

In The Pipeline

A photograph of a large, ornate pipe organ in a cathedral. The organ is made of dark wood and has many tall, silver-colored pipes. Above the organ is a large, colorful stained glass window with a circular design. The cathedral's architecture is visible, with tall columns and a vaulted ceiling.

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Orgue de l'abbatiale Saint-Ouen



The interior length of the church is 137m, 25m wide in the nave and 33m high in the vaults. The central tower is 88m in height. It's interior is only a few meters smaller than that of Notre-Dame, Paris. The measurements are included for reasons which will be explained later.

The abbey of St. Ouen is actually the fifth building to stand on this site. Construction began on the current building in 1318 by Abbot Jean Roussel. It appears that the nave and central tower were completed years later in 1549, still using the original architectural plan. The monastery was converted to house the city hall in 1800. The west facade was built from 1846 to 1851, but, for some unknown reason, not using the still surviving original plans. Today the monastery is not in use by any church. It's used for concerts, exhibitions, and an art gallery.

This church structure is in the Gothic style. And a bit of a rare Gothic structure as well. This cathedral was built with abundant and abundantly huge stained glass windows and therefore lets more light into the building than is typical of a Gothic structure.

In 1630, a man by the name of Crespin Carlier built and installed an organ in the west end of the cathedral. It was an 8-foot instrument (its largest pipes were 8 feet) with two 48-note manuals and a 12-note independent pedal. Part of that case



remains in the current set-up. Twenty-years later Thomas Morlet modified the instrument, including the addition of a dorsal positive and the main organ case went from an 8-foot 3-tower instrument into a 16-foot 5-tower instrument.



However, records show that by 1803 the only thing left was the organ case and the Montre pipes (facade pipes). A “new” organ was literally pieced together using parts from other organs. In 1851, Aristide Cavaillé-Coll was called in to assess the organ. He ranked it among the largest instruments in France with 50 stops over five manuals and pedal.

By the year 1888 the organ had fallen

into disrepair and a rebuild was called for. The contract was awarded to Cavaillé-Coll, with the stipulation that he re-use as much of the existing pipe work as possible. It’s interesting to note here that Cavaillé-Coll often reused existing pipework, if their condition was still good. Recycle! Anyway, in all Cavaillé-Coll kept 20 stops and augmented those with 44 more. In 1890 he completed the “rebuilding” of the instrument. Now the organ contained 64 stops, 84 ranks, spread across four manuals and pedal. The manuals contain 56 notes, and the pedal 30 notes.

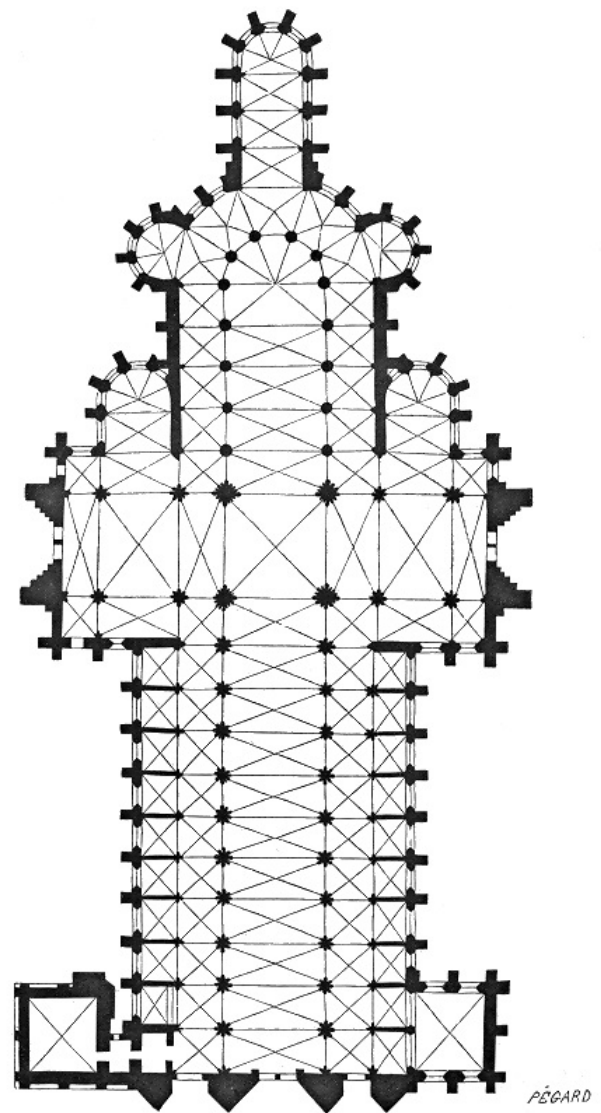
It is documented that Cavaillé-Coll was quite anxious during the organ inspection. In France at the time all new organs were inspected by organists and officials and had to be given their stamp of approval before the organ could be heard by the public. At the console was Charles-Marie Widor, organist of St. Sulpice, playing and trying out stops. When finally asked, it is said that Widor replied, “It is worthy of Michelangelo.” Widor inaugurated the instrument on April 17, 1890. Indeed Widor was so impressed with both the church and this new organ that his ninth organ symphony, *Symphony Gothique*, was premiered on this organ, and dedicated to the memory of bishop Saint Ouen of Rouen. This was one of the ten symphonies that Widor wrote.

