

THE FUTURE OF ORGANBUILDING  
AND PLAYING  
A PANEL DISCUSSION MODERATED BY  
JOHN GREW AS PART OF THE 1997  
MCGILL SUMMER ORGAN ACADEMY

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More than 70 organists, organbuilders, and scholars from Canada, the United States, Europe, and Asia took part in the McGill Summer Organ Academy, held in Montreal on July 9-19, 1997. The academy offered a range of courses led by Olivier Latry, Bernard Lagacé, John Grew, James David Christie, and Hank Knox, and drew on the rich organ culture of Montreal and its region, home to a number of Canada's best-known organs and organ-builders. In a fascinating illustrated talk, the Quebec scholar Elisabeth Gallat-Morin provided a context for that richness, outlining the historical development of the organ in New France from the 17th century onward.

The final day of the academy featured several special events. Participants took part in a field trip to Chambly for a brief recital by Christopher Jackson, and then proceeded to the city of St-Hyacinthe, some 60 kilometers southeast of Montreal, where Casavant Frères, Canada's oldest organbuilding firm, has its workshops. There, a panel discussion on the future of organbuilding and playing took place in one of Casavant's *salles de montage* or erecting rooms. Moderated by John Grew, university organist and dean emeritus of music at McGill University, the discussion featured several distinguished musicians and organbuilders, whose varied personalities and approaches complement a shared love of the organ and a desire to see the instrument, its music, and its players continue, despite many worrying signs, to flourish well into the next millennium. They included John Boody of the American organ-building firm Taylor & Boody; James David Christie, professor of organ at Holy Cross College in Boston and a specialist in the music of 17th-century North Germany; Jean-Louis Coignet, tonal director at Casavant and organ consultant for the City of Paris; Christopher Jackson, conductor, organist, and dean of music at Montreal's Concordia University; Bernard Lagacé, eminent performer and teacher; and Hellmuth Wolff, founder of the Canadian organbuilding firm, Wolff et Associés, in Laval, Quebec.

Guest of honor for the afternoon was the distinguished Quebec organist, composer, and teacher Antoine Reboulot. Born in 1914, Reboulot lived through one of the most creative periods in French organ history. He was present in Notre-Dame-de-Paris for the June 2, 1937, concert at which Louis Vierne died; he knew Messiaen, Tournemire, Jehan Alain, Bonnet, Duruflé, and others. A student of Marcel Dupré and André Marchal, he succeeded the latter as organist of Saint-Germain-des-Près in Paris before immigrating to Quebec in 1967, where he has been at the heart of organ culture for more than 30 years, and has trained two generations of players. Reboulot's colorful reminiscences fascinated his audience, whether he was recounting his experiences in Paris during the Occupation, or telling the story of being asked by the curé of Saint-Germain-des-Près to use the organ in a gentle attempt to curtail the verbosity of a visiting preacher.

Moderator John Grew introduced the discussion by dismissing the Cassandras inside and outside the organ world who predict the imminent demise of the pipe organ. Grew invoked the current renaissance of fine organ-building, many superb recordings of even distant reaches of the repertoire, and the impressive number of fine young players as clear evidence that, in his words, "things are looking better than they've ever looked before." He noted each generation's tendency to view itself as somehow having fallen short of the high standards set by its ancestors, and the consequent idea that, as we "progress," we get farther and farther away from a golden age, which, of course, is but a chimera.

That the organ world has in the last 30 years seen more rapid and far-reaching change than perhaps ever before should itself, according to Grew, be taken as a sign of health and vitality. Change rather than decay is evident in the areas of musicology and publishing as well. Grew recalled that in his student days there was little early music available, and players had to rely on sources such as Joseph Bonnet's *Historical Organ Recitals* as the only published versions of this repertoire. Today, he pointed out, we can obtain several well-edited versions of Samuel Scheidt's *Tablatura Nova*. New editions of Buxtehude and Couperin are available or forthcoming; even Widor's music has been newly and painstakingly edited. Modern players have access, therefore, to an unparalleled range of repertoire in carefully researched editions. It is up to the new generation of teachers and players to ensure a continued vitality in composition and performance, at the same time remembering Saint Paul's exhortation to Timothy: "Guard what has been entrusted to your care" (I Timothy 6:20).

Grew invited the organbuilders on the panel to give a statement of their views on the organ world: where are we now? where are we going? The first to respond was Jean-Louis Coignet, who prefaced his remarks by assuring the audience that he was neither fortune-teller nor guru, but rather a person familiar with movements in the organ world on both sides of the Atlantic. As a warning to the North American organ community, Coignet spoke of what has bedeviled its counterpart in France over the past 20 years: the increasing influence of consultants and various bureaucrats. Hardly anything can be done without the involvement of state “experts,” and the political baggage these people bring with them has led to a state of affairs that can, he said, only be described as critical. Some organists, and even some organbuilders, have discovered that it is more profitable and less tiring to consult on organbuilding projects than actually to build or play the instruments. In particularly bad cases, the organbuilder becomes merely a hired hand whose sole function is to carry out the wishes and directives of the consultant or “expert.” As a result, Coignet said, many artistic disasters have occurred in France, and he hoped that North Americans could avoid taking the same path.

