

Two organs in Cairo—a history of renovation by the Ktesibios Foundation

Bill Halsey

After living in Italy, I had the opportunity to go to Egypt to study Arabic. I had always been fascinated by Arabic literature and music, as well as the prayer chants that are so much a part of life in the Moslem world. They are similar to Gregorian chant and synagogue chanting, and remind me of the days when I was 17 and singing in a Gregorian chant choir. You can tell time by the call to prayer, and what's especially nice is the antiphonal effect from different mosques "going off" at slightly different moments.

All Saints' Cathedral, Cairo

I found a job playing organ for the English Mass at the Anglican All Saints' Cathedral of Egypt and the Horn of Africa, working primarily with the English chaplain, Father Mike. The cathedral is a modern concrete monolith, the interior all open and designed to have the upturned folds of a Bedouin tent. The organ is placed high in a rear gallery, and benefits from good acoustics. All Saints' dates from 1988 and was a replacement for the old cathedral in Tahrir Square, built in 1938 but torn down in the 1980s to make way for one of the ubiquitous Cairo freeways.

I was immediately struck by the quality of the organ, which I was told came from the old cathedral but seemed even older than 70 years, more like at least 100 years old. It was a small two-manual tracker action, everything—console, pipes, bellows, windchest—contained in a rather plain-looking wooden framework. It had a nameplate, Bevington and Sons, but no date or opus number, and was in remarkably good condition for its age. It reminded me of small Italian organs, but lacked the most minimal solo stop like Vox Humana that even the smallest Italian organ has. However, the quality of the Open Diapason and the principal chorus on the Great make it quite serviceable for a wide variety of organ music. The Swell division, as often happens even in much bigger organs, is too weak to compete with the Great.

In summer I took a trip to Italy. I had plans to do a concert with a violinist friend in Ostuni. The violinist specializes in Hispanic music and we were going to perform, among other pieces, a violin and piano partita I had written on songs by Luz Celenia Tirado, one of Puerto Rico's most famous composers. However, the concert, through a series of unfortunate events, was endlessly delayed and then didn't come about, and I finally returned to Cairo at the end of September.

Father Mike gave me my job back, which rather surprised me, since I had been absent so long, and he also excitedly informed me that two Belgian organbuilders had visited the organ while I was gone. They were going to come back, do a complete cleaning and tuning, and there would also be two recitals and a masterclass with an organist from Belgium. I was pretty surprised by this,



Gerard Pels, assisted by Filip Willems, starting work on the Swell division



Gerard Pels and Filip Willems clean out dust from pipes

thinking Cairo cut off from the world of organbuilders and masterclasses. He said the work was financed by a foundation, which I found out later was called Ktesibios, after the Alexandrian inventor of the hydraulic organ; they worked on Egyptian organs in exchange for accommodations and the cost of their airfare. The reason for their visit also included presenting the renovation they had been doing on the organ at the Basilica of Heliopolis, with a concert and masterclass by the same organist from Belgium.

I had never seen an organ dismantled, cleaned, and tuned, and the two organbuilders, Gerard Pels and Filip Willems, had asked for a helper, so I volunteered for the job. The two couldn't have been nicer or more informative about the progress of the work. We took out all the pipes except the heaviest façade pipes;

several pipes were missing, which led to a call to their firm in Belgium to see if the factory could supply the required small pipes.

During the work, I learned a number of very interesting things about an organ I thought I knew well. Gerard Pels, who besides being president of the Ktesibios Foundation is also the head of Pels Orgelbouw, an organbuilding company his family has operated for generations, had also come to the conclusion that this organ was more than 70 years old. Research was done, leading to the discovery that the organ came from another All Saints Church that predated the old cathedral, and that the organ was probably built around 1900. But alterations had been made, whose date is not altogether clear; for example, a stop was added, a Mixture on the Great, on electric action. Moreover, the whole pedal register, 16', 8', and 4', is a unit rank on electric action. The history of this pedal stop is unclear, whether it existed in the original organ, or was simply added at some point, perhaps in 1938 to give more *gravitas* to the organ. The Mixture, in Pels's opinion, was added for the new cathedral to give the organ a more Baroque sound.