Today, the organ and the organ case (separately) are listed as historical landmarks. We have a lot of thanks to be given to the organists of St. Ouen up to

this point – to resist changing anything on this instrument. Today, it is exactly how it was inaugurated by Widor in 1870. Though the instrument today is playable it is in need of a thorough restoration.

This organ is known for being an instrument of phenomenal tone quality! It's Récit division (swell) is also quite large. It contains 20 of the 64 stops and 22 of the 84 ranks! And that's just one division! This allows a lot of freedom of expression with this organ. Also it is interesting to note that in several recordings they mention in the liner notes that the Contre-Bombarde 32' is VERY powerful. More so on this organ than on other Cavallé-Coll instruments.

What makes this organ so special is not only the sound of it, which is perfect, but the space it is in. Remember those measurements given earlier in this article? Well, take those measurements – a room that big in stone – and in the west end of that room plunk down an organ against the wall at about the middle of the height of the cathedral, aimed



directly down the length of the room. What do you get? One VERY impressive organ.

This is one of the last instruments to leave the Cavallé-Coll workshop while Aristide was still alive. It is considered by many people to be one of his finest instruments (along with the organ at St. Sulpice). It is also the most recorded pipe organ in the world.

It is amazing and fortunate that this is one

of the very few Cavaillé-Coll instruments that has survived to this day completely unaltered. The organ even survived two World Wars!

The young Virgil Fox, later to become one of the most well-known of organists in the United States, gives us a first-hand insight into this remarkable organ at the Church of Saint-Ouen, Rouen.

In the autumn of 1932, newly graduated from Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore, Maryland, USA, Virgil Fox travelled to France to study with Marcel Dupré. In the following letter to Hugh C. Price, under whom he studied for several years while residing in Princeton, Illinois, Fox tells of his experience playing for Mass at the Church of Saint-Ouen.

November 6, 1932

The little French train drew into the station and I wasn't long in making my way through the confusion of foreign tongue and people into the narrow street en face. Still early morning (though I had ridden three hours already), and the tingling frost in the air of that part of a November day was still emphasized by the particular humidity that is France's. Believe that my only protection, a leather jacket, was buttoned to the last button, and I wished both my hands might stay in the pockets. However, by alternating between hands, I was able to carry the lunch I'd brought from Paris and keep up some circulation too.

Rouen! The day lay before me and I was keenly ready for it. My first trip out of Paris and this so ancient city and its building held

no end of mystery. Windows still closed from the night just passed were all laced in with the blinds that shut off each French house from the world outside, as soon as the sun is set. Only the fall of my steps to disturb a frozen air and an occasional opening of a shutter by a bonne as I passed.

I went the direction my map told me for the great church, Saint-Ouen. Quaint streets—forever narrow, and then as suddenly, one of them emptied me out onto an immense place and there at its height, I beheld Saint-Ouen. One sweeping glance convinced me of its reputation—"the most beautiful Gothic edifice in the world."



Postcard of Rouen Cathedral
Sent by Virgil Fox in 1932

At 9:30 I was to meet at the gallery entré, M. Albert Dupré, organist over the tremendous instrument and cathedral [sic] that is Saint-Ouen, to whom his son and my teacher, Marcel Dupré, had sent me. As I stood in amazement of the far heights of the nave, the whole sight became too beautiful to be real when scores of little choir boys scurried past (bare, cold-looking little heads) to get into their crimson robes and hurry on to their singing at the great altar. The clear Gregorian phrases, as they flow from these little fellows' throats, rise and sift out through the arches like a fine mist—and then settle—I forgot where I was.

