

# The American Organist Magazine

June, 2004

VOX HUMANA: Imagination?

Seventy or so years ago, American organ building was entering a particularly dynamic phase. While stolid old firms and respected builders enjoyed the maturity of the style begun in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, exciting developments were afoot at the margins. If Hook and Hastings, and Kimball, and Skinner and their breed were the norm, Wurlitzer and a few others were turning the organ into a thrilling acoustical orchestral substitute in the secular cathedrals of the cinema while a small assembly of visionaries were chewing on the ideas just articulated in the *Orgelbewegung* and preparing to bring a revolution to North America. G. Donald Harrison had not quite yet synthesized styles into his “American Classic” notion, but he was on the edge of that development. A few giants, the musical likes of which were never to be seen again, were brand spanking new – one each in Philadelphia and Atlantic City.

Debates churned. The organ journals brimmed with narratives of discovery— diaries of travels abroad and new sounds brought home. Broadcasting had begun to weave cultural threads into a national tapestry, but wide-scale recording was still scarce. Narrative accounts were important.

Musicians relied on their arguments, for these dialogs were the crucible of creative process. Where analytical, critical understanding fell short, not only did good reason and good science fill the breach, musicians and organ builders became inventive. Looking back at Harrison’s promotion of the American Classic style (as documented in any number of excellent books), one is struck by how little Harrison actually knew first-hand about the classic traditions he sought to emulate. Yet the result was richly musical.

We should also remember the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century for its bold and audacious organ designs. Would one have anything less than high praise for Walter Holtkamp Sr.’s eye? Who would have dreamt of breaking the rules so gracefully, of putting the mixtures in front, of making whole windchests visible, and inviting the eye to blend for itself the dissimilar shapes? Sure, Frank Geary broke the rules in Los Angeles, though some might assert not so gracefully. Nor is Geary an organ builder.

By the 1930’s, the Europeans had rediscovered the organ case and they were soon to be reintroduced here. Concurrently, organs were being built in chambers, in exposed functional displays, and in organ cases old and new. It was an era of dynamism and some extremes.

What has happened to us? While the pendulum swung in sometimes frenzied arcs, where did we end up? The Baroque revival eventually worked its way from uninformed theory and fantasized piles of upperwork on inappropriate actions to authentic and painstaking restoration work and historical copies. The opulent theatre organs saw their usefulness diminish with the advent of recorded sound in film and broadcasting, and came to find a second (high pressure) wind in the hands of dedicated conservationists and some unlikely

new homes like pizza parlors. American Classic organs fell to the ignominy of rebuilding, as surely as Harrison had altered so many earlier Skinner organs. Some would term it fair turnabout.

In the wash, we have wound up with a taste for predictable, excellent, sameness. Where is the debate today about organs? The winning formula seems as simple as buying a new SUV: broad scales, generous unison tone, clear clean upper work, rich reeds, effective swells, copious wind supply, solid basses of open ranks in metal and wood, slider wind chests, sturdy casework, predictable console designs loaded with all manner of electronic helps (would anyone even build a horseshoe, stopkey console if you asked?). It is the age of the new found, conservative, American Romanticism, of muscular but artful tone, of *multum in parvo*. Make little things do great work. American organ building in the past two decades has established a record of consistent musical excellence – and predictability. Against this scenario, two elements are conspicuously gone: the creative alternatives, and the bearded, hairy prophets predicting the next great development in organs.

Will there be a new trend? Will we all buy back those Zimbels that we discarded so unceremoniously 20 years ago? (They took little enough space in the dumpster!) Will free standing pipes make a comeback? Who are today's visionaries? Perhaps in an age where a decent three manual organ can set you back a million dollars, visionaries are of necessity relegated to driving taxis, but the ominous silence is enough to cause us old timers to reminisce about the old "tracker verses electric action" debate.

Art is many things, but it seems always to rope in unpredictable, serendipitous, and intuitive elements. These delights cease when the goal is reduced risk and predictable excellence. Oh for a return to the days of creative risk taking and the clangerous, glorious banter that developed in the process.

Haig Mardirosian