# The Organ of the Maurice Ravel Auditorium In Lyon, France

## by Tom Nichol



**L**yon, 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 4 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 Gonzalez rebuilt the organ in 1939 for the now-defunct Palais de Chaillot.



## Cavaillé-Coll (1878), Gonzalez (1939), Danion-Gonzalez (1977), Aubertin (2010)

### I. Grand Orgue (Great)

Bourdon 32

Montre 16

Montre 8 (II below C)

Violoncelle 8

Flute harmonique 8

Bourdon 8

Grosse Quinte 5-1/3

Flute a bec 4 Prestant 4

Grosse Tierce 3-1/5

Cornet V
Fourniture II
Plein-jeu IV
Cymbale IV
Bombarde 16
Trompette 8
Clairon 4

## II. Positif (Crowning division, located at the top of the organ, unenclosed)

Portunal 16

Principal 8

Bourdon 8

Viole d'amour 8

Suavial 8 (celeste)

Flute 4

Prestant 4

Quinte 2-2/3

Doublette 2

Tierce 1-3/5

Larigot 1-1/3

Plein-jeu V

Fagott 16

Trompette 8

Cromorne 8

Dulciane 8

## 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

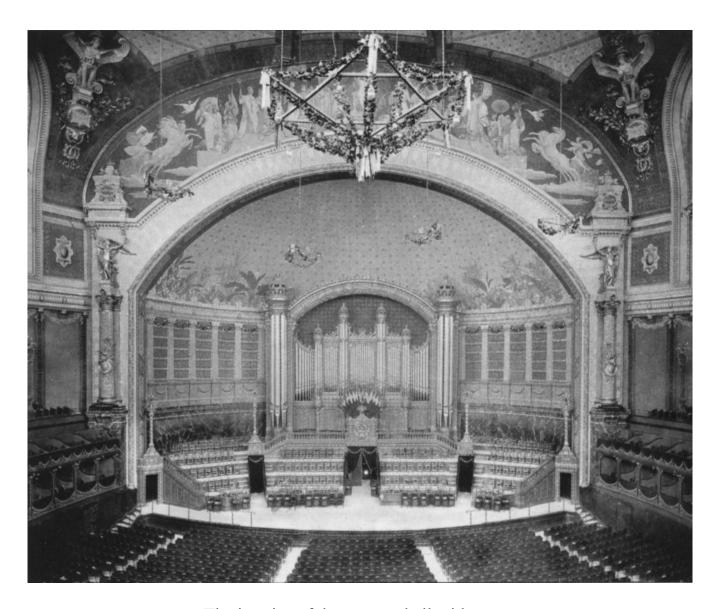
combinations (450 x 15 memory levels)

Sequencer

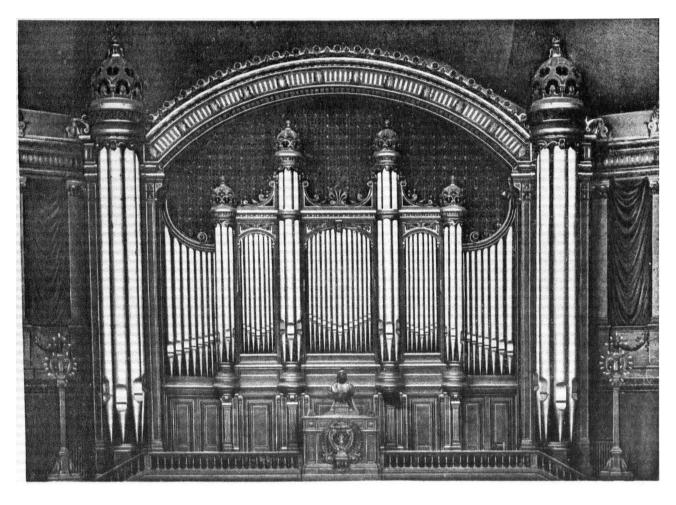
Total of 82 stops, 119 ranks, approximately 6, 500 pipes



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. Compass: Manuals, 56 notes: "C - "G

