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CLASSICAL MUSIC

Mightier than a Wurlitzer

A century ago, no instrument had the power, majesty or popularity of a pipe organ. A writer chronicles the instrument's rise and fall.

By Chris Pasles, Times Staff Writer

Even before a note is played on a massive pipe organ, the imagination is stirred by the sight of three, four or more broad keyboards stacked one above one other, panels of 20, 40 or more pullstops alongside to control an amazing variety of sounds, and a row of 30 or more foot pedals at the base of the console.

And when such an organ begins to resonate through the architecturally dazzling space of, say, the new Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in downtown Los Angeles, the experience can be thrilling. Seeing that instrument, and its unconventional new counterpart — a French-fry splay of pipes installed in Walt Disney Concert Hall — it's not difficult to imagine the excitement that pipe organs once regularly inspired in America, attracting massive audiences.

That period is evoked in sumptuous detail by Craig R. Whitney in his book "All the Stops" (Public Affairs), a fascinating, contentious history of the organ.

A New York Times editor and longtime pipe organ amateur and enthusiast, Whitney builds his tale around the personalities of the 20th century Americans who took into new realms what Mozart had dubbed the "king of all instruments." Each innovator had a different vision of the ideal instrument, and they fought each other tooth and nail as their ideas came into and passed out of fashion. "These are poignant characters who had real sad clashes, both personal and professional, and that lends a human drama to the story," Whitney said recently from his desk in New York.

It may be hard to believe now, but as Whitney shows, the pipe organ was once an incredibly popular instrument in the United States. It had moved out of its traditional home in the church and into concert halls and municipal auditoriums where, in the early decades of the last century, people flocked by the thousands to hear native and European virtuosos play original works, marches, patriotic songs, opera and symphony transcriptions and virtuoso improvisations.

Why? Because music was nowhere near as readily available as it is today. Radio was in its infancy, recordings were primitive, and live orchestra concerts were confined mostly to the elite. Organ recitals, on the other hand, allowed a single musician to imitate the sounds of a full orchestra, and at an affordable price.

It became a point of civic pride to install "monster" organs — with multiple keyboards and thousands of pipes — in auditoriums across the land. Entrepreneurs didn't hesitate to capitalize on the enthusiasm.

John Wanamaker began installing large organs in his department stores in New York, Chicago and Philadelphia, and after business hours, the Philadelphia store, in particular, became a prestigious concert site.

About 12,000 people sat on chairs placed on the marbled floor of the Grand Court and the six balconies surrounding the atrium to hear Leopold Stokowski conduct the Philadelphia Orchestra and Belgian organ star Charles-Marie Courboim play Bach at the inaugural concert in 1919.

Organs are built with one pipe for each of the 56 or 61 notes on a keyboard (called a manual). The pipes are arranged in sets of similar tone color, called “ranks,” which are controlled by stops. Theoretically, all the pipes could be played at the same time by “pulling out all the stops,” but it would take a tremendous amount of wind pressure to support this fortissimo sound.

Yankee ingenuity responded to all this, and as efficiency of scale came into play, prices began to come down and organs got bigger.

The rich — but not always just the rich — installed organs in their homes, mansions and even yachts, where they or hired organists or even player-mechanisms could entertain assembled guests.

In that fabled pre-income-tax era, Detroit auto builder Horace E. Dodge, for instance, didn’t need hesitate to raise his yacht, the Delphine, after it burned and sank at a pier in New York City in 1926, taking its two-keyboard, 16-rank pipe organ right to the bottom. He simply refit the ship with an even better organ.

Symphonic sound

As Whitney shows, one of the geniuses behind these large instruments — dubbed “orchestral” because of their aim to imitate the sounds of a modern orchestra — was Ernest M. Skinner.

A strong-willed if not impossible New Englander, Skinner created new stops and helped perfect electrical methods of transmitting the player’s keyboard touch to the pipes, making the instrument easier to play than the earlier mechanical or “tracker” transmission methods.

Even more significantly, Skinner worked his whole life to perfect a blended, warm sound that could mimic all the resources of a real symphony orchestra, from distinctive solos all the way up to fortissimo ensembles. This was the rich, fat, romantic sound that 19th century composers and organists coveted.

But the economic climate changed after the stock market collapse of 1929 and the ensuing Great Depression. The demand for the instruments began to dry up.

Musical tastes were changing too. Ironically, Skinner’s eventual nemesis, G. Donald Harrison, began as assistant general manager to the Skinner Organ Co. But after he went to Europe in the 1950s to research the famous instruments there, Harrison began to promote the idea of going back to the principles of the Classical and Baroque periods of organ building, using, for instance, more high-pitched treble pipes to produce a leaner, brighter and more brilliant sound than Skinner’s, one that would prove more suitable for bringing out the individual voices in works such as Bach’s Toccata and Fugue in D Minor.

Thus began a philosophical debate that would split the organ world in two and which continues to this day. The introduction of electronic — and later, electronic “sampling” — instruments only further exacerbated the debate.

In essence it was the recurring artistic conflict between subjectivity and objectivity, expression and restraint, going-for-broke reinterpretation and stick-to-the-facts historical “authenticity.”

The same struggle was going on in all of music: Were Handel and Beethoven best rendered with a full-sized modern orchestra of 90 or 100 musicians or with an ensemble of 20 or 30, playing on gut strings and “period” instruments?

In the organ world, each side produced a celebrity champion — Virgil Fox for the big, romantic organ (and later the electronic organ, which he took to rock shows) and E. Power Biggs for the leaner, classical one.

The divide, Whitney writes in his book, had serious consequences:

“When the ‘purists’ insisted that concertgoers would be better off ‘eating their spinach’ and listening to ancient music on reproductions of Baroque organs instead of indulging in the Romantic ‘mashed potatoes’ that so many people actually liked, much of the general public agreed. Organ music was spinach, all right, and to hell with it.”

Biggs versus Fox

Whose side is Whitney on?

“I started out, when I was a student, firmly on the Biggs side,” he said. “I thought the Romantic organs were mushy and Fox was a soupy player. But I wouldn’t say that any more.

“Great romantic organ music and a great artist, as Fox was at his best, when they take a piece of music by Franck or Liszt or Widor and play it for all it’s worth — it’s a thrilling experience, and there’s nothing like it.

“I can also see why Biggs was so taken by those organs when he first heard them. They have an integrity that tells you a lot. But you can’t play Franck on an organ tuned in mean temperament.

“Where I come down is, ‘Let a thousand flowers bloom,’ live and let live. Great romantic orchestral organs have to be met on their own terms.”

Since the publication of his book, people have written Whitney to tell him about their memories of these players or their joy in finding out who Skinner was. While he’s been heartened by those responses, what Whitney would really like is for the divide to be healed and the organ to take its rightful place in the heart of a music-loving public.

“I’m encouraged by so many new concert halls or old ones spending money to build expensive pipe organs. What needs to happen, and I see it’s happening, is that some organists are being unconventional in their programming.

“What a performer ought to be thinking about is, ‘What can I do to get the glories of this instrument across to the people I’m playing for?’ You’ve got to be creative and not passive. I see well-trained, really musically talented players who seem to be positioned to do that kind of thing. If they get a very lucky break, we could well see a revival of interest in this instrument. I think it may be on the verge of starting.”