

14th International Organ Festival Toulouse, France

Bill Halsey

The 14th Toulouse International Organ Festival (known as Toulouse les orgues) took place October 8–18, 2009 in Toulouse, France and the Midi-Pyrénées region. Concerts honored the anniversaries of Handel, Haydn, and Louis Braille (1809–1852). Performers included Elisabeth Amalric, Stéphane Bois, Gilbert Vergé-Borderolle, Yasuko-Uyama Bouvard, Anne-Gaëlle Chanon, Pieter-Jelle De Boer, Matthieu De Miguel, Tania Dovgal, Jean-Baptiste Dupont, Pierre Farago, Bernard Focroulle, Jan Willem Jansen, Maïko Kato, Adam Kecskés, Rudolf Kelber, Eric Lebrun, Mathias Lecomte, Philippe Lefèbre, Marie-Ange Leurent, François Marchal, Jean-Baptiste Monnot, Yves Rechsteiner, Benjamin Righetti, Juan de la Rubia Romero, William Whitehead, and others. The festival is also presenting concerts covering the entire canon of Bach's organ works, on Sundays at 4 pm at the Musée des Augustins in Toulouse. The series began on September 13 and continues through June 2010. (For information:

<www.toulouse-les-orgues.org>.)

I had spent time visiting the historic organs of Italy, and felt the need to reconnect with my first love, French organs, both Classic (that is, pre-Revolution) and Romantic, and the annual organ festival of Toulouse-les-orgues seemed a good place to do it. Two years ago, my wife and I went to part of the festival and then spent the rest of October going from one French town to another throughout south central France, visiting different organs and being inspired by the quality of the instruments and the hospitality of the organists.

About Toulouse

Toulouse seemed both more beautiful and more foreign than I remembered, with its monumental rose-colored brick buildings spread out on the banks of the Garonne. After living in Italy, I found French formality strange but charming, almost quaint.

There is something different about the churches in Toulouse—they have been described as church fortresses, with the explanation that one of the first Crusades was against the Cathar heresy, in some ways a precursor of Calvinism, which was centered in the southwest of France, Toulouse and Albi especially. These im-



Eglise-musée des Augustins, organ by Jürgen Ahrend (1981) (© J.J.Ader, used with permission)

mense and stark Gothic edifices contain a number of fine Romantic organs, their dark walnut cases and dull metal pipes looming from either the choir loft in back or sometimes above and to one side of the altar. Many were built by two nineteenth-century firms from the region, Aristide Cavaillé-Coll, from Gaillac, a half-hour train ride outside of Toulouse, and the Pugets, who continued the family business into the modern era, in Toulouse itself.

There are also churches from the classical period, and in one of these, St. Pierre-les-Chartreux, is a fine Micot organ, from the end of the 18th century, barely pre-Revolutionary. One of the most impressive sites in Toulouse, oddly enough, doesn't even have an organ—the Gothic church Les Jacobins, where St. Thomas Aquinas is buried.

Day one

Our first event was a series of three student concerts at Saint-Pierre les Chartreux, Saint-Nicolas, and the Institut Catholique's modern Bonfils organ. The best concert was the one at Saint-Nicolas, on a really interesting transitional 1844 Daublaine et Callinet, by **Matthieu de Miguel**, an organist with a bright future ahead of him. I especially

liked his rendering of the *Intermezzo* from Widor's *Sixth Symphony*.

That day, in addition to the memorial concert for the fall of the Berlin Wall, which we didn't attend, there were two concerts on the recently restored Puget (1888) at Notre-Dame la Dalbade, with three manuals, 50 stops, and two expression pedals, this last very unusual for organs outside of Paris. In the afternoon was a choral concert by the **Maîtrise du conservatoire de Toulouse**, directed by **Mark Opstad** and accompanied by **William Whitehead**, and in the evening an organ recital by **Philippe Lefèbre**.

The Maîtrise is a chorus of children, mostly girls, and their program consisted of four *Misse Breves*, by Delibes, Fauré, Caplet, and Leighton, done in chronological order. The Delibes (1875) was a revelation, full of dramatic, almost operatic, contrasts. The Fauré is a minor work, and the Caplet and Leighton had interesting moments but did not seem like very distinguished pieces. The children were very well trained, but although it was possible to admire their skill in the more contemporary pieces, they were really at their best in the Delibes, where the quasi-operatic nature of the vocal writing allowed their resonance to blossom. William Whitehead's accompaniment was

masterful—gently supportive for the kids and making exuberant full use of the organ on the codas.

The evening concert by Philippe Lefèbre, one of the three *titulaires* of Notre Dame de Paris, was excellent. He started with Franck's *Trois Pièces pour le Grand Orgue*, of which the best was the first, the *Fantaisie en la*, where he showed off the wonderful power of the organ's monumental reeds. He then played the *Choral* from Vierne's *Symphony No. 2*, Boëllmann's *Suite Gothique*, and Duruflé's *Prélude et fugue sur le nom d'Alain*, concluding with a vast improvisation. Lefèbre made expert use of the organ's tone colors and the (two) swell pedals, but I wish he had played more music, like Widor or Guilmant, that was really designed for such a grand instrument.