But with the coming of the old Papa Dupré and his large, noisy keys, I was quickly restored to the where and when of things. To try and tell the characteristics of this wonderful old man and his little wife is something my words won't attempt. Finer people never were, that is all. His largest key opened the miniature door of the tower and we were soon climbing the stone steps winding, winding, ever up and over and around. But we eventually came to the top and to the light again. When I stepped out into the loft and looked down into that nave stretching below— its altar far away at the end like a brilliant diamond at its head—I don't remember what the old man was saying. But when the organ claviers were opened, my attention was all there. He was about to play, I thought, when he turned to me with "mettez vos gants." I had already heard enough of the Mass in French to know the amount of improvising demanded. And when he thus told me to prepare myself to play, I was so completely taken that my poor French would scarcely come at all in the rush



Albert and Alice Dupré, parents of Marcel
Albert was both an organist in Rouen
and friend of Aristide Cavallé-Coll, organ builder.

of words I wanted to use to explain I'd had only too little training in improvisation. But I was on the bench—just like that.

The first interlude was to be a minute and a half in length and fff. Every stop (of the 65) was drawn—tremendous 32' Bombarde and all to match it. I trembled—and listened for the key (and style of mood) from the choir 'way down at the altar. A little bell rang and he gave me the nod! I "stepped on" that organ like I had never stepped on one before! And what tone pealed from it! My heart vibrated as did the whole building. Another nod and the interlude was over. Then more followed in quick succession, all different in style, volume, etc. And the grand old man's

“bravos” and pats on the back after each gave me an assurance to enter with all my might, where otherwise I would have been afraid to even knock.

The Offertoire came and I played a Bach fugue. At the Communion more Bach (Trio Sonata movement) and then Madame Dupré came into the loft. She shook my hand for five minutes (surely) saying she was almost as happy (and out of breath) as I was. As the end of the Mass came nearer, I wondered and waited for the Papa to ask me, “What will you play for the Sortie (Postlude)?” And [he] did! Ever since hearing my teacher at the Peabody, Mr. Robert, tell about playing the great Franck Finale in B-flat in his cathedral in Holland, I have been so anxious and wondered if the chance to play this Franck under similar condition of church and organ would ever be mine. And here it was—in the matchless organ with power enough for three cathedrals, and the Saint-Ouen. I answered “Franck Finale” almost before he asked me.

Under normal conditions my fingers would have been warm long before now. But this was France, and November, and the keys on those four manuals were like bars of smooth ice. For the Finale, I thought, “all or none”—took off even the leather jacket and waited for the signal to begin. It came, and I played into the pedal entry with the fire I knew they would speak back. By the time of the first manual passage, my fingers could have been frozen stiff and they would have played regardless. The cold did not matter.



The stops on such an instrument are so large, so difficult to pull, and there are so many, that it takes more than one person to handle them. I had not said a word to M. Dupré, but he seemed to know what I was going to do, as somehow I understood the same of him. Thus, without a word, he took all the stops on the right, and I, those on the left. The time for changes we worked together and it built just as it should, as though we had practiced. I came nearer the end; he had pulled everything he thought necessary and settled back with the others who had come into the loft. There were three octave-couplers I had spied while playing at full speed, not more than a minute before the piece would end. I got one foot over the first—felt it was like lead (undoubtedly not used for 20 years) but under supremacy of the moment, I made it! Then the next, and just in time for the final burst, the last! I held on while the very foundations shook. With the release of the B-flat chord (that I can still hear ringing) and a turn to M. Dupré, he nodded and beamed all acquiescence; and from the time those three couplers went down—with his jaw dropped open.



completeness of his joy in making another sale.

The sun had come out, and while returning to a little park by the church, I was sure it couldn't all be true. There, in the shadow of Saint-Ouen's towering spires and by the side of a little fountain that sparkled and danced the noon hour away, I ate my sandwich and apple.

