The Organ of the Maurice Ravel Auditorium
In Lyon, France

by
Tom Nichol

Lyon, in east-central France, contains, among its many artistic treasures, an almost forgotten, yet quite significant, musical instrument—namely, the organ of the Maurice Ravel Auditorium. This article will give a brief history of this marvelous instrument, along with its current and original specifications.

For the Paris World Exposition of 1878, the renowned French organ builder, Aristide Cavaillé-Coll, was commissioned to build a concert organ for the new Trocadéro concert hall, under the supervision of renowned organist and composer Alexandre Guilmant. Because he could not build the organ from scratch in the short time allowed by the contract, he was compelled to use an uncompleted three-manual organ originally intended for the Church of Notre Dame in Auteuil, a district in the northwestern area of Paris, as the basis for the new instrument. A fourth manual and more pedal stops were added. The now-completed instrument was enclosed in what by modern standards would be an incredibly ugly case in imitation Classical style, including towers and turrets. The new organ was inaugurated by a roster of France’s greatest organists, including not only Guilmant, but also César Franck, who wrote his “Three Pieces for Organ,” and particularly the “Pièce héroïque,” especially for the occasion. In addition, Guilmant performed a series of solo recitals on the Trocadéro organ, which brought his enormous talent to the notice of an international public.

Despite this notoriety, however, it soon became apparent that the acoustics of the Trocadéro were far from perfect, particularly where the organ was concerned. Numerous reports, articles, and reviews complained, not only of dry overall acoustics but especially of a mysterious echo, which could neither be traced nor corrected. Thus, it was in fact a relief to organ devotees when the government of the City
of Paris decided to tear down the Trocadéro in 1937 to make way for a new concert hall for the Paris World’s Fair of 1939, to be known as the “Palais de Chaillot.” The organ was carefully dismantled and stored away while the building’s architects pondered how to reinstall it in such a way as to show it off to best advantage in concerts, yet not have it be in the way when the Auditorium was used for other purposes.

The solution they decided upon was an ingenious one: The organ and its mechanism was mounted on a movable iron platform, which, in turn, was mounted on rails, permitting the 70-metric-ton organ to be brought forward for solo performances, moved part-way back for use with other instruments, or to be moved all the way against the back wall when it was not to be used at all. The modern, movable console was connected to the organ by a huge, flexible conduit. This unusual placement made it possible to arrange organ and instruments to the best musical and acoustical advantage, eliminating problems of ensemble and balance which so often plague such performances.

Despite these advantages, however, two major flies in the ointment, so to speak, soon made their presence known. First, the acoustics were even drier than those of the old Trocadéro. Second, and much more serious to many organ lovers, the organ had been rebuilt and substantially altered by the firm of V. and F. Gonzalez, who were notoriously unsympathetic to the organs of Cavaillé-Coll. The sound that resulted was changed from warmly Romantic to a screaming neo-Baroque in character. In spite of this, however, the legendary American organ virtuoso Virgil Fox recorded Belgian composer Joseph Jongen’s “Symphonie Concertante,” opus 78, on this instrument in 1959, with the celebrated Paris Opera Orchestra, conducted by Georges Prêtre, to worldwide acclaim.

Just 18 years later, however, in 1977, the Paris city government decided to tear down the Palais de Chaillot, replacing it with a parking garage. Once again, the organ was carefully removed and placed in storage, while a new home was sought in which to place it. Happily, the city government of Lyon purchased the organ, installing it in the then new Maurice Ravel Auditorium. The firm of Danion-Gonzalez, successors to the Victor and Francois Gonzalez team, was selected to perform the installation. Due to space limitations, several controversial changes were made this time around. The swell box was removed from the Positif division, the lowest 12 pipes of the 32-foot Principal in the Pedal division were replaced with stopped pipes, and all of the wooden pipes were painted silver! Finally, the organ was furnished with a new, portable console, equipped with a modern solid-state combination action. The again-revised instrument was the subject of several excellent recordings by the late Professor Patrice Caire, of the Lyon Conservatoire, none of which, sadly, are now available.

After Professor Caire’s untimely death in 1992 at the age of 43, the organ fell into a period of disuse and decline, which lasted until 2010, when the local organ building firm of Aubertin was chosen to rebuild and restore the organ, under the direction of organist Michel Gaillard. Once again, several changes were made. The Solo division was revised with the addition of a 9-rank mixture stop, as well as two “en chamade” trumpets named “Gaillardes,” after the new designer. Also, the original 32-foot Contra Bombarde in the Pedal was replaced with a lighter-sounding 32-foot Contre Basson. The manual console was also updated with a new and larger combination action. The organ was completed and re-inaugurated in 2013 and continues in active use under Monsieur Gaillard’s enthusiastic direction. Sadly, however, this magnificent and historic instrument has been all but ignored by recording companies, despite its historic and musical significance. Hopefully, some recording company will realize the enormous capabilities and potential of this magnificent instrument, and bring it back before the musical public through at least one new recording, or even a video or two!
The specification as of 2013 is given below. Note: For the benefit of those who do not read or speak French, I have reorganized this specification in conformity with the standards of the American Guild of Organists. The original compass of 56 manual and 30 pedal keys was expanded to 61/32 when González rebuilt the organ in 1939 for the now-defunct Palais de Chaillot.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I. Grand Orgue (Great)</th>
<th>II. Positif (Crowning division, located at the top of the organ, unenclosed)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bourdon 32</td>
<td>Portunal 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montre 16</td>
<td>Principal 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montre 8 (II below C)</td>
<td>Bourdon 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violoncelle 8</td>
<td>Viole d’amour 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flute harmonique 8</td>
<td>Suavial 8 (celeste)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bourdon 8</td>
<td>Flute 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grosse Quinte 5-1/3</td>
<td>Prestant 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flute a bec 4</td>
<td>Quinte 2-2/3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prestant 4</td>
<td>Doublette 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grosse Tierce 3-1/5</td>
<td>Tierce 1-3/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cornet V</td>
<td>Larigot 1-1/3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourniture II</td>
<td>Plein-jeu V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plein-jeu IV</td>
<td>Fagott 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cymbale IV</td>
<td>Trompette 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bombarde 16</td>
<td>Cromorne 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trompette 8</td>
<td>Dulciane 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clairon 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
III. Récit Expressif (Swell)
Quintaton 16
Flute harmonique 8
Cor de nuit 8
Gambe 8
Voix celeste 8
Aeoline 8
Flute 4
Octavin 2
Nasard conique 2-2/3
Tierce conique 1-3/5
Septieme 1-1/7
Piccolo 1
Plein-jeu V
Bombarde 16
Trompette 8
Basson-Hautbois 8
Voix humaine 8
Clairon 4

