

In the wind...

Once you've seen the best, there's only the rest.

So many things, so many concepts, so many ideas today are labeled “the best” or “the greatest” that I sometimes wonder if we can still recognize real greatness. We speak in superlatives as if there was no other class. “This is the best cheese I’ve ever tasted,” lasts only until tomorrow when I get lucky enough to have a bite of something different. “Oh my God, it was the best movie ever.” And get the emphasis of punctuation: “Oh. My. God.” You set yourself up as the authority, as if no other opinion has value. Invoking the Deity is a tactic for substantiating overstatement.

“Of all time” is a common lead-in for overstatement. “He was the best quarterback of all time.” “She was the best actress of all time.” Maybe, but most of the time, I doubt it. You could make a perfectly legitimate claim a little less sweeping by starting with “I think,” as in, “I think that was a great play.” Fair enough; I’ll buy that. I think it was a great play, too, but neither of us are qualified to continue with “of all time.” “I really enjoyed that play,” isn’t forceful enough, somehow.

The search for “the best” or “the most” is a universal mantra, accompanied on television by triumphant music and the forceful voice of a male announcer. Anthony Bourdain travels the world looking for the most unusual meal. ABC Sports searches for the most dangerous ski slope. *Sports Illustrated* searches for the best swimsuit model. Stand them next to each other and they all look just fine.

Having worked as an organbuilder and an organist for more than forty years, I understand how people unfamiliar with the field are surprised and even baffled when they encounter it. The third or fourth exchange when you’re meeting someone for the first time at a party is “What do you do for a living?” “I’m a pipe organ builder.” “A pipe organ builder? I didn’t know there were any of you left.”

Once we get past a few pleasantries, an inevitable question is, “What’s the best organ in the world?” That’s a better question than asking after the biggest organ, which is easier to answer but usually leads to sniggering.

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Wow! What is the best organ in the world? How in the world can I answer? Is it up to me to judge? What are the criteria? What are the variables? Can I break it into subsets like the best German organ, the best French organ, the best tracker-action organ? Do we need to know the best, or can we be happy with a list of “great” organs?

To be the best, must it be the biggest?

The Wanamaker Grand Court Organ is the largest “fully operational” organ in the world. According to the website of the Friends of the Wanamaker Organ, it has six manuals, 463 ranks, and 28,677 pipes. This compares to the Boardwalk Hall Auditorium Organ in Atlantic City (not fully operational, but restoration work is under way), with seven manuals, 449 ranks, and 33,114 pipes. So if you’re counting by ranks, Wanamaker wins by 14, and if you’re counting by pipes, Atlantic City wins by 4,437 (the size of an organ with more than 70 ranks!).

When I was a naïve and budding organ-guy, deep in the thrall of the tracker-action revival in Boston in the 1970s, I knew vaguely about the Wanamaker organ, touted as the largest organ in the world. I understood that it was in poor condition—that a lot of it was unplayable. Hmmph, I thought in my



Oldest: Sion, Switzerland, 1390

infancy. What can being the largest have to do with being any good? It would be years before I actually saw, heard, and experienced the Wanamaker. By the time I made its acquaintance, enormous effort had been put toward bringing that massive instrument into good condition. And now I marvel at its artistic content every time I visit, which is ever more often.

I don’t know if it’s the best, but it sure is wonderful. A tour with curator Curt Mangel is a privileged walk through countless rooms crammed with pipes. Any tuner would quail at the parades of reeds and dozens of pairs of celestes. What a responsibility. And to witness Grand Court Organist Peter Richard Conte doing his thing (you really have to see it to believe what you’re hearing) is to witness a marriage of man and machine unparalleled in the human experience. Oops, I guess unparalleled is a superlative.

...Oldest?

Am I up to date? Is the little abbey organ built around 1390 in Sion, Switzerland, really the oldest in the world? E. Power Biggs taught me that with his 1967 recording, *Historic Organs of Switzerland*. I still have those bold tones and archaic tuning in my ears. Geoffrey Chaucer (1343–1400) wrote *The Canterbury Tales* around 1390. In one of those delightful narratives, *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, the main character was

A widow, poor and somewhat advanced in years, [who] dwelt once in a little cottage . . . By managing carefully what God sent, she provided for herself and her three daughters . . . her only treatment was a temperate diet, with exercise and heart’s content. The gout never kept her from dancing, nor did the apoplexy bother her head . . . She had a yard enclosed all around . . . and a dry ditch, and in it she had a cock called Chanticleer. In all the land there was no match for his crowing; his voice was merrier than the merry organ that goes in the church on mass-days . . .