Coignet argued that in our time, an age of extreme individualism, the organ has become what the customer wants. For probably the first time in the instrument’s history, there is no leading trend. Buyers can choose organs with tracker action (suspended or not), with or without electronic coupling, Barker machines, and flexible wind. They can also buy non-tracker instruments with pitman or slider chests, electropneumatic or all-electric action. Then there are the so-called “combination” organs: customers can buy them with two ranks of pipes and a hundred digital voices, or vice versa. They can buy copies—of varying accuracy and quality—of instruments by any historic builder from Schnitger, Silbermann, and Clicquot through to Cavallé-Coll—even Hope-Jones. Organists are allowed—in some cases, encouraged—to believe in the superiority of sensitive touch, flexible wind, or whatever takes their fancy. The field is wide open.

At the same time, he argued, organs are extremely expensive instruments, and their future is therefore inextricably linked to available budgets. Coignet outlined what he called the two most significant immediate dangers to the pipe organ. The first is the electronic substitute that, thanks to digital sampling, has made progress toward a more authentic pipelike sound. When the majority of ordinary people cannot tell the difference between a pipe organ and an electronic, it is, according to Coignet, time to worry. Equally worrisome is the way in which some pipe

organ builders are tempted to collaborate with large multinational firms that produce electronic substitutes. Inevitably, pipe organ builders will over time be absorbed by the multinationals.

In speaking of the second danger, Coignet introduced a theme that would recur throughout the afternoon’s discussions. Given the shrinking attendance and financial resources of many churches, the future of the organ *in churches* is seriously in danger. To the question, “Is there a future for the pipe organ outside churches?” Coignet wished to provide a positive answer, but felt that the organ world makes so little effort to address a general public that prospects are dim. He cited the words of a French organbuilder who stated, “The naked fact is that almost nobody comes to organ recitals.” A craft that has produced a number of masterpieces and that represents much knowledge and expertise, he felt, could therefore simply disappear.

Hellmuth Wolff began his statement by admitting to perplexity at what is going on, not only in the organ world but in churches themselves. Because the organ is so dependent on what is happening in the churches, it is, he said, difficult to say what will happen to the craft of organbuilding. Given that most organists’ weekly work remains firmly tied to the church, where they often face people with little interest in organ music, less than advantageous acoustical conditions, and instruments that are sometimes not very good, the horizon can look darkly ominous. Many mainstream North American churches are struggling with declining membership and with belated attempts to make themselves more relevant or at least credible to an increasingly secularized public. Wolff was grateful for the fact that his firm had enough work to keep it occupied for a considerable time, but was disturbed by what goes on in the very churches that at one time were the organbuilder’s best customers. According to Wolff, the serious organbuilder is, in the late in the 20th century, engaged in producing instruments that apparently interest fewer and fewer people, despite those instruments’ status as works of musical art of which builder and player alike can be proud, and on which the most worthy music can be brought to life. The denominations currently gaining ground in North America seem to be those in which classical organ music is marginal or simply not relevant. The style of music such churches promote is largely a soft-rock or easy-listening format aimed at the largest possible audience.

On the other hand, there are, according to Wolff, encouraging signs that the organ is still very much alive. He cited the remarkable number of instruments built in recent years for concert halls in North

American universities, ranging from the Redpath Hall instrument at McGill University 15 years ago to the recently inaugurated organs at Rice University in Houston and at the University of Kansas. Such instruments create much excitement and help to form a new public for organ recitals. We can only hope, he concluded, that the really fine instruments and halls will, over time, make enough of an impact to help begin to change the organ world at large, bringing in their wake a general improvement in instruments and standards, and perhaps a renewed interest from the churches.

John Boody stated that we live in an age of omnipresent and instantaneous communication. For those who love the organ, much of the news being communicated over the past few years has been worrying. We hear of universities having fewer and fewer organ students, and again of mainline churches losing membership. If, however, one pays closer attention, the evidence, according to Boody, suggests that we are at a turning point, a time of great opportunity. There are several things that can be done to ensure that the art and craft of organbuilding not only endures but goes forward with renewed health and vigor. First, according to Boody, is the need to be proactive about promoting the instrument and its music. Programs such as the AGO's Pipe Organ Encounters for young people are excellent examples of such promotion. It's clear, as well, that North America is currently blessed with a number of highly talented organbuilders working in firms that range from one-or two-person ateliers to large concerns employing 70 to 80 people. The fact that several builders are regularly exporting instruments to other continents is an encouraging sign for the future, which Boody characterized as "bright." He concluded by pointing out that during the Great Depression of the 1930s, many organ companies went out of business, but those that were flexible, hardworking, and innovative survived and prospered. Builders now making instruments of the highest quality will similarly prosper.

