

## THE LEGACY OF CAVAILLÉ-COLL A Symposium at McGill University



(Photo: Gene Bedient, Guy Thérien, Jean-Louis Coignet, Jesse Eschbach, John Grew, and Fenner Douglass)

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### Haig Mardirosian

Instrument builders have the potential to sway music making mightily, not merely in matters of performance style or technique but composition as well. Some pioneers have gone so far as to alter inexorably the prevailing musical language. Piano frontiersman Bartolomeo Cristofori and synthesizer guru Robert Moog, for instance, inspired tectonic musical changes. Cristofori, instrument curator for the Medicis, solved the essential engineering riddle, a reliable “escapement” that by the 1720s enabled him to build a true pianoforte. Within 80 years, the Classical composers had set into motion sweeping changes of texture and form, changes that would land the piano at the heart of Western music making and of Romanticism. Bob Moog manufactured a convenient, in-one-box synthesizer in the 1960s, an essential step that would remove electronic music from the academic and theoretical domain and put it, for better or worse, within everyone's reach and eventually on everyone's desk or lap top.

But even Cristofori or Moog may not have had the impact upon a single genre that Aristide Cavaillé-Coll (1811-99) did. After Cavaillé-Coll, the expressiveness and axiomatic structure of organ literature would never be the same, at least in France. He was destined to become the benchmark against which all subsequent innovations in organbuilding would be measured, and a shining beacon for successors in his craft. While Cavaillé-Coll may not have rivaled the raw numbers of those affected by the modern piano, the Romantic movement, or today's digital music technology, his impact upon a particular repertoire was both profound

and explosive. Willis and Walker were as important in terms of the Romantic organ and its literature, but Cavaillé-Coll advanced from his revision of Classicism to his embracing of Romanticism to his invention of the symphonic organ. Thus, he motivated the creation of forms and compositions and once done, like Wagner with the music drama, successors had to either attempt to follow suit or devise entirely new answers.

It also helps to recall that Cavaillé-Coll virtually saved French organ music, or at least inspired front-rank composers to revisit the instrument. Comparably few French organs survived the Revolution and those that did were used for the most frivolous of tunes. It took an artist of Cavaillé-Coll's stature and integrity to reassemble a context in which serious composers could once again conjure up music of gravity, worth, and credibility.

How these elements unfolded and evolved in multiple contexts occupied an esteemed panel of experts assembled by McGill University in Montreal. The year 1999 marked the centennial of Aristide Cavaillé-Coll's death and McGill's Summer Organ Academy observed that centennial as it concluded its two-week session on August 6 with a symposium entitled “The Legacy of Cavaillé-Coll.” Artistic director and McGill University organist John Grew convoked scholars and players from France, Canada, and the United States at the hub of North American French culture and the largest French-speaking city outside of France. Presenters and panelists included Gene Bedient, Jean-Louis Coignet, Fenner Douglass, Jesse Eschbach, Jean Ferrard, Bengt Hambræus, Olivier Latry, Jacquelin Rochette, Daniel Roth, Guy Thérien, and Helmuth Wolff. To conclude the organ academy, Daniel Roth played a recital on the newly restored 1914 91-stop Casavant organ at l'Église Très-Saint-Nom-de-Jésus.

Numerous themes and much knowledge unfolded over the day-long event. Although the promised overarching theme was Cavaillé-Coll's legacy and the particular actualization of that legacy for the 21st century, prophetic summary figured in only a few of the talks. Rather, auditors were left to conclude for themselves, conclusions admittedly inspired by valuable if sometimes predictable questions posed at the concluding panel. Individual presenters chose for the most part to dwell on component aspects of Cavaillé-Coll's story, principally his contributions or formative environment. These talks mirrored contributors' ongoing research agendas and interests and, perhaps unintentionally, blended outlooks and attitudes. Generalization and pronouncements were in short supply; detailed information, categorical compilation, and idiosyncratic data were common. Synthesis would be the work of the audience.

### **Fenner Douglass**

The revered professor emeritus of Oberlin Conservatory and Duke University and author of seminal works on French organ music and Cavallé-Coll entitled his opening presentation "Aristide Cavallé-Coll and the Devils: A glance at circumstances and events that guaranteed early success, threatened a fragile business, and may bode ill for the survival of his legacy." Douglass's premise was two-edged. First, what conditions and coincidences contributed to, for want of a better term, Cavallé-Coll's Parisian "formation," and second, how in retrospect has restoration affected Cavallé-Coll's work? Like any articulate academic, Douglass framed his argument against prior theory, in this case Steven Jay Gould's assertion that all things evolve in random spurts and extinctions. Evolution is no smooth, constant ride. Douglass saw Cavallé-Coll's good luck as merely dodging "devils."