One of the most interesting things I learned concerned the Swell, which includes 8' 4' 2' flutes and a Larigot, and is quite weak because there is no diapason. But, during the dismantling, Gerard Pels was quite surprised to discover that the 2' flute had the scale not of a flute but of a diapason, causing it to overbalance the 8' and 4' stops. Since the weakness of the Swell came from the fact it lacked a diapason chorus, this led me to consider playing melodies on the Swell down an



Heliopolis Basilica organ pipes



Heliopolis Basilica organ interior



Filip Willems handing down a pipe during dismantling

octave, to mimic at least a 4' diapason. This also gives the effect of having a 16' on the Swell, which is very useful.

The work was limited by the time frame, only two days, and the pipes were cleaned and put back, and a few problems were fixed—most importantly, replacing a broken pipe on the Great Octave, and repairing a broken tracker on the Swell. The missing pipes were replaced by pipes from Pels Orgelbouw, some from the 18th century, brought to Cairo by Gerard Pels's 84-year-old mother.

The organist from Belgium, Pieter Van de Welde, titular of the organ at the Antwerp cathedral, chose to do all Baroque works for both his noon and evening concerts. At noon he played Bach's "St. Anne" *Prelude in E-flat* and a fugue by C. P. E. Bach; he went on to skillfully

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Bill Halsey, Gerard Pels, and Filip Willems during a tea break



Gerard Pels and Filip Willems blowing dust out of pipes

demonstrate the whole gamut of different stops with various chorale preludes and trio sonatas by Bach. In the evening he played, among other works, pieces by Buxtehude and Bach's *Passacaglia in C Minor*. I had really never heard the organ from downstairs played by a professional, and was impressed not only by the massive power it had in the big *tutti* but also the strength of just a single diapason.

The masterclass, which came between the two concerts, was a little strange. A number of people who played at other Cairo churches came just to watch and ask questions, and a few young people tried out piano pieces on the organ, but I was the only organist to actually play organ pieces, Bach's *Prelude and Fugue in G major*. Pieter Van de Welde gave me some very useful tips and corrected some mistakes I was making.

Heliopolis Basilica

The city of Heliopolis was built in the early 20th century as a new modern development by the Belgian Baron Empain, who constructed churches

and mosques for the new neighborhood, including the Catholic basilica for the large foreign Catholic community. There is something of a mystery about the organ itself. It was installed in 1914 by Theofiel Boeckx, an apprentice of Gerard Pels's great grandfather, but there is debate about the actual builder. The nameplate reads *Theophile Boech, Facteur, 10 mars 1914*, but Gerard Pels found evidence inside the organ that some of the parts or pipes were made in Georges Cloetens's factory.

Theofiel Boeckx's name on the organ was, however, the inspiration for the Ktesibios Foundation. Raymond Batroussi, the basilica organist until recently, when he left Egypt for Canada, had asked Gerard Pels to take him on as an apprentice organbuilder and restorer in Belgium, but he couldn't get a visa for Belgium. He did, however, arrange for Pels to visit the Heliopolis Basilica and see the organ, to give him advice about restoring it. When Pels saw the organ and the nameplate, he was intrigued by the family connection. He realized the restoration would be a delicate affair, so decided to found the Ktesibios Foundation to fund his own involvement in the project. Pels's blog, <http://www.ktesibios.eu/ktesibios_emails.html>, provides a good history of the restoration, done in November 2009. It's in Dutch, but Google translate provides an adequate English version.

Apparently one of the major problems was the wind system, an unusual and novel system. Pels and his coworkers had to order a new blower from Belgium and solve problems in order to reduce the noise of the system and make it more efficient. The organ has three manuals, and the third, which is devoted solely to a type of reed organ, remains unusable because the workers didn't have the equipment in Egypt to repair it.