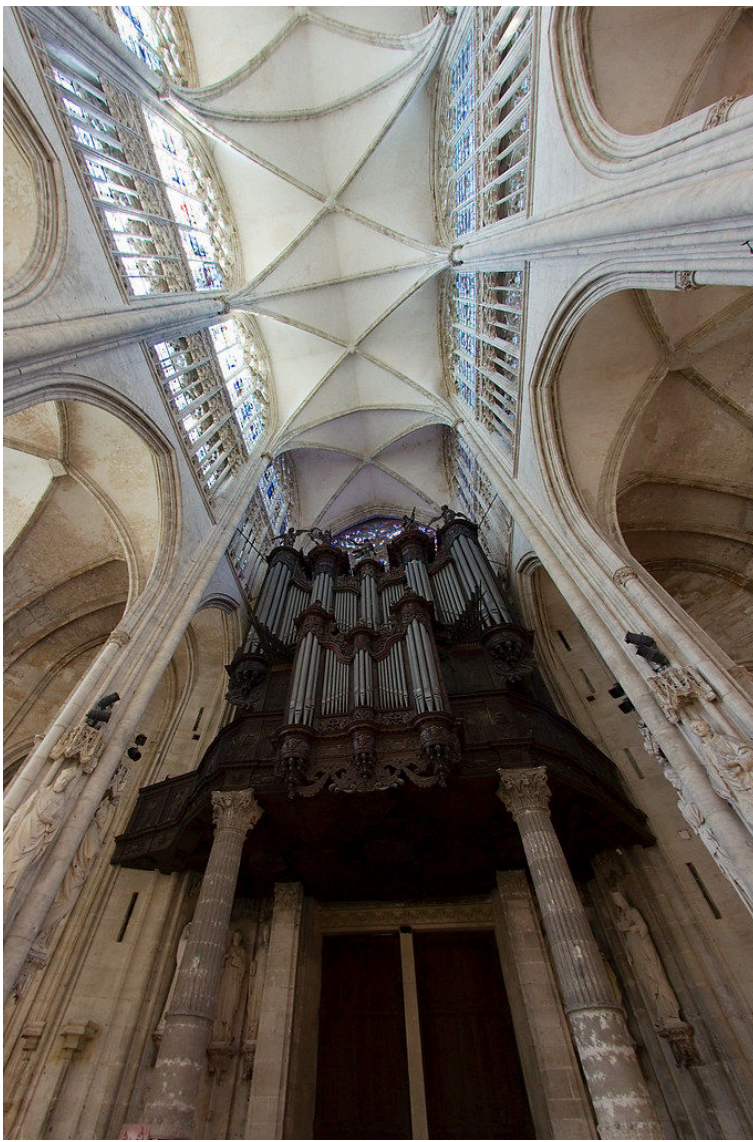
Before the too-short hours before 3:00 were passed, I explored Rouen. To an utter completion and satisfaction, what should I find and buy but a grand, big photo of the very church and organ where I had just played. Wandering on I passed under the "Gros-Horloge," spent some time in the cathedral where a boy choir was singing in one of the distant chapels, and window-shopped in ancient streets where my time was all too limited.

Before re-entering Saint-Ouen at three, the cloches in both front and central towers began pealing like all the bells of heaven. I had thought those of Notre-Dame the most inspiring as they rang out over Paris, but these—!

The Vespers! Again I improvised all the interludes and then closed the service with the Bach Fantasy and Fugue in G Minor, playing it for the first time in public. The older Dupré, not realizing that I had just studied it with his son, got so excited in the Fugue that he pointed to the Swell five measures ahead of time. I fully intended to make the change (at the proper time) and did, to his delight. The passing of sunset had left the church nearly dark, and at the ending, looking down into the nave, nearly all the worshipers were seen still seated. M. Dupré

Getting off that bench with the full realization of what had just happened, I nearly burst with happiness. I really don't remember what was said or done until we were out of the church—except that Vespers was to be at 3:00 and I was to come again.

The fates were making it a perfect day. André Marchal, the blind virtuoso, was playing an historical recital and improvisations at 4:30 on the 17th-century organ of the ancient Church of Saint-Nicaise. A fascinating walk through a part of Rouen that made me feel that Paris didn't know what "atmosphere" was, and I found the old landmark. To sell me a ticket there was a funny old priest with his hat flatter than all the rest (I'm sure) and a beaming, round face that betrayed the



organ of the past spoke a beautiful message from the time of its masters.

Through the now dark streets to Number 12, rue du Vert-Buisson. The Duprés' home is a small paradise for an organist, with its pictures, books, and its organ—a gem of an instrument which Marcel Dupré grew up on. The Papa sat on the steps to the right and the Mama hummed along and made her fingers dance when I played the *Fugue à la Gigue*, Widor's *Andante Cantabile*, and silence held the room.