Douglass cited the early 19th-century penchant for invention, particularly musical invention (for instance, as with the above-mentioned Cristofori, the rise of the piano and the extinction of the harpsichord). Similarly, a young Cavallé-Coll sought expressiveness and coloristic possibilities on what was then still a classic organ. On the second issue of restoration, Douglass pronounced a scathing indictment of the French Organ Commission (Commission des Orgues des Monuments Historiques) and, in particular, its longtime political commandant, Norbert Dufourcq, or "Norbert le diable." Douglass reminded all that the commission was formed in 1932 as a response to a number of factors including, in part, the Orgelbewegung already gathering a head of steam in Germany. Not all of the commission's members were malefactors. Of names like Wider, Vierne, Tournemire, Dupré, Duruflé, and Messiaen, not all could have been revisionist devils and eager to imperil the original work of Cavallé-Coll. But Dufourcq defended his wholesale revision of older instruments with the buckler and shield of historical musicology and pretended liturgical sympathy. (In this regard, Jean-Louis Coignet would comment later that the Cavallé-Coll organ was conceived for a liturgy that no longer exists in Roman Catholicism.) Fenner Douglass's point, put simply, was that Dufourcq's philosophy of "restoration" was really one of rebuilding to mistaken (to put it kindly—perhaps ill-intended might be more apt to some) contemporary standards. Ironically, because "Dufourcq the Devil" had relatively little interest in the Romantic era (remembering that no decent musicologist would touch the 19th century before a few dozens of years ago), many Cavallé-Coll instruments were spared his pitchforks. Where Cavallé-Coll instruments sat in

parishes rather than cathedrals, these too escaped some of the "devils" of rebuilding.

These recurring leitmotifs of purity and beef-witted restoration would run through the remarks of many. If nearly all agreed on anything, it was that "restoration" and "Baroquization" were not only misguided notions, but willfully wicked ones as well.

### **Daniel Roth**

Daniel Roth played a triple-threat role in the Summer Organ Academy. He taught, he spoke, he performed. As organist of Saint-Sulpice, Roth was one of two participants (Olivier Latry being the other) who live on a daily basis with Cavallé-Coll organs. Roth's topic, "Are the registrations of Widor's organ works intended for the Grand Orgue de Saint-Sulpice?" actuated a simple answer. No. But rephrasing the question as "Was Widor's music composed with an eye toward the capabilities and particularities of the Saint-Sulpice organ?" would initiate a more complex discussion.

Roth made reference to the well-known adage that Wider did not compose his organ music until he had heard and "felt under his fingers" the glorious sounds of Saint-Sulpice. A glance at the scores, however, proves that Wider does not indicate registrations specific to Saint-Sulpice. The generic markings presume a three-manual instrument offering most of the typical tonal and mechanical conventions of the style, the time, and place. Widor's musical gleamings, however, are quite specific to the Saint-Sulpice organ in the same fashion as a composer writing for a particular orchestra would capitalize upon certain analogous strengths--the Philadelphia Orchestra's strings, for instance. How did Roth conclude such?

Cavallé-Coll's architectural layout for the Saint-Sulpice organ, most prominently the crowning and unencumbered position of the Récit, offers certain acoustical idiosyncrasies (or opportunities). Among other movements, the first of Widor's Third and the Choral of the Seventh Symphony evidence those advantages. There, Widor dramatically engages the fonds of the Grand-Orgue to accompany the Récit's flutes 8' and 4'. This leads to Roth's admonition, the words of a smart and seasoned teacher, that the ears should seek out the spirit of the sound rather than the letter of the written law, good advice be it applied to Widor, Bach, Messiaen, or whomever.

