

# A mighty wind

You don't need to be Catholic to enjoy pipe-organ music—or to appreciate the grandeur of the instruments themselves to be found throughout the region



The O'Brien Theatre organ in Renfrew sits behind the movie screen and takes up three floors of the building and part of the basement

ITS STONE SPIRE RISING MAJESTICALLY above old St. Patrick Street, Église Sainte Anne seems oddly cloistered among its lower-profile, secular neighbours—mostly brown brick office buildings that house institutions such as the John Howard Society and the Metis Nation of Ontario. Inside, stained glass diffuses the morning sunlight, conspiring with the lingering musk of incense and the faint echo of prayers to create an atmosphere of subdued reverence. But when the first chords emanate from the pipe organ, it's as if the voice of God Himself is reverberating through the pews.

You don't have to be religious to appreciate the magnificence of pipe-organ music or the instrument itself, although if you want to hear one in Ottawa, you may need to visit one of the historic churches that house them. "It's worth it for everyone to take in a recital or two, because once you realize the full palette of sound and versatility of the repertoire that's available, most people will come to see that it's not just a church instrument," says

Gilles Leclerc, composer and organist at Église St-Francois d'Assise on Wellington Street.

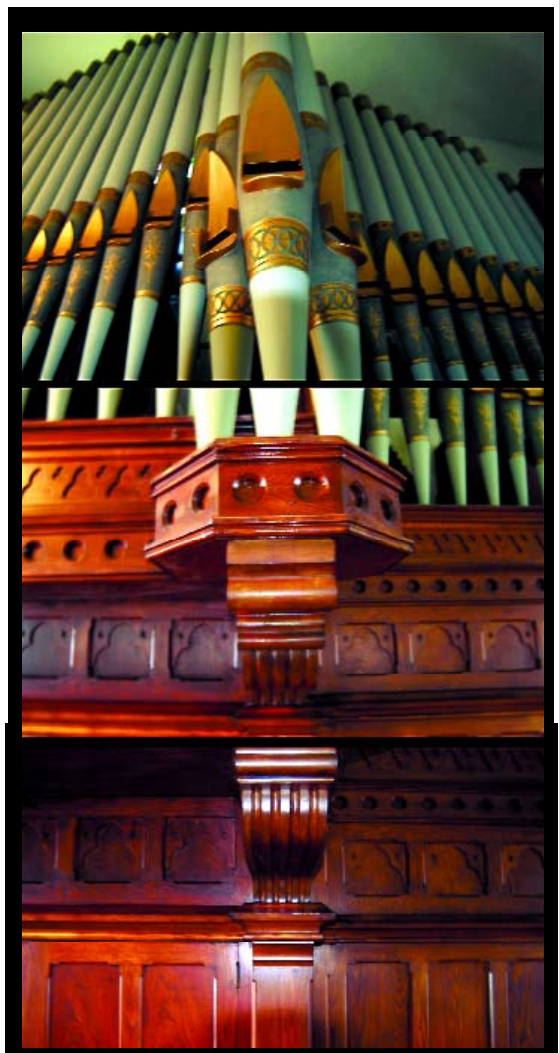
For most people, the pipe organ is so intimately connected with churches that it comes as a surprise to discover that its origins are not in Christian spiritual life. In fact, the organ did not become associated with the Roman Catholic Church until the tenth century, about 1,300 years after its invention. It's not entirely clear how the marriage was ultimately consummated, but since then, churches and organs have been inseparable. And as cathedrals grew in size and opulence, so grew the grandeur of the organ.

The precursor of the modern organ dates to around 270 BC and is credited to a Greek engineer named Ktesibios. Historians believe that Ktesibios did not set out to invent a new musical instrument but instead was attempting to solve the mechanical problem of how one person could play more than one wind instrument at the same time. The result was the first instance

of an instrument composed of the elements that define an organ: a mechanical blower that creates pressure on air stored in a chamber; attached to a set of pipes controlled by a keyboard, causing the stored air to vibrate at fixed frequencies and thus produce the sound.

From their origin until the fall of the Roman Empire in the latter part of the fifth century AD, organs enjoyed widespread use in Europe. Then they vanished, at least from the historical record, until late in the eighth century. The reintroduced early organs were either portable or chamber instruments used to accompany secular singing or dancing until the church slowly began to adopt it in the tenth century. It was a reluctant courtship, possibly because, as Leclerc suggests, "during Roman times, many early Christians met their death in the mouths of lions to the sound of organ music." Grudging acceptance or not, by the end of the Middle Ages, the church organ, with its multiple sets of pipes, keyboards, and blowers, was firmly in place.

Ottawa has several extraordinary church organs. The oldest of these occupies the chancel at Notre Dame Basilica on Sussex Drive. But, curiously, this organ is also one of the youngest in the city because it combines old and new components. Canada's earliest manufacturer, Joseph Casavant of St-Hyacinthe, Quebec, built the original in 1850. Then, as in so many cases, the organ and its setting evolved together. The organ at Notre Dame went through a complete reconstruction by Casavant's sons in 1892, just two years after the cathedral was elevated to metropolitan church status when Ottawa became an archdiocese. In 1999, Guilbault-Thérien, another important Quebec manufacturer, was commissioned to do a \$400,000 renovation on the Casavant in conjunction with a \$10 million repair and renovation of the church.



The organ at Église St-Francois d'Assise on Wellington St.