This time the masterclass took place the day before the concert, and was

even stranger than the masterclass at All Saints'. Again, I was the only one to play real organ music. There were a few kids doing piano pieces, but Pieter Van de Welde understandably seemed in a hurry to start preparing for the next day's concert. The concert at the basilica, a presentation of the restored organ, was going to be a very prestigious affair. Susan Mubarak, the wife of the Egyptian president, was coming. The Belgian ambassador and a big group from the embassy would be there. The Ktesibios Foundation had even sold tours from Belgium, including the pyramids with the concert, for 890 Euros a head!

On Friday, security was tight, and the concert started over an hour late because Mrs. Mubarak was late. The church, which seats about 500, was filled to bursting. Mr. Van de Welde performed a mostly lightweight program starting with Bach's *Tocatta and Fugue in D minor*, ending with Widor's *Tocatta*; in the middle were Verdi's *Triumphal March* from *Aida* and other softer pieces, such as Flor Peeters' "Oh God, thou faithful God," and *Aalaiki'ssalaam* by Naji Hakim. It's fair to say the soft pieces worked best. The diapason chorus on this organ seems quite weak. To get any power, Van de Welde had to use a really annoying 16' Trombone on the Pedal that drowned out the manuals. 1914 was a strange era in organbuilding; many builders, including very prestigious firms, were trying innovations that didn't really work. The emphasis was on symphonic stops with fancy names and this led to neglect of the basic diapason chorus or the 8' and 16' foundations that are so important for the Romantic repertoire.

In December I was hired to play the basilica carol service and formed a more nuanced view of this organ. Obviously, any true evaluation of it must wait for a complete restoration that includes the reed organ on the third manual, which may make up for the lack of solo reed stops—clarinet or oboe—on the organ. The Positif to Grand Orgue coupler is not at present usable because when it is engaged there is a cipher. The most usable solo stop is the Grand Orgue Viola di Gamba. The trumpets on the Grand Orgue and Positif are not really solo stops; they are the reeds that in the French system make up the Grand Jeu. The organ in many ways seems like a collection of spare parts—but over the course of a day and half of rehearsal and the carol concert, where I accompanied not only singers but also a flautist and violinist, I began to realize that this organ has a lot of good elements; it's just necessary to find out where they are and how to use them.

But the cathedral organ is undeniably a better instrument. The moral of this story is that bigger isn't necessarily better. The cathedral organ has no reeds or solo stops, but the strength of its foundation stops means it is suitable, with creativity, for a wide variety of solo music, while perhaps really being optimal, and certainly designed primarily, for accompanying Anglican choral music and chanting. That said, the basilica organ has many interesting capabilities

that would take more time to explore and recognize. ■

Bill Halsey was born in Seattle, where he studied piano and composition from an early age, and began organ lessons in his teens. While a student at the Sorbonne, he had access to the two-manual unmodified tracker-action Cavaillé-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.

Bevington organ at All Saints' Anglican Cathedral, Zamalek, Cairo

GREAT

- 8' Open Diapason
- 8' Höhl Flute
- 4' Principal
- 2' Octave
- Mixture II

SWELL

- 8' Lieblich Gedeckt
- 4' Flute
- 2' Flageolet
- 1½' Larigot

PEDAL

- 16' Bourdon
- 8' Bass Flute
- 4' Octave Flute

Couplers

- Swell to Great
- Great to Pedal
- Swell to Pedal

Heliopolis Basilica

GRAND ORGUE

- 16' Bourdon
- 8' Montre
- 8' Flute Harmonique
- 8' Viola di Gamba
- 8' Bourdon
- 8' Quintatön
- 4' Prestant
- 4' Flute Harmonique
- 2' Doublette
- Mixture II
- Cornet V, starts at middle C
- 8' Trompetteuba

POSITIF

- 8' Diapason
- 8' Flute Harmonique
- 8' Salicional
- 8' Voix céleste
- 6' Quinte
- 4' Violine
- 4' Eoline
- 4' Flute echo
- 2' Flageolet
- 8' Trompette Harmonique

PEDAL

- 16' Contrebasson
- 8' Octavebasse
- 16' Trombone

Couplers and expression pedals:

- Octave aiguë sur Grand Orgue
- Tirasse au Positif
- Tirasse au Grand Orgue
- Positif au Grand Orgue
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