### **Jesse Eschbach**

Jesse Eschbach is professor of music at Northwest Texas State University and conducts research on Cavaille-Coll stoplists. Using an archive gathered by Fenner Douglass at Duke University, a trove of documents that chronicles Cavallé-Coll's first 30 years as an organbuilder, Eschbach fashioned a talk, "From

Louis XIV to Louis-Philippe: Cavaillé-Coll's thoughts on modernizing Classical and Post-Classical French Organs." Eschbach's sources—proposals, contracts, letters, and reports—prove that Cavaillé-Coll was not, at first, driven to revise the Classic organ. Cavaillé-Coll's initial examination of existing instruments would typically result in notes on the extant configuration and an inventory of tonal resources. Using Saint-Germain-en-Laye, Notre-Dame-des-Victoires, and Saint-Étienne, Toulouse, as his case studies (the stoplists of which he distributed), Eschbach concluded that Cavaillé-Coll limited his tonal improvements to conservative revisions until approximately 1859. Although he would always propose cleaning, mechanical repair, and the inevitable upgrading of the wind supply (not through raising pressures but by ensuring steady and copious wind), tonal "progress" was a circumscribed matter. By comparing his "before" reports to known post-rebuilding stoplists, Eschbach inferred that Cavaillé-Coll generally suggested new Récit divisions in place of old Échos and incomplete compass Récita, fuller pedal divisions to include 16' stops and Bombardes, and, in general, a substitution of strings for mutations. Again through stoplist pairing, Eschbach also determined that some early Cavaillé-Coll Voix célestes were, in reality, stopped flutes! Cavaillé-Coll's conservatism effaced after 1860 and it wasn't for yet another two decades that the true symphonic idiom would be born.

### **Jean Ferrard**

Jean Ferrard, professor at the Royal Conservatory, Brussels, averred one of the more audacious, even peevish, assessments of Cavaillé-Coll in "Jacques Nicolas Lemmens, Clement Loret, and César Franck: Three Pillars of the French Symphonic School." These French pillars, one quickly notices, are all Belgian! Ferrard traced the French school's "founding fathers" by outlining teaching lineage beginning with the observation that in 1826 there were only two organists of any worth in all of Paris. Of these, Benoit taught at the Conservatoire and thus sired the first generation of Parisian organists, a number that included Franck. Lemmens eventually arrived to codify technique and articulation. Loret wrote a notable method of playing. Franck elevated French music to new "seriousness." Interestingly, as the organ at Sainte-Clotilde neared completion, Franck had numerous additions made to it, additions without which the *Six Pièces* could not have been written. Those works, which arguably play an axial role in the evolution of French organ repertoire, authenticate the importance of Franck, not only as a composer but as a force on Cavaillé-Coll's thinking. In many respects, Ferrard's presentation amounted to the most arresting of the day, as it took the stand that

French nationalism was well served, even illuminated, by international (well ... Belgian) influences. Once Lemmens, Franck, and Loret had interacted with Cavaillé-Coll, new possibilities abounded and new doors opened. Furthermore, if the French did not comprehend the magnitude of these possibilities, the Belgians did!

### **Bengt Hambraeus**

Since Cavaillé-Coll both took inspiration from and influenced composers, what composers had to say about him would be essential to the complete picture. However, Bengt Hambraeus, professor emeritus of composition at McGill, evinced only a vague connection to his announced topic, "Aristide Cavaillé-Coll, Charles-Marie Widor: the Organ and the Orchestra." Hambraeus pointed out the oft-cited wind passages in Revel's *Bohero*, passages that mimic a comet, an orchestrational convention that, de facto, merely proposes that Ravel was aware of the timbres of the organ, not necessarily attuned to Cavaillé-Coll. In fact, an old graduate-school analysis teacher gave this same passage a slightly different spin in suggesting that Ravel was intensifying the line by merely writing harmonics, a technique entirely in keeping with his cunning orchestration elsewhere. Hambraeus also underscored passages in several of his own works although, once again, their bearing on the work and influence of Cavaillé-Coll remained obscure.

### **Jean-Louis Coignet**

The morning's sessions had run extremely late and lunch hour was curtailed. Jean-Louis Coignet's "Cavaillé-Coll in Paris" proved a mightily appreciated early afternoon treat, not at all unlike the after-lunch movie so fondly a part of many of our elementary school experiences. Coignet, tonal director of Casavant Frères, and a member of La Commission des Monuments Historiques de France, forswore making meatier points or inundating his listeners with a plethora of detail. He simply showed an extraordinary cocktail of slides of some Cavaillé-Coll instruments. These detailed not only their virtues, but the violence done them by "restoration." Coignet's evidence of such artlessness was perhaps best encapsulated with surreal irony in a depiction of one action frame to which the Organ Commission had attached a smoke detector! (So much for fiery playing technique!) Coignet concluded with his entertainingly catty "how to improve a Cavaillé-Coll": (1) allow Gonzalez to put a nameplate on it; (2) solder up pipe slots; (3) open up and flatten reed shallots and lower wind pressure; (4) computerize the whole thing!