Pedal, 30 notes: ,,C - 'F

#### I. GRAND-ORGUE

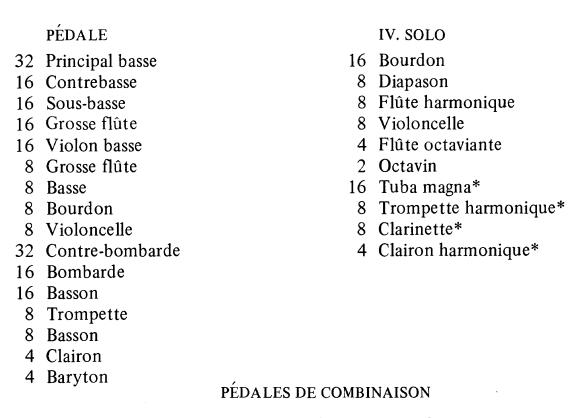
- 16 Montre
- 16 Bourdon
- 8 Montre
- 8 Flûte harmonique
- 8 Bourdon
- 8 Violoncelle
- 4 Prestant
- 4 Flûte douce
- V Dessus de Cornet\*
- V Plein jeu harmonique\*
- 16 Bombarde\*
- 8 Trompette\*
- 4 Clairon\*

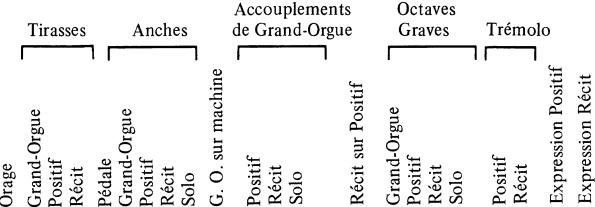
#### III. RÉCIT

- 16 Quintaton
- 8 Flûte harmonique
- 8 Cor-de-nuit
- 8 Viole de gambe
- 8 Voix céleste
- 4 Flûte octaviante
- 2<sup>2</sup> Quinte
  - 2 Octavin\*
- 16 Basson\*
- 8 Trompette\*
- 8 Basson-hautbois
- 8 Voix humaine
- 4 Clairon harmonique\*

#### II. POSITIF

- 16 Bourdon
- 8 Principal
- 8 Flûte harmonique
- 8 Salicional
- 8 Unda maris
- 4 Flûte octaviante
- 2 <sup>2</sup> Quinte\*
- 2 Doublette
- 16 Basson\*
- 8 Trompette\*
- 8 Cromorne\*





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 <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rAmkAi8WnC0">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rAmkAi8WnC0</a>

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

An audio recording of Saint-Saëns Symphony No. 3 played by Vincent Warnier and conducted by Leonard Slatkin released in 2015

- Blu-ray Audio: <a href="http://www.naxos.com/catalogue/item.asp?item\_code=NBD0045">http://www.naxos.com/catalogue/item.asp?item\_code=NBD0045</a>
- CD: http://www.naxos.com/catalogue/item.asp?item\_code=8.573331
- A review by "The Classical Reviewer" http://theclassicalreviewer.blogspot.com/2015/02/a-new-release-from-naxos-with-organist.html
- A review by John Sunier <a href="http://www.audaud.com/saint-saens-danse-macabre-cypres-et-lauriers-symphony-no-3-in-c-minor-organ-vincent-warnier-organ-orch-national-de-lyon-leonard-slatkin-naxos-pure-audio-blu-ray/">http://www.audaud.com/saint-saens-danse-macabre-cypres-et-lauriers-symphony-no-3-in-c-minor-organ-vincent-warnier-organ-orch-national-de-lyon-leonard-slatkin-naxos-pure-audio-blu-ray/</a>

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 <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OVwgv-Za12U">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OVwgv-Za12U</a>

Daniel Roth played a recital on Sunday, May 22, 2015 http://www.auditorium-lyon.com/Programmation-15-16/Orgue/Recitals-orgue/Recital-Daniel-Roth

French Wikipedia contains much information and includes a listing of recordings <a href="https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orgue\_de\_l'Auditorium\_Maurice-Ravel">https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orgue\_de\_l'Auditorium\_Maurice-Ravel</a>

(some editing and research by D. John Apple, <u>michaelsmusicservice.com</u>)