About the festival

Toulouse-les-orgues offers a wide variety of events, from formal evening concerts to more relaxed afternoon events and lunchtime concerts, two of which I attended. The first, on October 13, was by **William Whitehead** on the Cavaillé-Coll at Saint-Sernin entitled "Bayreuth Aftershock!" and the theme was Wagner's influence on French organ music. Whitehead played two transcriptions by George Bennett of selections from *Parsifal*, a *Scherzo* by Edward Bairstow, and two pieces by César Franck. His playing was wonderful, but the Wagner seemed thin without the orchestra. Even a Cavaillé-Coll organ is no substitute for a Wagner orchestra!

The other noon concert I attended, also at Saint-Sernin on October 16, was all improvisations, played by **Juan de la Rubia Romero**: first, chorale variations in the style of Bach, then a fantasy in the style of Mahler, and finally chorale variations done in a modern style. These improvisations seemed weak, especially considering Romero had the leisure to plan them; they weren't true improvisations in the Franz Liszt sense, where the artist is given a subject from the audience and has no time to prepare beforehand.

The Toulouse festival is also known for offbeat concerts that pair the organ with dancers, brass ensembles, spoken word, etc. I saw two of these on October 11: an organ suite with narration, written for children, entitled *Parade of Animals*, and inspired by Saint-Saëns' *Carnival of the Animals*, and a concert of works for organ and instruments, with many either Toulouse or world premières. The *Parade of Animals*, by Iain Farrington, played at Saint-Sernin by **William Whitehead**, with spoken verses about different animals, followed by musical portraits that drew on the organ's vast tonal repertoire, was well done; the children present certainly seemed to eat it up. The other concert's new pieces seemed a little dated—surely this type of modernist writing, the Nadia Boulanger plus a little Stravinsky and atonalism school, is passé by now?

Events outside Toulouse

Toulouse les orgues festival also always has several "Journées-région," excursions by bus to various sites near Toulouse. I joined one to the Frontonnais, with visits to Verdun-sur-Garonne (Lépine organ, 1767), Fronton (B. Feuga organ, 1852), Vallemur-sur-Tarn (Maurice Puget organ, 1960), and Moissac (Cavaillé-Coll, 1864). The most interesting was the Feuga—the only Feuga organ apparently still playable. It is in need of restoration, and there was a group from the community, the "friends of the organ," who have been trying to raise money to restore the instrument and wanted to use the event to evaluate the state of the organ and get advice from **Jan Willem Jansen**, the festival director, whose baroque-style improvisations on an organ he had never seen were brilliant. The organ obviously

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This fascinating 1723 Abraham Jordan organ was originally built for St George's, Botolph Lane, in the City of London. When the church was demolished in 1904, the organ was transferred to the new church of St George's Southall. The entire lower section of the case was discarded and significant changes were made to the interior of the organ and its specification.

The organ has now been restored to its original specification and every effort made to reconstruct it in its original form. The lower casework is new, based on photographic evidence from when the organ stood in the church at Botolph Lane. The Great compass is G¹, A¹, C, D to d³. Swell is g⁰ to d³. There are no pedals. The organ is tuned to its original pitch at A455 and 1/6th comma meantone temperament.

The restoration received significant financial support from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

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St-Sernin, Grand Orgue, by Robert Delaunay (1674), Daublaine & Callinet (1845), Aristide Cavallé-Coll (1889), restoration Jean-Loup Boisseau, Bertrand Cattiaux and Patrice Bellet (1996) (© Patrice Nin, used with permission)



St-Etienne, Grand Orgue, by Antoine Lefèvre (1612), Aristide Cavallé-Coll (1849), reconstruction Alfred Kern (1976) (© Francis Bacon, used with permission)



Eglise de la Delbade, seen from the outside (© Patrice Nin, used with permission)



Eglise de Gesu, Grand Orgue by Aristide Cavallé-Coll (1864) (© Patrice Nin, used with permission)

did have major problems; one of the front pipes had even fallen out of the case—luckily, no one had been standing underneath at the time! But the core of it seemed very solid, with nice flutes, a stentorian trumpet, and an oboe full of plangency and character.

The Lépine organ seemed a little tinny. **Benjamin Righetti** played pieces by Du Mage and a sonata by Mozart. The Du Mage was nice enough if a little perfunctory; the Mozart worked fairly well. It's always a challenge that devotees of the French Classic organs face, to prove that this instrument can do justice to other music besides French Classic music. The modern Puget just didn't seem like a very good instrument. The Cavallé-Coll in the Moissac monastery church was wonderful, powerful, and somber by turns, and the building itself—even in a region of wonderful churches—was amazing.