### **Jacquelin Rochette**

Coignet's co-tonal director at Casavant Frères, Jacquelin Rochette, traced "The influence of Cavaillé-

Coll chez Casavant” by paralleling organbuilding developments in France and French Canada between 1837 and 1933, His pronouncement that his firm had an unbroken line of descent from Cavaillé-Coll rested on three assertions: (1) Casavant bought pipework from Cavaillé-Coll (it should be mentioned that other North American builders occasionally did the same; (2) Claver Casavant, one of the sons of founder Joseph Casavant, spent several years in France studying Cavaillé-Coll and other instruments close at hand; (3) when the Société Cavaillé-Coll was attempting to save the foundering business more than 30 years after Aristide's death, Casavant was targeted as the company with which to merge. As we know, that attempt failed.

### Gene Bediant

Organbuilders today are frequent and lavish in both their praise of Cavaillé-Coll and in quick admissions of his influence. One need not mention how stylish it has become (not to mention commercially viable) to boast of building instruments somehow in the style of Cavaillé-Coll. Gene Bediant, who for some years has studied the work of Cavaillé-Coll and led study tours to France, added an organbuilder's perspective in his talk, “Cavaillé-Coll and the New World: Practical Considerations.” His candid perspectives outlined his own advancement from studying the instruments to recreating Cavaillé-Coll-style designs, mechanical systems, and tonal dialects. Yet Bediant couched all against the valid and cardinal question: should one do so?

Projecting photographs of several of his instruments, particularly the two-manual one in the Episcopal cathedral in Louisville, now relocated to the Roman Catholic cathedral in Charleston, South Carolina, Bediant depicted both the misfortunes and payoffs of building one's own Barker-like action assists or coping with split pallets or double sliders for an *appel*. Moreover, Bediant asked cogent philosophical questions. In these, as distilled to the raw essence, Bediant pondered how an American builder who daily faces eclectic musical needs and must build for those needs can actually adopt a single historical style, no matter how great or compelling, and follow through with an all-out evolution in that style. Time is simply too short to allow an American builder to grow as Cavaillé-Coll grew, in part because other musical needs and imperatives intervene.

Bediant advised that lessons be drawn from Cavaillé-Coll. Among these Bediant extolled the virtues of efficiency, for even Cavaillé-Coll's smallest instruments make a full and rich sound. One is hard-pressed to find a less than essential stop, even on Cavaillé-Coll's largest organs. Bediant, like Roth, encouraged efforts in preservation not merely for its

own sake, but as a path to the richness of experiencing historical styles firsthand.

### Concluding Panel

If these ranging topics and viewpoints were to yield any benefit, they would have to be collected and critiqued in the closing panel, “The Legacy of Cavaillé-Coll: Lessons for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.” Joining the earlier presenters were Olivier Latry, organist of Notre-Dame-de-Paris, and Quebec organbuilders Guy Therien and Helmuth Wolff, who with Casavant, Orgues Létourneau, and others see to it that Quebec remains the capital of North American organbuilding, Jean Ferrard returned to moderate the group and smoothly bound the concluding remarks of each expert. The summary did begin to clarify and focus a representation of Cavaillé-Coll's present-day influence, but as for host John Grew's underlying question about the next century, that remained open-ended. Some important deductions, however, ensued:

- In many respects, contemporary organbuilding has not surpassed Cavaillé-Coll, an assertion that, when factored against today's culture, presses the question, “If Cavaillé-Coll were born today, would he again do what he did?” Furthermore, would we need him? (Ferrard)
- The view that Cavaillé-Coll was a Romanticist and, therefore, demanded revision and rebuilding of the pre-existing Classical organs, is mistaken. Cavaillé-Coll instruments are complete and valid for a range of repertoire. As such, they celebrate the patrimony of Western culture and require preservation. (Roth)
- Cavaillé-Coll created his instruments for the prototypical Roman Catholic liturgy, one that no longer exists. (Coignet)
- Cavaillé-Coll's life and work signified the passage from Classic to Romantic sensibilities, from the 18th to the 19th centuries. He invented specific organ technology and adapted to the aesthetics of the period. We should take inspiration from that spirit of integrity and invention. (Thérien)
- The rush to build organs in the style of Cavaillé-Coll is a concern. Slavish imitation leads to bad copies, and mere printing of Cavaillé-Coll-like stoplists or knob engraving does not recreate a style. (Latry)
- Cavaillé-Coll was a shrewd and important force in music making and a personality in Parisian cultural life. He promoted himself by associating with and fostering the careers of the important musicians of the day (through shop recitals, dedicatory programs, concert series). (Wolff)
- A legacy is something given, not taken. What lessons, therefore, should one take? Cavaillé-Coll's shop produced organs. Good builders today

cannot. Therefore, if it is to survive, the organ industry must acquire subsidization and locate grant money in order to achieve a degree of integrity comparable to that of Cavallé-Coll. (Douglass)

