Virgil Fox

Forty thousand pounds of organ stand up and speak.

Catherine Contos

VIRGIL FOX, organist at New York's Riverside Church, occupies comfortably —joyfully, in fact—the front combat position in a lively controversy between two opposing schools of organ playing. He is the most celebrated (and in all likelihood one of the most articulate) of those who believe in making use, without apology, of the resources of the modern instrument in performing music of an earlier age. Specifically, the issue arises in connection with music of the baroque era. Fox's castigation of "The Baroque Boys," as he labels his contrary-minded colleagues, can be as delightful as it is devastating; and when he sits ensconced at a console, hands and feet flying at a pace almost too fast for the eye to follow, his terse commentaries shouted above the monumental reverberations seem ammunition enough to lay waste any less verbally eloquent opponent.

I saw Mr. Fox in action one afternoon recently when I went to Lincoln Center to be introduced to New York's newest musical addition, the 5,498-pipe Aeolian-Skinner organ designed for Philharmonic Hall. This organ, four years in the planning, boasts some specifications that struck me as being of interest even to the least statistical-minded: its air compressor is driven by an engine four stories below stage level, with wind conducted by three large galvanized iron trunks; there are some 20,000 electrical connections, and enough cable, according to the Aeolian-Skinner Company, to provide telephone service to a small city; the organ weighs about 40,000 pounds, and all the lumber used is carefully seasoned California sugar pine, calculated to last as long as Philharmonic Hall itself.

This rather awesome instrument made its public debut at the hands of Virgil Fox and two fellow-performers at the inaugural organ concert last December, and three weeks later it was heard again in a solo recital presented by Mr. Fox alone. It seems particularly fitting, in view of this close association, that he introduce the instrument to records—which he has now done, under the auspices of Command (for a review of this release, see page 73).

"Do you realize," he said, watching with an understandably paternal eye as the massive console was moved into position at the center of the stage, "that this is the first adequate concert organ New York has ever had? I am continually being told by managers in this country that there is no audience for organ recitals. But if organists would play musically, and if more cities had good concert instruments, there *would* be an audience. I give an average of sixty concerts a year, mostly in churches—but church recitals are not the answer. With all the associations of worship and burial, audiences are apt to feel cowed there. After all, who would listen to Heifetz behind a potted palm?"

THIS QUESTION going unanswered, Mr. Fox slipped onto the organ bench to conduct me on an exploratory tour of the instrument's 125 stops. He sounded, one by one, the five manuals: that of the Great Organ ("the backbone of the instrument," an Aeolian-Skinner official has called it), whose pipes occupy the center of the gilt-screened platform reaching back from the stage; the Positiv, a smaller division with pipes stationed in a reflecting box atop a 9-foot column on the platform (the distance between the Great and Positiv pipes being historically correct for the performance of works in which the theme is stated on one and answered on the other); the Swell division, containing brilliant and rather trumpetlike reed stops particularly appropriate for French literature; the Choir, with reed tones of orchestral quality, and flute and string stops designed for vocal accompaniment; and the Bombarde division, consisting of a large family of powerful trumpet-toned stops especially useful in works demanding great dynamic range. Last of all came the Pedal stops, adding tremendous weight to the low end of the frequency spectrum. The Pedal includes two 32-foot stops with low notes of 16 cycles per second—an octave below the reach of the lowest instrument in the orchestra.

"There has been much criticism of the lack of low frequency response in Philharmonic Hall," Mr. Fox commented. (This problem had proved particularly acute for the organ builders because the ceiling of the hall is suspended on springs to absorb the vibrations of airplane noise; unfortunately, it also absorbed with equal efficiency the tones of the organ's 32-foot pipes.) "To compensate for weakness at the low end," Virgil Fox explained, "Joseph Whiteford, who is tonal director of Aeolian-Skinner, had to 'beef up' the 32-foot stops after the organ was installed by increasing the size of the blowers. Now those pipes really stand up and speak!" Mr. Fox made his point by producing with his feet a massive fugue subject.

"Another point to note about this organ," he continued, as the thunder died away, "is that it uses very low wind pressure—only three inches, as organ builders measure it. There was low pressure in Bach's day, but after that a general move to high pressures; the Philharmonic Convention Hall organ has fifty inches, for instance, and most cinema organs take high pressure. Now the pendulum is swinging back again. Builders have developed a way of cutting the lip of the modern pipe so that it responds to low pressure. The tone has greater intensity, a more beautiful, alive, bright fiery sound. Of course, I'm not disparaging the older European organs. Many of them are thrilling tonally, though mechanically some of them respond like Mack trucks. I played an organ at Lübeck that needed two men to pull the stops.

"But there is a vogue of organ building *and* playing today that is just as unhealthy as it can be," Mr. Fox went on with considerable vehemence. "It aims at imitating the limitations of the organs of two hundred years ago—trying to re-create the sounds of Couperin at Saint-Gervais, for example. (A terrible sound. How could anybody have said his prayers?) The Baroque Boys don't believe, generally, in repeating a phrase more softly than they played it the first time, or in using the swell pedal. They tend to play monotonously. If pianists did what the baroquists do—if they tried to give a recital on a piano like Beethoven's —they'd be hissed off the stage. Bach himself wasn't a colorless organist. He resigned a church post once because they wouldn't let him use the cymbelstern [a tinkling, bell-like device] in his chorale setting of Luther's *Rejoice, Beloved Christians.* He wanted the cymbelstern to epitomize rejoicing.

"When I was a student, each of my teachers said to me, 'My dear boy, this is the *only* way to play the organ.' And they all disagreed. Finally I went to study with Wilhelm Middelschulte, the famous Bach performer who taught in this country for many years. On the first day he said: 'The organ is the most mechanical of instruments. If you can get beyond the mechanics and reach the hearts of people, you will accomplish what few organists have been able to.' That has been my credo."

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