The concert, however, suffered from being entirely composed of lugubrious music and also from the numerous program changes announced by Jansen, who wasn't audible past the first few rows of seats. The selections were organ solos and songs for mezzo-soprano and organ, including some of Mussorgsky's *Songs and Dances of Death*. The organist was **Matthieu de Miguel**, and **Marilyn Revel** was the vocal soloist. De Miguel, who had been so excellent at St. Nicolas, didn't seem to have properly prepared the music. Everything sounded underrehearsed.

On the way to these events, we had a wine tasting with snacks at Chateau Caze, in Villaudric, followed by a recital of pieces for soprano, French horn and piano, and then an excellent lunch of regional specialties at Fronton. On the whole, the day was disappointing; too many of these concerts seemed less than well prepared, and the festival's concerts of Romantic and modern repertoire contained too much music in minor keys that didn't really seem to go anywhere.

Other notable concerts

Thursday I went to the all-Schütz concert of the **Sacqueboutiers**, a pioneering early music group. The second half of this concert was much more interesting than the first, especially *Fili mi Absalon*, sung ringingly by **Renaud Delaigue** to bring the house down, and then Schütz's masterpiece, *Seven Last Words of Christ on the Cross*, which was splendidly done.

On Friday, the grand finale was the third event of the day, an evening *Ciné-concert*, with **Jean-Baptiste Dupont** at Saint-Sernin accompanying Jacques Feyder's *Visages d'enfants*, a silent film from 1923–25. The film was wonderful, with beautiful outdoor shots of the Swiss Alps and excellent child actors. Dupont's work at the organ was adequate without being inspired.

Summing up

Overall, I enjoyed the festival without thinking it really lived up to its promise.

There were a number of problems, some small and some big, with the way the festival is run, the level of preparation of the artists, and probably also with the way they are selected. One minor quibble I have is the lack of information in the programs about the organs themselves, such as the builder and date of construction. This information, including complete stoplists, is fortunately available on their website, <toulouse-les-orgues.org>, under the rubric "patrimoine," but concert programs still should include a minimal description of the organ, along with information about the music and the performers.

A bigger issue is the lack of commitment to the French Romantic organ repertoire. They do include, obviously, many works from the nineteenth- and twentieth-century organ tradition, but without much sense of context, of purpose, or of exploration. This year, the festival was severely curtailed because of their Bach cycle. But even so, it seems a shame, given that most of Toulouse's historic instruments are from the nineteenth century, that there weren't at least one or two concerts devoted to an in-depth look at one of that period's composers. After all, even with the attention paid to Bach, they still managed to devote an entire concert to Schütz.

Widor and Guilmant, in particular, are fundamental to the French organ repertoire. The sonatas of Guilmant would make a fascinating cycle. They show an evolution from his early neo-classical work

to the impressionism of the final sonatas, and as the hinge between early and late sonatas there is the monumental Fifth Sonata with its searing Romanticism, the skillful but never academic fugues, and the final explosion of the chorale, fugue and variations on "Ein Feste Burg."

A real presentation of French organ romanticism—something the festival should aim for each and every year—would also include the precursors and the earlier nineteenth century, namely Rossini, Donizetti, and Meyerbeer. These three opera composers made Paris their home in the 1830s and '40s, and created works that are essentially French. They, along with Franz Liszt, who lived in Paris and wrote his "Ad nos" based on Meyerbeer's theme for *Le Prophète*, and the native French composers active at around the same time, such as Daniel François Esprit Auber and Adolphe Adam, established the foundation for the French musical culture that evolved toward the end of the century.

The Toulouse organ festival's new-music programming also seems not as interesting as it could be. Even if a work is a première, that doesn't by itself make it interesting and important; the new pieces programmed this year seemed already dated. One of the best "new music" events at the festival was one that, probably, the festival took least seriously—the *Parade of Animals*. Some of the pieces were really special, like low hums on the organ to evoke the blue whale. That piece sticks in my mind, which is really the fundamental test of new music—would you ever want to hear it again?

The quality of the concerts was also very uneven. Too many of them were obviously underrehearsed and slapdash, and this was especially true for the Romantic repertoire. In short, this festival, which has the potential to be a wonderful celebration of the history of French music, seems to almost shy away from the core of the repertoire. People don't come to Toulouse-les-orgues for Bach cycles or the type of Baroque or Renaissance concert you can hear—often done better—in New York or Boston. They come for the core French Romantic and modern repertoire—and this includes all the wonderful works written in France by foreigners, like Rossini's Masses and his other liturgical music—done in spaces and on instruments that really are hardly to be found outside of France. ■

Bill Halsey was born in Seattle, where he studied piano and composition from an early age. He fell in love with the organ after hearing a Corrette suite played on the Montreal Beckerath, and began organ lessons in his teens. While a student at the Sorbonne, he had the good fortune to gain access to the two-manual unmodified tracker-action Cavallé-Coll organ at Saint Bernard de la Chapelle, in a northern arrondissement of Paris. This fueled his interest in historic organs, and after spending fifteen years serving in organist positions at St. John Cantius, St. Peter Claver, Church of the Assumption, and the Basilica of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, all in Brooklyn, New York, he took a permanent leave of absence to explore historic organs, first in France, and later in Italy.



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