- Where is the appeal of this legacy? Where are the women? Where are the teachers who will pass it on to the students? (Douglass)

As with any systematic and wide-ranging investigation, the panel's conclusions were thoughtful and valid, but resulted in more questions than answers. In large measure, the concern of a legacy for the 21st century was simply unaddressed—it could not be by these or any others lacking a foolproof crystal ball. But some matters could and should have figured further.

Significantly, and largely because most of the audience were students from the Summer Organ Institute, the attendees were young (typically of graduate school age). One wondered how this panoply of information played to that generation? For instance, the symposium procedurally disregarded interactivity and communications other than one-directional speech. With the significant and welcome exceptions of Jean-Louis Coignet and Gene Bedient, presenters who obviously understood the value of teaching with pictures, no one employed significant graphic representations or, astonishingly, sound. Those of us who have been at various academic symposia in recent years actually longed for visual summary points (à la Powerpoint) or projections simpler than the blocks of text put up by some.

Plainly, too many speakers were herded into too few hours. One presenter commented that he had never addressed such a topic in a mere 25 minutes (for the record, he spoke for more than 45). The crush of time negated audience questions or, even more valuable, respondents. The panel discussion was sequential in nature, not truly interactive. A more effective learning environment would have encouraged audience discussion and teacher/student interaction. One longed, therefore, for the treasure of time in order to digest and contemplate Cavallé-Coll's importance and testament further.

Although Fenner Douglass introduced the point late in the day, no consideration of legacy can be complete without a coherent understanding of recipient as well as donor. A legacy is given ... but to whom? "Where are the women" is but a cursory and unsatisfactory mention of a larger and critical issue. Without getting into the gloom and deconstruction of the Cultural Studies academic crowd, big questions loom. For instance, what values mark the society that has inherited Cavallé-Coll's gifts (or, for that matter, those

of any past artist)? What, in the present and future, makes the organ a viable and vital instrument? Why spend millions on commissioning new instruments or restoring the old? Once answers to those questions begin to take shape, preservation or historicity or research assumes greater importance. Lacking such context, the question of "Where would Cavallé-Coll work today?" bears a simple answer, Microsoft.

How was this symposium different in tenor from a similar one happening in France or the United States? The Quebec organ school—both performing and building—has deep roots in Classicism, roots owing to Colonial origins, the musicological discovery of important French Classic sources in Quebec, the resurgence of important Classic-style instruments in the region and, specifically, those commissioned by the host institution. That organ tradition has always been grist for the intellect as surely as the ear. The Wolff organ of Redpath Hall, for instance, occasioned a symposium, "L'Orgue à notre époque," in 1981. Interestingly, more than one participant in the Cavallé-Coll symposium also imaged the 19th-century builder through classically tinged eyes. Speakers emphasized Cavallé-Coll's relationship to earlier styles and less upon stylistic evolution *afterward*. True, Gene Bedient meditated upon his own work in light of Cavallé-Coll, but what of the intervening century? Like those working in the shadow of Richard Wagner in exactly the same span of years, composers who were forced to either venerate the Wagnerian spirit or invent fresh musical languages that in turn exploded into a swarm of 20th-century ideologies, what about the organbuilding names after Cavallé-Coll? Just as there are palpable links between, say, Beethoven and Messiaen, links that more clearly define the explosive musical melange of the past 100 years, so understanding Cavallé-Coll's connection to the Skinners, the Harrisons, the Holtkamps, and others better paves the way to our own door.

Such reservations notwithstanding, McGill University's "Legacy of Cavallé-Coll" collected important research on the arguably most influential organbuilder of the 19th century. The participants' scholarly integrity and passionate cheerleading reminded one of the greatest fruits of learning, the ability and desire to meld and shape abstractions across time and distance. That one reality may comprise Cavallé-Coll's greatest legacy—not that he influenced today's builders, respected his past, caused new musical forms to flourish, centered himself in Parisian cultural circles, or brought technological innovation to an old instrument, but rather that 100 years after he died, musicians and instrument builders still grapple with who he was, what he did, and why. And the crown of that struggle is music.

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