Reprint from the Front Page of the August 30, 2008 issue of *The Providence Journal*

Organist Philip Faraone's music 'elevates the soul' in Providence's cathedral

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The Providence Journal - Providence, R.I.
Subjects: Compressed air
Author: Miller, G Wayne
Date: Aug 30, 2008
Start Page: A.1
Section: Local News

Document Text

To better appreciate what Philip Faraone does, you must get inside his passion. Literally inside. Follow him as he enters Providence's Cathedral of SS. Peter and Paul and crosses the polished marble floor to the north transept wall. His footsteps echo in the vastness of the place, empty and shadow-filled on this late-summer morning.

And quiet, for now.

Faraone reaches the cathedral's organ, hand-built by the master craftsmen of Casavant Freres, of St. Hyacinthe, Quebec, Canada. With its 6,235 wood and metal pipes, some of which reach more than four stories into the air, it is one of the largest of its type in the world. It seems to point toward the heavens, by intention. Pipe organs do more than make music. They make a visual statement that complements their beautiful sound.

Stepping behind the console, where he sits when he's playing, Faraone opens a small wooden door and disappears into a space that seems stolen from The Phantom of the Opera. This part of the organ is called the chamber. It contains a labyrinthine complexity of rods, levers, compressors, blowers, windchests, valves and pipes, some made of a tin/lead alloy, others constructed of mahogany. Small bulbs light the way. You must duck and squeeze to get around.

The organist climbs one of the many ladders to a catwalk some 15 feet above the floor, not even halfway up. This is the section of organ connected to the great manual (or keyboard), one of four on the console.

"So here we are standing inside the organ itself," Faraone says. "You can see we're surrounded by pipes. Some are conical shapes. Some are straight pipes. Smallest ones are just a few inches. The largest ones in this section are up to 16 feet."

The length determines pitch: the longer the pipe, the lower the pitch. (The ratio of tin to lead in metal pipes, among other factors, determines tone.) One pipe produces one sound -- but with 6,235 pipes, the combinations are immeasurable, the volume of sound immense. Little wonder that many of the great sacred compositions are for pipe organ. Flutes and violins have their virtues, but they are lost inside a cathedral.

This Casavant instrument is of the manual-tracker type, which means that the pipes connect to the keyboards, pedalboards and stops (which control groups of pipes) directly, not via electric circuit. The connecting pieces -- the trackers -- are a sort of rod constructed of wood and wire. When a key is depressed, the tracker opens a valve to a pipe, sending compressed air through. The result is a sound, produced according to a principle a child can understand.

"It sounds like a whistle," Faraone says. "That's basically how it works." Because the organist controls his instrument directly, playing requires strength not necessary for more modern electric and electronic designs.

"Like an old-fashioned typewriter," Faraone says.

The motors that power the compressors run silently. They draw ample current, but are a considerable improvement over the seventh and eighth centuries, when the first air-driven pipe organs began to emerge. "In the old days, before it was mechanized," Faraone says, "it would have been people, with a bellows -- people pressing to keep the pressure up." Steam and gasoline engines followed in the 1800s. Their clatter did not enhance the music. Electricity was a blessing.

Faraone explains how the organ is tuned: one person, the "keyholder," sits at the console and depresses a key (or pedal) while a second person, the "chambermaid," adjusts the pipe here. The Andover Organ Co., of Lawrence, Mass., tunes this Casavant and also cleans it. Bugs and wasps that die inside the mechanism obstruct operation and must be vacuumed out. Extremely dirty pipes are brought to Lawrence for cleaning.

THE ORGANIST climbs down and exits the chamber, locking the door with a skeleton key that is kept in the cathedral safe. The organ, Casavant Opus no. 3145, cost $217,500 and was completed in July 1971 after two years of construction. It is worth considerably more today, and is insured for millions of dollars.

During Masses, ordinations and other services at which he plays -- often with the Gregorian Concert Choir, which is directed by the Rev. Anthony Mancini, cathedral rector -- Faraone wears special organists' shoes. But this morning, he wears only socks. He turns the instrument on and plays an improvised tune, an original.

The music pours into the cathedral, up to the vaulted ceiling and down into the darkness of the lower nave, bringing the building alive. Perhaps Bishop Thomas Hendricken, who died in 1886, before it was finished, and now lies in a granite sarcophagus on the other side of the transept, is listening.

As Faraone moves deeper into his improvisation, his music transforms him. He becomes animated. His head and shoulders move with the rhythm as his hands and fingers, strengthened from years of playing, move hand keys. You recognize this from having watched a pianist. Less familiar are his feet on the pedals. Viewing only them, you would imagine he was dancing. They mesmerize.

Faraone, who teaches music at Cranston High School West, became cathedral organist in 1990. He has played many other pipe organs, including those at New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral and St. Peter's Basilica in Rome (more than once), but this one remains his passion. He practices on it almost daily, and estimates he plays an average of 20 hours a week. Over almost two decades, that adds up to some 20,000 hours, here with his beloved Casavant no. 3145.

A humble man of considerable accomplishment, Faraone is not given to boasts. He believes everyone is gifted with a talent; his just happens to be music. But not just any music; a cathedral organ, he believes, can inspire transcendence. He quotes an award an Italian group gave him after he played in Rome:

"Your music elevates us beyond the noise of modern life to another dimension, elevates the soul."

The morning wanes; noon Mass approaches, and soon, people will enter the cathedral. Faraone is not playing.

He finishes his piece, and looks at the stained-glass window high on the south transept wall. He looks at it through the mirror on his console. A cathedral organist plays with his back to the pews.

At times like this, he says, "you're in your own world. It's me, the organ and the Lord."

- The Gregorian Concert Choir: www.cathedralprovidence.org/Choir.html

- Casavant Freres: www.casavant.ca/

- Andover Organ Co.: www.andoverorgan.com/

- Wikipedia article on history and construction of pipe organs:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pipe_organ

- Largest pipe organs in the world: www.theatreorgans.com/laird/top.pipe.organs.html

The electric pipe organ at the Cathedral of SS. Peter and Paul in Providence is one of the largest of its type in the world. Philip Faraone became cathedral organist in 1990. The Providence Journal / Connie Grosch

Philip Faraone, like all cathedral organists, plays with his back to the pews. Says Faraone: "You're in your own world. It's me, the organ and the Lord." The Providence Journal / Connie Grosch

The organ, Casavant Opus no. 3145, took two years to build and cost $217,500 in July 1971. It is insured for millions.

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Credit: G Wayne Miller, Journal Staff Writer

Illustration

Caption: 1) Philip Faraone, like all cathedral organists, plays with his back to the pews. Says Faraone: "You're in your own world. It's me, the organ and the Lord." [The Providence Journal / Connie Grosch] 2) The organ, Casavant Opus no. 3145, took two years to build and cost $217,500 in July 1971. It is insured for millions.

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