir rehearsal, Mr. Purvis announced to a few of us who were fascinated with the organ that a famous organist named Virgil Fox, who was Organist of the Riverside Church in New York, was coming to town to give a concert in a week or so. Mr. Purvis thought it would be a good idea for us to hear him.

My first thoughts were that I'd never heard of Virgil Fox (actually, I didn't know of any other famous organist at the time), and the Riverside Church was not Episcopal—how could its organist be any good? To make matters worse, the concert would not take place in the cathedral but in the local Calvary Presbyterian Church, where I was sure the organ and building would be inferior.

Nevertheless, a fellow chorister and I went to the concert, holding our noses high in the air.

The first thing that struck me when we arrived was that Calvary Presbyterian Church was jammed to capacity! We actually had to stand, along with many others.

I was amazed. Except for Christmas or Easter—or some special great event—Grace Cathedral was rarely filled. It was certainly never

well attended for an organ recital! The normal attendance was only a few hundred people—the same as the weekend concerts at the Legion of Honor.

Calvary Church turned out to be a wonderful, large Victorian building in the elegant Pacific Heights area of San Francisco. The organ was located high above the choir, and the organ façade dominated the entire front of the sanctuary.



*(Photo by Bruno of Hollywood, early 1950s)*

You could see the organ console situated in the middle of the choir area. I thought such a placement was a splendid idea. Grace Cathedral's console wasn't visible to anyone who wasn't seated in a small section of the Great Choir. (Later they got a new, movable console that could be positioned so that everyone could see the player during a concert.)

I remember our excitement: with a packed house and a visible console, we felt something extraordinary was about to happen.

Then I noticed that I couldn't see the music rack on the organ console, or any music in evidence. What was going on?

The minister of the church appeared and made some welcoming announcements, including one about applause for this evening's concert being permitted. Indeed, applause was invited!

How *tacky*, I thought. Grace Cathedral would *never* permit applause! (Happily, that policy was to change within a few years).

The minister then asked the audience to welcome Virgil Fox. A small, bespectacled, but amazingly energetic, youthful, and spirited man strode to the console. He sat down, began to push buttons, adjust stops, and generally look over the console. Aristocratic in manner, he definitely took his time. I couldn't wait for him to begin.

I noticed, again, that there was no music rack, and no sign of music. How could this organist possibly begin without his music? And where was the page-turner?

At last, Mr. Fox finished fooling around with the stops, and seemed poised to begin. Then he turned, swung off the bench, and stood up to face the audience.

Aha, I thought. Now he's going to call for his music and the page-turner!

A wonderfully resonant, almost stentorian voice came forth that was astonishingly clear, even without a microphone. Virgil Fox began to speak about the first work on the program (the "Concerto Number IV in F Major" by George Frederick Handel—complete, in four movements). His remarks were entertaining and informative; and he delivered them with great authority.

Then he began to play—from memory.

From the first chord, I knew that this man was a true master. The rhythmic and dynamic way he attacked the manual and pedal keyboards captivated me immediately. A kaleidoscope of Baroque effects emanated from the instrument, alternating with rich orchestral sounds as he skipped from solo organ portions to the orchestra's

portions. (The original concerto was written for organ, strings, and woodwinds.)

Toward the end of the first movement, he inserted a decidedly un-Handelian cadenza. It started building in volume, went down to a whisper, then built into a powerful crescendo, culminating in a display of pedal technique on the full resources of the instrument. It took my breath away.

I was especially susceptible, as all young devotees of the King of Instruments are who prefer to hear the instrument played as loud as possible.

Before the last chord of the first movement, the audience burst into a wild ovation; and a star-struck, youthful organ student had a new idol.

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*Of all of Virgil Fox's students, Carlo Curley is one of the most widely acclaimed popular concert organists today. Now based in London, he was the first classical organist to play a solo organ recital in the White House, and currently appears constantly in recitals and on radio and television. He has made over 30 recordings, as well as the first commercially-available video of a classical organ performance, "Organ Imperial," for Decca International. His book, In The Pipeline may be ordered from HarperCollins.*

Carlo Curley

*I first experienced Virgil Fox in-the-flesh and in concert with no less than the Atlanta Symphony, albeit without Robert Shaw conducting (he was waving his arms abroad). No matter, as I would happily discover that Virgil would be merrily leading the orchestra no matter who was perched on the podium!*

*As I sat wedged into my seat, the veil was truly rent. As this "devil" performed, my eyes became exophthalmic, my ears grew numb. There was no denying that all my youthful senses were stimulated as never before! Here was a true master, of whose talents I had been disparagingly misled for so long. Any of Virgil's real or imagined artistic infidelities were swept aside in an instant as he gave the Jongen and Handel concerti incredibly moving readings that will remain with me until the moment of my departure from this mortal coil—and probably beyond. Each movement was*

undoubtedly jealously coveted and meticulously prepared. His soaring sense of rhythm and line; his devotion to making the virtually inaudible passages as moving as the ragingly triple-fortissimo ones; his delicate, daring flirtatiousness with the stops; his shockingly impressive technique—all these things, especially when topped'n'tailed by the man's sheer chutzpah, combined to render me virtually senseless. I do not exaggerate when I say that I left the hall in a daze, mightily confused. That night I yearned for sleep in any quantity, but lay wide-awake until the dawn as though in the throes of a severe, Starbucks-induced high.

To hell with the staid organ purists of my school days. His was a sonic and visual five-star feast served up with extraordinary abandon, yet very much under control, going miles beyond anything I had ever heard or dreamed imaginable. Virgil's performance provided, for the ludicrously low price of a single admission, a far headier elixir than the finest vino collapso. Everything I had gleaned from the naughty nay-sayers had been obviously based on envy and gross misunderstanding. Their views were as transparent as a department store window. I wanted to play as he played. I had to meet this maitre. I wanted desperately to work with him. Carlo Curley's dreams were suddenly made real.