At dinner they told me all the things I would know: Marcel's boyhood, great musicians of France they knew, those who had played at Saint-Ouen, who had sat there at that very table. (And my French flowed like it hadn't before.) But there must be an end, and so train time came. The Papa gave me a picture and plan of the organ with something very nice written on it. I tried to thank them and then hurried off into the cold night, leaving three old people,

said I should be glad, that that was unusual. The presiding priest later told him that as soon as his robes from the Mass had been properly taken care of, he returned and listened until the end.

Then imagine how, after being invited to the Duprés' for dinner, I enjoyed Marchal's superb concert. The setting was ideal, with even the new moon reflecting on the ancient stained-glass windows, and the tones of this

1419 146
CARTE
VALABLE
du 27-9-32
au 27-9-34

prorogée jusqu'au
prorogée jusqu'au
Délivrée par M. le Préfet
de Police

Le 3 FEVR 1933
LE PRÉFET,
Jean Bignon

CARTE 432421

Nom: *Loa*
Prénoms: *Virgil Keel*
Né le: *5-5-1918*
à: *Heor. Princeton*
de: *Ames*
né le: *1888*
à: *Princeton*
et de: *Nichols (Bird)*
née le: *1888*
à: *Princeton*
Profession: *Américaine*
Nationalité: *Américaine*

Mode d'acquisition de cette nationalité :
filiation, mariage, naturalisation, (rayer les mentions inutiles).

Situation de famille : *célibataire, marié, veuf, divorcé* (rayer les mentions inutiles).

— 3 —

*Papa, Mama, and Aunt, wrapped in shawls
and waving under their wee door lamp. As I
turned for a last look, it flickered out of sight.*

*In the darkness I passed the tower where Joan
of Arc was held prisoner, and on the crest of
the wave of happiness I was riding, wondered
how there ever existed such things as hate
and torture.*

*Once again on the little train headed back
toward Paris, and truly I wondered if I had
been dreaming.*

Virgil Fox

Virgil Fox's letter originally published in the Bureau County
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Photo of the Duprés from the collection of Rollin Smith.
Other photographs from the American Guild of Organists
and various internet sources.

Stoplist from <https://en.wikipedia.org>

Stoplist of the 1890 Cavallé-Coll Organ in Abbatale Saint-Ouen

I Positif	II Grand-Orgue	III Récit Expressif	IV Bombarde	Pédale	
Montre	8' Montre	16' Quintaton	16' Grosse Flûte	8' Soubasse	32'
Bourdon	8' Violon-basse	16' Corno dolce	16' Flûte	4' Contre-basse	16'
Gambe	8' Bourdon	16' Diapason	8' Doublette	2' Soubasse	16'
Unda maris	8' Montre	8' Flûte traversière	8' Fourniture V	2 2/3' Basse	8'
Flûte douce	4' Diapason	8' Cor de nuit	8' Cornet V	16' Violoncelle	8'
Dulciane	4' Bourdon	8' Voix eolienne	8' Bombarde	16' Bourdon	8'
Doublette	2' Salicional	8' Viole de gambe	8' Basson	16' Flûte	4'
Plein-jeu V	1' Flûte harmonique	8' Voix celeste	8' Trompette	8' Contre-bombarde	32'
Cor anglaise	16' Prestant	4' Flûte octaviante	4' Clairon	4' Bombarde	16'
Trompette	8' Trompette en chamade	Viole d'amour	4'	Basson	16'
Cromorne	8'	8' Quinte	2 2/3' Bomb./G.O.	Trompette	8'
Clairon	4' Clairon en chamade	4' Octavin	2' Bomb./Réc.	Clairon	4'
		Carillon I-III	1' Anches Bomb.,		
Tirasse Pos.	Tirasse G.O.	Cornet V	8'	Anches Péd.,	
Pos./G.O.	Appel G.O.	Tuba magna	16'		
Pos./Réc.	Oct. gr. G.O.	Trompette harmonique	8'		
Anches Pos.,	Anches G.O.,		8'		
		Basson-Hautbois	8'		
		Clarinette	8'		
		Voix Humaine	8'		
		Clairon harmonique	4'		
		Tirasse Réc.			
		Réc./G.O.			
		Oct. gr. Réc./G.O.			
		Oct. gr. Réc.			
		Oct. aiguë Réc.			
		Anches Réc.,			
		Trémolo Réc.,			
		Expression Réc.			