Remember the wonderful carol with the refrain “O the rising of the sun, and the running of the deer, the playing of the merry organ, sweet singing in the *Kwahl!*” Chaucer must have been referring to contemporary British organs, so we can assume a burgeoning pipe organ industry as Europe shook itself free of the Dark Ages. An organ built in 1390 that we can still play today? What a fabulous icon of human history. It has been rebuilt and expanded several times—its history seems to read “every hundred years or so, whether it needs it or not . . .” What a



Most majestic: Christian Müller, St. Bavo Church, Haarlem, the Netherlands



Most influential: St. Sulpice in Paris

treat to play on a musical instrument that’s 624 years old! Who cares if it’s any good?

...Most majestic?

One of the most familiar images of the pipe organ world is the lion-topped façade of the 1738 organ built by Christian Müller in St. Bavo Church in Haarlem, the Netherlands. The top of the case is nearly a hundred feet above the floor of the church, and the sounds of the organ are as vital, energetic, and expressive as any modern instrument. There’s a legend saying that Mozart played on this organ, and there are dozens of modern recordings available. The instrument is the centerpiece of the International Summer Academy for Organists, founded in 1955, and continuing today as a seminal educational experience for hundreds of musicians.

With just over 5,000 pipes, the Haarlem organ must have been one of the largest in the world when it was built, but today it represents only the difference in size between the Wanamaker and Atlantic City organs!

Studying the intricate details of the design and construction of this organ, it’s hard to believe that such a thing could have been built using available technology from the early eighteenth century. Think of the state of high culture in America at that time—what the fanciest colonial architecture was like. This organ is high on the list of doozies in the organ world. Does that make it best?

...Most influential?

Aristide Cavaillé-Coll completed the rebuilding and expansion of the organ at St. Sulpice in Paris in 1862.



Most melodious: Old West Church (Photo credit: Len Levasseur)



Most incensed: Aeolian-Skinner, Church of the Advent

With five manuals and a hundred stops it was one of the largest organs in the world at that time. And with its myriad complex mechanical innovations, it was an eloquent statement of technology of the day. Charles-Marie Widor and Marcel Dupré combined their careers to serve this church for 101 years. The organ alone as a mechanical entity must be considered among the most elegant, expressive, and fiery instruments ever built. But when combined with its illustrious players—including present organists Daniel Roth and Sophie-Véronique Cauchefier-Chopin—it's hard to imagine another church balcony that has housed and launched more extraordinary music.

Widor (1844–1937) was born to a family of organbuilders. Cavaillé-Coll was a family friend who arranged for Widor to study with Jacques Nicolas Lemmens in Brussels. How many of us have played Lemmens' *Fanfare* how many times? Maybe it's unfair to use one piece to stand for a musician's life work, but it's a long way in sophistication from that *Fanfare* to Widor's *Symphonie Gothique* or *Symphonie Romane*. Along with his organ symphonies, Widor produced dozens of orchestral works including symphonies and piano concertos, chamber music, piano music, and choral works. He was a prolific teacher whose students included Charles Tournemire, Louis Vierne, Darius Milhaud, and Alexander Schreiner. Widor's lifelong relationship with the St. Sulpice organ must be one of the most important between musician and instrument in the history of music.

Marcel Dupré (1886–1971) was also deeply influenced by Cavaillé-Coll's masterpiece, and how many modern organists still living can claim to be his students and therefore students of that



Most seminal: Flentrop, Adolphus Busch Hall

organ, whether in private lessons or master class. He died when I was in high school, and I never met him or heard him play. But I know he taught Jehan and Marie-Claire Alain, Jeanne Demessieux, Jean Guillou, Jean Langlais, and Olivier Messiaen. His weekly organ improvisations were legendary, raising the church of St. Sulpice to the level of organists' pilgrimage—a tradition that remains more than forty years after his death. To this day, a knowing worshipper can quickly pick out the visiting organists, quivering and weeping in their seats.

...Most melodious?

Charles Brenton Fisk, aka Charlie, was a pioneer in the mid-twentieth century renaissance of classical styles of organ building. I was fortunate as a teenager growing up in Winchester, Massachusetts, to live within two blocks in opposite directions of two new Fisk organs. And I was fortunate to know Charlie at least a little. Charlie Fisk's organs are lively and interesting. Many are controversial, especially because of their sonic power. His thrilling Opus 82, installed in Christ United Methodist Church in Greensborough, North Carolina, must be one of the most powerful organs ever built, stop-for-stop.

Fisk's Opus 55 is a modest three-manual organ of twenty-nine stops, built in 1971. It has a lovely case that includes architectural elements from a much older case by Boston organbuilder Thomas Appleton. It's housed in a stately 1806 building in Boston's West End. While its size, scope, and surroundings are nice enough, it would be an unremarkable organ except that it's widely considered to be one of the finest organs in the world. Its solo voices and choruses combine proud fundamental tone with limpid harmonic structure to produce strikingly beautiful organ tone.

