

### **Some considerations on the great organ of the cathedral of Saint-Denis (1841- opus 10)**

On September 21, 1841, the inauguration of the great organ of the royal basilica of Saint-Denis did not create the shock that Aristide Cavaillé-Coll had hoped for. He had sent letters to the most eminent personalities, to journalists and to music lovers who had come in great numbers to invite them to this event. At noon, the members of the commission appointed by the minister arrived in the royal church to examine the instrument. They noted the exceptional qualities of the work of art created by the Cavaillé-Coll family, notably the winding and the simplicity of the mechanism. They will specify their findings and opinions in their report. But a little later, the presentation of the organ to the public that was planned at the time was cut short. The canons of Saint-Denis entered the choir to intone interminable vespers that lasted 3 hours or 5 quarters of an hour, according to witnesses. The verses chanted by the canons were answered by the organ. But Charles Simon, the titular organist, was absent from the ceremony. He left the keyboards to an organist of little stature, who discouraged the public by the flatness of his improvisations.

It was not until a small concert in October with the finest organists of the time: François Benoist from the Conservatoire, Félix Danjou, titular organist at Notre-Dame de Paris, Louis-Nicolas Séjan, titular organist at Saint-Sulpice, and Alexandre Boëly, composer and titular organist at Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois, that the praise poured in for ACC's major work.

Starting from a still very classical project (for example, the initial absence of the Voix célestes and the Gambe au Récit added by Mutin in 1901), Cavaillé-Coll ended up with an unprecedented instrument for the Basilica of Saint-Denis, thanks in particular to the installation of the first Barker machine in the world on the main keyboard. Other innovations included the adoption of different pressures, the use of double-layered windchests (reed calls) and the design of so-called "harmonic" pipes.

The famous harmonic flutes, whose intensity and softness were the trademark of the organ builder, are well represented.

Three are placed in the Positif : 8' harmonic flute, 4' octave flute and 2' harmonic flageolet

Two are placed in the Grand-Orgue/Bombarde: 8' harmonic flute and 4' octave flute

Two are placed in the Récit: 8' harmonic flute and 4' harmonic octave flute

That is to say a total of seven harmonic backgrounds to which must be added the four open flutes of the pedalboard, including the unique 32' flute, and two other non-harmonic flutes in the Positif and in the Bombarde keyboard (second barker keyboard).

This remarkable instrument - it was the first large organ built by Cavaillé-Coll - suffers from two major drawbacks: its 25-note pedalboard and its great fragility. Moreover, three manuals are limited to 54 notes, the copulas to the Récit-GO and Positif-GO couplings, but not to the Récit-Positif, the tirasses (pedal couplers) to the Récit and GO, but not to the Positif, which obliges to acrobatics with the Tirasse GO and the coupling GO-POS with a mute GO... The expression box is controlled by a spoon, without intermediate positions.

Thus, from 1841 to 1860, in spite of careful care, the 1855 overhaul of the organ and some replacement of stops, the instrument experienced long periods of silence. Cavaillé-Coll abandoned the maintenance in 1860 and the instrument, which he considered a prototype, was struck from his reference lists.

We had to wait for the overhaul carried out by Danion-Gonzalez and Jean-Loup Boisseau and Bernard Cattiaux (harmony) in 1987 to hear again an instrument that had been silent for more than ten years.

On this occasion, the Mutin stops were replaced by new ones in order to restore the composition of 1855, the date of Cavaillé-Coll's overhaul. The extension of the pedalboard from C to C is however preserved, and a Barker machine added to it.

Pierre Pincemaille, the incumbent of this instrument was appointed by competition in 1987: he did not little to make it an organ of world renown until his death in January 2018.