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‘Booming, Beaming Waves Of Noise’

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Igor Toronyi-Lalic looks back to the early 20th century when organs were in their heyday

‘As in England, in America the organ is King,’ wrote the French organ-composer Louis Vierne in 1927, following a phenomenally successful three-month tour of America and Canada. His 50 recitals had drawn in around 70,000 obsessed fans, including some 6,000 at the Wanamaker’s department store in Philadelphia alone, home to the world’s largest organ.

There was a time, not so long ago, when the organ and its practitioners were at the top of the musical pile. Virtuosos like Louis Vierne or Edwin Lemare packed out municipal halls, football stadiums and shopping malls with hordes of frenzied crowds; they toured the world, played for political royalty, became household names and indulged in appropriately modish, pop star-ish pursuits. The charismatic French organist Charles M. Courboin, for example, was advertised as an aviator, motorist — his cars included a racy Stutz Bearcat — and speedboat pilot.

Their mammoth instruments, meanwhile, got larger, more elaborate and more exalted. At the early World Fairs organs became the centrepiece exhibits. Their unveiling was always the cultural apex of the jamboree, akin to the start of the 100-metre race at an Olympics. And audiences thronged to hear these hulking, ever-expanding behemoths, often paying triple the entrance fee for the privilege.

It was no coincidence that Leon Czolgosz, a young Polish anarchist, chose to shoot President William McKinley dead with two rounds of his pistol at the 1901 Pan-American Exposition at Buffalo, while McKinley was attending the opening organ recital. It was the biggest audience that Czolgosz would get.

Today, assassinations are less likely at organ concerts — as are appearances from prime ministers or presidents. It is in many ways quite difficult to imagine that previous age where organists and their instruments were so revered that presidents attended dedications, though the recent organ Proms offered up the full Victorian ferocity of the Royal Albert Hall’s Willis organ, a wonderful glimpse of what once was.

Unlike today, there was nothing modest or marginal about the mighty organ in the 19th century. In a time of industrial and scientific revolution, the world’s most complex machine could hardly stand still. Instead it grew mightier and mightier, morphing into ever-grander shapes and sizes, absorbing the latest knowledge on pneumatics, electricity, steam engines and hydraulics to make it doughtier and more durable.

At the forefront of this advance was the Royal Albert Hall organ, with its two huge steam engines, tucked away in the basement. When it was opened in 1871, the Royal Albert Hall had higher wind pressure below the pipes than anything else in the world previously. At full blast, it’s booming, beaming waves of noise could both envelop and puncture you. And at its inauguration the stunned local press could only describe it as an American, steam-powered devil.

‘Organs were suddenly no longer dependent upon a drunken man with a pint of beer,’ says Ian Bell, organ consultant to the Royal Albert Hall, ‘but could produce as much wind as anyone could envisage.’

At the same time, the Romantic musical movement emerged, demanding ever-greater complexity and power. It provided a new corpus of organ compositions that depended on these larger instruments, and a popular body of orchestral symphonies that the public craved to hear in organ transcriptions.

‘In the days before recordings the only way you could hear orchestral repertoire was either live or in arrangements,’ explains James O’Donnell, the organist of Westminster Abbey. ‘And because of the range of its sounds, the organ became the perfect instrument for mimicking the orchestral works.’

This partly accounts for the enormous growth of symphonic organs in Britain’s town halls, says O’Donnell, where they were just used for concerts. The proud and often competitive civic movement was a vital spur to the organ explosion, each great city trying to outdo the other in providing the most impressively high-tech instrument.

Equally important were the virtuoso organists, who sprung up to play these municipal instruments. With whole symphonies under their fingertips, these new stars drew in the crowds like few performers before. Over 7,000 people turned up each day for the week-long sojourns by Camille Saints-Saens and Anton Bruckner at the Royal Albert Hall in 1871.

And British organists also flourished, many achieving an iconic status by the early 20th century. ‘They begin to appear in magazines such as Tatler, their full-page photographs being published alongside the goings-on of the Prince of Wales or the images of the leading learned men of the age,’ explains William McVicker, organ curator of the Royal Festival Hall.

But it was in America that the organ reached an apotheosis. Few places were better suited to the spread and growth of this monumental instrument. Aspirational values, civic idealism and philanthropic zeal — with seemingly bottomless reserves — all conspired to provide the ideal conditions for an epic organ craze. Organs sprung up in almost every municipal auditorium, the recitals attended by masses of obsessive fans.Some 10,000 turned up at the San Francisco municipal organ recital in 1917; 30,000 at the one at St Paul, Minnesota; and 20,000 at Cleveland, where the police ‘soon gave up in despair as an eager mob swept all before it’.

At the turn of the century, the organ had become the ultimate symbol of sophistication, money and power. And for the American oligarchs, the new home range from the Aeolian music company became the most impressive way to complete the country residence.

Andrew Carnegie had one installed in 1900 and hired the organist Walter C. Gale to play to him every morning. Henry Clay Frick wanted an organ to accompany his meals, so had one erected opposite his dining room. And Horace E. Dodge ordered one for his yacht. When the boat went up in smoke and sank in 1926, Dodge bought another boat and another organ. By 1911, the New York Times reported that 300 New York mansion-owners had organs.

These extraordinary Twenties’ extravagances would be a final flourish, however. Changing tastes and the darkening economic times brought to an end this turn-of-the-century obsession, ushering in a period of neglect and dereliction. ‘Serious musicians gradually begin to have no regard at all for these huge concert organs,’ explains Ian Bell; ‘they begin to jeer at them, and revile them. So that with the arrival of the gramophone and the radio...the era was really over: these huge white elephants were left for dead.’

Today, the concert hall organ is slowly creeping back. The 1980s and 1990s saw abandoned instruments brought back to life, and the tradition of transcribing was

renewed. Of course, the instrument won’t ever return to its former exalted position. Its dominance over modern life — its influence on culture and commerce, on the popular and the classical — has disappeared: its musical crown has gone. But what remains from that golden age is undeniably impressive: a troupe of 19th- and 20th-century giants, musical monuments to the industrial revolution, whose sounds will ensure that they are unlikely to be forgotten.

As part of the Messiaen Festival there are organ recitals at the Brompton Oratory, London, on 6 October (Charles Cole), 13 October (John McGreal), 20 October (Patrick Russill) and 27 October (David Titterington); and at St Paul’s Cathedral on 7 December (Huw Williams). The Royal Albert Hall has recitals on 21 October (Cameron Carpenter) and 22 October (John Scott).

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