Yuko Hayashi, the brilliant twentieth-century teacher of hundreds of important modern organists, became organist at Old West in 1973, at the suggestion of Charles Fisk. Yuko had been teaching organ at the New England Conservatory of Music since 1960 and was well known for her lyrical playing. Shortly after she started playing there, she brought the NEC organ class there for lessons, and from then until her retirement in 2001 many hundreds of our finest organists studied with Yuko on the organ at Old West Church. Since it was built, it has been one of the most heavily used organs in the country. Yuko once told me she believed that the organ sounded better the more it was played—that the passage of air through the pipes makes the pipes sound better. How's that for spiritual?

...Most incensed?

According to Google Maps, the Church of the Advent in Boston is six-tenths

By John Bishop

of a mile from Old West Church. The Aeolian-Skinner organ at Church of the Advent, a product of the firm's G. Donald Harrison era, is just as modest and ordinary on paper as the Fisk at Old West. It has fifty-seven stops on three manuals, and is installed in a chamber above the chancel that also speaks into the nave. Modest and ordinary, maybe, but there's just something about it. Worshipping there with the inspired musical leadership that has always been a hallmark of the place is a *Magical Mystery Tour*. It would be a challenge to find another organ of this scale that could equal the seamless crescendos and decrescendos that accompany the singing of the choir. It would be a challenge to find another organ of this scale that could play so much of the organ repertory so effectively. In the intense and incensed smoke-filled room that is the Advent's sanctuary, the architectural borders between instrument and building are as elusive as the musical borders between organ pipes and acoustics. It's otherworldly.

If Old West Church is a mecca for beautiful organ tone, Church of the Advent is a mecca for the effect of a pipe organ on deep and sophisticated liturgically grounded worship. And you can walk from one to the other in just fifteen minutes.

...Most seminal?

I'm stuck in a rut along the Charles River in Boston, which is just a long block from Church of the Advent. (By the way, the home of Joseph Whiteford, president of Aeolian-Skinner from 1956 until 1965, faces the Charles from one of the little neighborhoods near "The Advent." It's the one with the tapered front door!) From there it would take about an hour and a half to walk, but only ten minutes to drive to Adolphus Busch Hall, formerly known as the Busch-Reisinger Museum, and familiarly known to generations of organists and Harvard students as "The Busch." Aeolian-Skinner had installed an experimental organ there in 1937, one that included classically inspired principal choruses, from which E. Power Biggs played many live radio broadcasts. Mr. Biggs commissioned the landmark Flentrop organ with his own money in 1958 and placed it on loan to Harvard University. He paid personally for its tuning and maintenance for the rest of his life and bequeathed the organ to the university after his death.

Like the organs at "Old West" and "The Advent," the Flentrop in "The Busch" is of modest proportions—three manuals and twenty-seven stops. But simply to mention the extraordinary series of recordings Biggs made on that organ, *E. Power Biggs Plays Bach Organ Favorites*, is to acknowledge its importance. It still stands as the best-selling series of solo classical music recordings, an accurate and indisputable superlative. And while those performances are still controversial icons of the "organ wars," his snappy and peppy readings of those classic pieces brought excellent playing of excellent organ music to the ears of millions around the world. Many of us were hearing "chiff" for the first time. To some it was clear and rhythmic, to others it sounded like hitting xylophone bars. Bach's *Jig Fugue* brings popping popcorn to mind. The organ is fifty-six years old, and I love taking visiting friends to see it. They melt in its presence.

...Most nostalgic?

I think that all of us who care about playing the organ have a favorite or two, and I, for one, have a list of organs I've loved since I was a kid. There are



a couple in Yarmouthport on Cape Cod that I played (and practiced on) for hundreds of teenage summertime hours. There are a couple beauties by E. & G.G. Hook that were within walking distance of my youthful home. And there are some, even those that fail to stand out as excellent examples of the art, where I had important experiences both personal and musical, where I heard great musicians play for the first time, where important milestones of my personal life and professional career are marked.

In fact, some of the worst organs I've seen have had the most impact on me, helping me understand in their negativity why excellence is so important.

Please don't ask me to name the best organ in the world. If I'm lucky, I haven't heard about it yet. And the organ to die for? It will be played at my funeral. Any takers?

Postscript:

While I'm always interested in good organs anywhere, in this writing I've focused on instruments that I think have served as more than just good organs. Each has had a special and wide influence on many musicians, and each has played a particular role in the history of our instrument. Organists go out of their way to experience them. When we think of the modern pipe organ, we can picture dozens, if not hundreds, of various forms, and each of these pivotal organs have played a part in that development. I've written this off the top of my head without research, so the list is in no way complete. I'm interested to hear from readers their suggestions of additions to this list. Please write me at john@organclearinghouse.com to share your thoughts.

Thank you for reading.

* Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Nun's Priest's Tale*. Translation by Gerard NeCastro, published as "eChaucer" by the University of Maine at Machias: <http://machias.edu/faculty/necastro/chaucer/translation/ct/21npt.html>.

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