IV. Solo (Blockwerk/Trompeteria)
(enclosed except where noted)
Bourdon 16
Flute 8
Diapason 8 (II ranks)
Principal 4
Progression IX
Cornet V
Tuba Magna 16
Trompette 8
Clarinette 8
Clairon 4
Gaillarde 8 (en chamade—unenclosed)
Gaillarde 4 (en chamade—unenclosed)

Pedal
Principal 32 (lowest 12 notes stopped)
Flute 16
Contrebasse 16
Soubasse 16
Principal 8
Flute 8
Bourdon 8
Octave 4
Flute 4
Mixture V
Contrebasson 32
Ophicleide 16
Posaune 16
Buzene 8
Trompette 8
Clairon 4
Basson 4

Couplers and Accessories
Manual Couplers: II/I, III/I, IV/I; III/II, IV/II; IV/III.
Pedal Couplers: Grand-Orgue/Pedal, Positif/Pedal,
Recit/Pedal, Solo/Pedal.
Mixture Ventils: Grand-Orgue, Positif, Recit, Solo.
Reed Ventils: Grand-Orgue, Positif, Recit, Solo,
Pedale.
Tremulant
Cancels for each division
General cancel
Tutti for each division
Tutti I (plein-jeu)
Tutti II (Full Organ)
Expression pedals for Recit and Solo divisions
Crescendo pedal
Electro-pneumatic playing action
Electronic combination action with 6,750 available
combinations (450 x 15 memory levels)
Sequencer

Total of 82 stops, 119 ranks, approximately 6,500
pipes
The fountains and exterior of The Trocadéro
The interior of the concert hall with organ
Closer view of the organ case

XII. Le Palais du Trocadéro
La Salle des Fêtes

Cavaillé-Coll Organ
Inaugurated: Alexandre Guilmant,
7 August 1878. Played by
César Franck, 1 October 1878.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I. GRAND-ORGUE</th>
<th>III. RÉCIT</th>
<th>II. POSITIF</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16 Montre</td>
<td>16 Quintaton</td>
<td>16 Bourdon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 Bourdon</td>
<td>8 Flûte harmonique</td>
<td>8 Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Montre</td>
<td>8 Cor-de-nuit</td>
<td>8 Flûte harmonique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Flûte harmonique</td>
<td>8 Viole de gambe</td>
<td>8 Salicional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Bourdon</td>
<td>8 Voix céleste</td>
<td>8 Unda maris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Violoncelle</td>
<td>4 Flûte octaviane</td>
<td>4 Flûte octaviane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Pristent</td>
<td>2 Quinte</td>
<td>2 Quinte*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Flûte douce</td>
<td>2 Octavin*</td>
<td>2 Doublette</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V Dessus de Cornet*</td>
<td>16 Basson*</td>
<td>16 Basson*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V Plein jeu harmonique*</td>
<td>8 Trompette*</td>
<td>8 Trompette*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 Bombarde*</td>
<td>8 Basson-hautbois</td>
<td>8 Cromorne*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Trompette*</td>
<td>8 Voix humaine</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Clairon*</td>
<td>4 Clairon harmonique*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This specification for the original Cavaillé-Coll organ is taken from *Toward an Authentic Interpretation of the Organ Works of César Franck*, by Rollin Smith, published by Pendragon Press, 1983.
Recordings and Video

There are few recordings of the organ in its current form, but for those interested in what is available to read and hear online, I offer these links for your enjoyment. All of them were active in May of 2016.

A slideshow with performance of the Dubois Toccata in G played by Patrice Caire from 1977
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rAmkAi8WnC0

Inside of the Ravel Auditorium and performance of the Duruflé Toccata played by Aymeric Lefevre
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wc6yGGFRKZ8

An audio recording of Saint-Saëns Symphony No. 3 played by Vincent Warnier and conducted by Leonard Slatkin released in 2015
  - A review by “The Classical Reviewer”
  - A review by John Sunier

A concert of the above program was reviewed by Colin Anderson in 2013
http://www.classicalsource.com/db_control/db_concert_review.php?id=11565

There is an excerpt from the concert from Medici Television
http://www.medici.tv/#!/leonard-slatkin-orchestre-national-de-lyon-organ-concert-poulenc-saint-saens

A short video of the chambers and pipes in French
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OVwgv_Za12U

Daniel Roth played a recital on Sunday, May 22, 2015

French Wikipedia contains much information and includes a listing of recordings
https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orgue_de_l%27Auditorium_Maurice-Ravel

(some editing and research by D. John Apple, michaelsmusicservice.com)