Moderator John Grew then called upon the organists on the panel to voice their thoughts. Bernard Lagacé began his remarks by telling the audience that the symposium had special significance for him, not least because he was born only four miles from the Casavant workshops. Every Sunday morning from the age of five onward, Lagacé attended Mass at the cathedral in St-Hyacinthe. In that church was a large Casavant organ containing several reed stops by Cavallé-Coll, the sound of which entranced Lagacé and often delayed his family, who had to wait for the postlude to end before young Bernard would consent to leave. The

route to and from the cathedral took his family past the Casavant workshops, and he was often reminded by his parents that pipe organs were being made in that very place. Later, the young Lagacé attended school at a college close to those same workshops, and with the windows open on warm summer days, he and his schoolmates could hear the sounds of pipes being voiced and organs being tried out in the *salles de montage*.

Lagacé cited Wolff's remark that any uncertainty facing the churches will immediately face the organbuilder, arguing that there was little prospect that the profession as a whole could be sustained only by concert hall instruments. There are specific instances where such installations have been very successful—and here Lagacé cited the Wolff organ in Redpath Hall—but in his view the organ will remain closely associated with the church. Even so, he remains optimistic. He spoke of his continuing work as organist in a Montreal parish with a congregation of widely varying backgrounds and levels of education. There are seven Masses each weekend, all of them with organ music; Lagacé plays for five. The organ, a two-manual, mechanical-action instrument without an enclosed division or pistons is heard by about 2,000 people each weekend in repertoire that, to many observers, might seem uncompromising: Titelouze versets, preludes and fugues from the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, the Brahms chorale preludes, and so on. Lagacé reported that there is no pressure on him to "lighten" or "popularize" his repertoire: both clergy and congregation express their appreciation of it. He deduced from this experience the need for organists everywhere to expose their congregations to the best traditions of composition and performance. Most important in bringing about a true renaissance of interest in the organ, Lagacé concluded, is a clear realization that organists move people with the beauty of their music.

James David Christie recounted his experience of trying out a newly built organ and of becoming discouraged as he explored it by the realization that the builder had no understanding of organ playing or indeed of general musicality. He decried the lack of general musical culture evident in much organ playing, citing the way in which, late in the 20th century, it is still possible to hear people playing the music of Franck in the same way they play Sweelinck. Christie argued that not just organists but serious musicians in general are now having to pay the price imposed by the enormous changes that have taken place in Western society beginning in the late 1950s and accelerating through the 1960s and 1970s when serious music became, in his words, a "dispensable art." He

particularly identified changes in education as root causes of the struggles currently facing serious musicians, and spoke movingly of his distress at seeing his church, the Catholic Church, abandon without a second thought so much of its rich musical heritage. Despite this, Christie remains convinced that the inherent beauty of fine instruments and fine music will ensure that neither will die out. It is, he said, the work of players and builders alike to maximize that beauty and to bring it to as many people as possible.

Conductor and organist Christopher Jackson agreed with Christie's lament about education. His introduction to the world of early music came about through his study of the organ, and he stressed the need to recognize this and many other bridges between the sometimes hermetic world of the organ and the larger musical world. This is especially true, he felt, because of the association in people's minds between the organ and the church, and the way in which the organ consequently suffers because of widespread negative perceptions of the church. As a choral conductor who specializes in Renaissance polyphony, Jackson reminded his listeners of the fact that much of that repertoire must now be confined to concerts, so distant is it from the current shape of the liturgy. Yet such concerts, almost always held in churches, draw sizable audiences. Would it not be possible, he asked, to envisage a secure future for the organ on a similar basis? We must recognize that the organ is inextricably linked to the church, but at the same time encourage people to come and hear it in concert, allowing them to approach the instrument and its music on its own terms, free from doctrinal or devotional restrictions. In this regard, he cited his experience assisting in the rebuilding by Casavant of a large parish organ in a disadvantaged part of Montreal. He began the project filled with apprehension: would the parish community support it? As it progressed, according to Jackson, his worries evaporated as he watched the residents of the *quartier* take a supportive interest in the restored instrument and treat it proudly as "theirs," a part of their patrimony.

Discussion followed between panel members and those in the audience. It highlighted the irony inherent in the situations outlined by the various speakers: the astonishingly high quality of organbuilding at the moment, the presence of large numbers of well-trained young organists, and yet a worrisome decline in membership among the denominations that for decades have been the principal patrons of North American organbuilders. The symposium concluded with an optimistic note that echoed James David Christie's remarks: if organists are able to reach out beyond the narrow confines of their organ lofts, the inherent

beauty of the instrument and its repertoire will ensure not only its survival but perhaps herald the dawn of yet another golden age.

Participants then traveled to the historic church of Ste-Famille in Boucherville, south of Montreal, where Casavant has built a new organ in a beautiful existing case (see the cover of TAO, Feb. 1998). To conclude both the symposium and the 1997 McGill Academy as a whole, Olivier Latry played a splendid recital to inaugurate the instrument. The visible delight of the parishioners of Ste-Famille in their new instrument gave renewed meaning to the remarks by Lagacé and Jackson about a local community taking pride in a well-wrought work of art used as a vehicle for fine music making. Latry's exceptional musicality sent participants home that evening eagerly anticipating the next McGill Academy, which will take place July 26-August 6, 1999 and will mark the centenary of the death of one of the greatest organbuilders the world has known, Aristide Cavallé-Coll.

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