Christ Church Cathedral at Sparks Street and Bronson Avenue is another good example of the interconnectivity between organs and their buildings, this time with the organ calling the tune. In 1930, designs were drawn up to build an addition that would house a bigger organ. Those plans had to be modified in 1931 when Godfrey Hewitt, the new organist from England, arrived and decided the proposed organ chamber was too small. The chancel now extends into the rear parking lot.

The 1890 Église St-Francois d'Assise owes its internal look and feel—characterized by simple shapes and pastel colours—to an effort to match the interior decor with the colour and elegance of the organ's pipes. The original 1886 Karn-Warren organs rebuilt several times—by Warren, 1915; Franklin Legg, 1933 and Guilbault-Thérien, 1988—features a striking symmetrical array of pale green pipes overlooking the pews from the balcony.

Canada has a number of world-class organ builders, so it is perhaps not surprising that the majority of Ottawa installations are Canadian. St-Anne,

Notre Dame, Christ Church, First Baptist, Knox Presbyterian, St. Alban's Anglican, and St. Peter's Lutheran all own Casavant Frères instruments. Guilbault-Thérien claims a number of the others, including St. Andrew's Presbyterian, Rideau Park United, and Ste. Geneviève. Also not surprising is that the church-organ industry in Canada would be largely concentrated in Quebec, given its strong religious tradition.

Aside from the churches, pipe organs are scarce in the Ottawa area. The National Arts Centre has two. Although only thirty-three and thirty-one years old respectively, these small chamber and medium-sized concert organs, built by the Dutch house of Flentrop Orgelbouw of Zaandam, also have important historical significance. They were presented to the NAC by the Dutch-Canadian Committee on March 17, 1970, in celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of Holland's liberation from Nazi occupation by Canadian forces.

The NAC is one of only a handful of concert venues in the entire country that

have pipe organs. Paul Henning, director of production operations for the NAC, suggests they're just not feasible for most centres, because very few are strictly used for concerts. Barbara Feldman, general manager of Centrepointe Theatre, agrees. "It would be really wonderful to have an organ, but we're more of a multi-purpose venue and the facility is not designed either acoustically or physically for it."

In the case of the NAC, even the larger of the two organs—standing just over two storeys tall with a fifteen square-metre base—is still small enough to hide in the stage wings when it's not in use. Barely. "If it was any bigger, I'm not sure it would be possible for us to deal with it," Henning says. Its specially designed platform, with a detachable steering wheel, sits on large eight-inch rubber casters. Typically, four stagehands plus a driver are required to get it off stage. A larger, permanent organ wouldn't work. "For us, it isn't an option because of the vastly different types of productions we do," Henning adds that if a full-size organ were installed, "we'd have to stop doing theatre, travelling shows, and a variety of other events."

Despite the widespread perception of the pipe organ as a church instrument, it did enjoy immense secular glory in the European operatic and choral traditions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, most famously the great works J.S. Bach, whose name will forever be associated with the organ. The organ never did quite break into twentieth-century popular culture, though, except for a significant but brief role in the motion picture industry of the 1910s and 1920s, as the provider of soundtracks for silent films.

The theatre organ was generally much more complex than its religious cousin, comprising bells, whistles, sirens, drums, strings and all the other accoutrements required for the movies of the day. Although virtually extinct by the 1930s, theatre organs are actually making a bit of a comeback. In the United States, renovated theatres and silent-film societies are resurrecting live organ accompaniment to movies.

An Ottawa group wants to do just that for our city. The Ottawa Valley Theatre Organ Society was founded in 1989 with a mandate to "help preserve the theatre organ's role in music history and to increase public appreciation of theatre organ music." The society has installed a large organ in the refurbished 1931 O'Brien Theatre in Renfrew from parts

of several different instruments donated by the estates of private owners. The organ sits behind the movie screen, taking up three floors of the building and part of the basement.

Ross Robinson, president of the society, describes the group as "a bunch of fanatics" whose inspiration for taking on the project was "madness." After approximately seven years of work, the O'Brien Theatre organ is only about thirty per cent functional. That is enough, however, that the society has already started holding concerts and screening silent films in the 300-seat theatre, generally for sold-out audiences. "There is a small but dedicated following," he says, "some [fans] coming from as far away as Toronto." When the project is completed, this unique composite instrument will have some one-of-a-kind features, including a portable wireless device that will allow someone to tune the instrument without having a second person at the keyboards, as well as the ability to record and play back soundtracks digitally.

But Robinson would like to see the resurrection go much further than that. In Great Britain, many cities and towns have civic organs. There is also a growing number of installations in public buildings and parks in the United States, including the world's largest at the convention centre in Atlantic City, New Jersey. "I think it's a tradition we should start here in Canada," Robinson says. "I'll give them one if they want to install it in city hall." The one he has in mind is a 600-pipe Wurlitzer originally from the Regent Theatre in Bournemouth, England, that he is currently restoring to original condition. It would be the only civic organ in Canada. Bill Teron, the Kanata developer who is planning a municipal concert hall for Ottawa, is interested. "The donation (of the organ) would go a long way to demonstrating community support for the project."

Throughout the two millennia of its history, the pipe organ has maintained the status of the largest, most highly developed and most complex instrument known to humans, and its potential is virtually limitless. So why hasn't an REM or a Tragically Hip locked onto it yet? Where are the great pop extravaganzas for pipe organ and rock band? "The instrument does kind of lend itself to the classical forms, and I think most composers have respected that nature," says Leclerc. "You can add almost any sound you want to them, though. It was the original, rudimentary synthesizer." ■