

LABORATOIRE HARMONIQUE

The new Mascioni-Toussaint organ in Paris's Conservatoire National Supérieur

The Cité de la Musique at La Villette, Paris, is aptly named. Here, concert halls, museums, and digital libraries sit together, accessible to professionals and amateurs alike. And at its heart sits the Conservatoire National Supérieur. Designed by Christian de Portzamparc and dedicated in 1983 by François Mitterrand, it's home to 1,200 aspiring young artists every year.

Since 1983, the Conservatoire has housed two concert organs, by Dupont and Rieger (the latter of whom also built the instrument in the neighboring Philharmonie 35 years later). Now there are three practice organs as well. To sharpen their skills before 2018, young organists had to access the concert halls between rehearsals. So Olivier Latry and Michel Bouvard, the Conservatoire's organ chairs, sought to take organ practice into the practice room. And knowing that a diverse repertoire takes diverse organs, they set out to make the three new practice instruments as musically diverse as possible.

Two are two-manual mechanical organs, inspired by known genres: one in the Silbermann style by Quentin Blumenroeder, and another in Romantic-Symphonic style, after Cavallé-Coll, by Peter Meier and Marco Venegoni. But the third instrument is entirely different.

Built by Mascioni of Italy and France's Nicholas Toussaint, it's a unit organ of three manuals and 13 ranks. To Latry and Bouvard, embracing the electric-action organ is crucial. They're widespread, and their features demand unique skills. But that's not the only reason. Technology can expand imaginations.

In France, improvisation is a musical staple. In the 1860s, Cavaille-Coll provided the technology to let it flourish. His playing aids allowed Franck to turn counterpoint, fugue, and canon into abstract art. From there, luminaries such as Dupré, Langlais, Cocherneau, Roth, and Latry himself—as well as their protégés—have kept the art very much alive.

Improvisation not only requires an encyclopedic knowledge of theory, history, and styles, it also demands



imagination. It can't be so much taught as nurtured. So in that vein, a student team joined consultants and craftsmen to conceive the instrument. They improvised with spirit, keen to explore the potential of every pipe.

The stark external design mirrors the Rieger across the park. On 81mm pressure, the overall tonal design borders on French Romantic. But convention ends there. The progressions and scaling allow ranks to fulfill a plethora of roles and blend with unlikely counterparts. The Celeste and conical Gambe, for example, swap roles throughout their compass, the former actually opening up to a Gemshorn generous enough to form part of the smaller mixtures.

Playable from any manual, the divisions can be divided into solo and accompaniment in any configuration, and be coupled at any pitch. The Pédale is divisible, and even the Plein-Jeu's breaks reconfigurable. Récit can be coupled to Positif at $2\frac{2}{7}$; Grand-Orgue to Pédale three semitones up can be tried at will.

In addition to this, there are chord functions, pizzicato, a sostenuto, and even programmable delays between keys and pipes. This isn't just to show the versatility of solid-state switching; it also simulates the realities of organs: corners, long naves, even pneumatic actions. The whole organ, too, is under double expression—one box within another—allowing a way of simulating a range of instruments and buildings in the confines of a practice room.

So here is an organ not just for repertoire, but for experiments as well. A laboratory to which students can bring an established theory or reference, then turn

it on its head. Yes, after trying the historic copies, some hardened purists will reflexively turn up their noses. But most will seize the opportunity to let loose like kids in a candy shop and release their creativity. Olivier Latry writes,

Though the conservatory's organ class only accepts ten students a year, it still remains, by sheer tradition, one of its pillars. Ever since the 19th century, the French organ school has been world-famous. A host of overseas students still come to Paris, both to benefit from its teaching and acquaint themselves with its organs. They are, after all, some of France's historic figures. What makes this course of study even more attractive is the conservatory's relationships with places like the Palace of Versailles and France's festivals, and the chance for students to take their master's exam on one of Paris's emblematic organs. It's undoubtedly why many of the musicians who come here become world-class organists. We're delighted!

ANDREW JOLLIFFE

Mascioni-Toussaint Organ (2020) Paris Conservatory

I. GRAND-ORGUE

16 Bourdon (A)
8 Montre (B)
8 Flûte (C, F)
8 Bourdon (A)
4 Prestant (D)
4 Flûte (B)
2½ Quinte (J)
2 Doublette (D)
Plein-Jeu III (I)
Cornet V (from c¹)
(C, E, J, K)
16 Basson (G)
8 Basson (G)

II. POSITIF

16 Bourdon (A, C)
8 Gambe (E, L)
8 Bourdon (C)
4 Salicet (L, E)
4 Flûte (F)
2½ Nasard (J)
2 Flûte (C)
1½ Tierce (K)
1½ Larigot (J)
1½ Septième (K)
2 Plein-Jeu (E, J, K, L)
8 Clarinette (M)

III. RÉCIT

16 Bourdon (A, C)
8 Gambe (E, L)
8 Voix céleste (E)
8 Bourdon-Flûte (C, F)
4 Flûte (C)
2½ Nasard (J)
2 Quarte (F)
2 Plein-Jeu (E, J, L)
Cornet V (from g)
(C, E, J, K)
16 Basson (G)
8 Basson (G)
8 Hautbois (G, H)

PÉDALE

32 Soubasse (A)
16 Violoncelle (A, C)
16 Soubasse (A)
8 Principal (B)
8 Violoncelle (E, L)
8 Bourdon (A)
4 Octave (D)
4 Flûte (F)
2 Flûte (C)
16 Basson (G)
8 Basson (G)
8 Clarinette (M)

RANKS

A. 16 Bourdon (73 pipes)
B. 8 Montre (61 pipes)
C. 8 Bourdon (85 pipes)
D. 4 Prestant (73 pipes)
E. 8 Gambe (85 pipes)
F. 4 Flute (73 pipes)
G. 16 Basson (73 pipes)
H. 8 Hautbois (37 pipes)
I. 1½ Plein-Jeu III (183 pipes)
J. 2½ Quinte-Larigot (73 pipes)
K. 1½ Tierce-Septième
(61 pipes)
L. 8 Voix céleste (49 pipes)
M. 8 Clarinette (61 pipes)

Three manuals, 13 ranks
Manuals: 61 notes (C–c¹)
Pedal: 32 notes (C–g¹)

From Tokyo to Moscow

to Paris to Portugal to here in Italy, no two Mascioni organs are alike. Yet they've much in common. Skills of old, and construction for the rigors of today. Lead, tin, silver spruce, cherry, burr walnut, composites and plastics. Concepts from experience, choruses that sing and actions that last. An amalgam of tradition and progress since 1829. One of which we're justly proud, and you will be too.

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