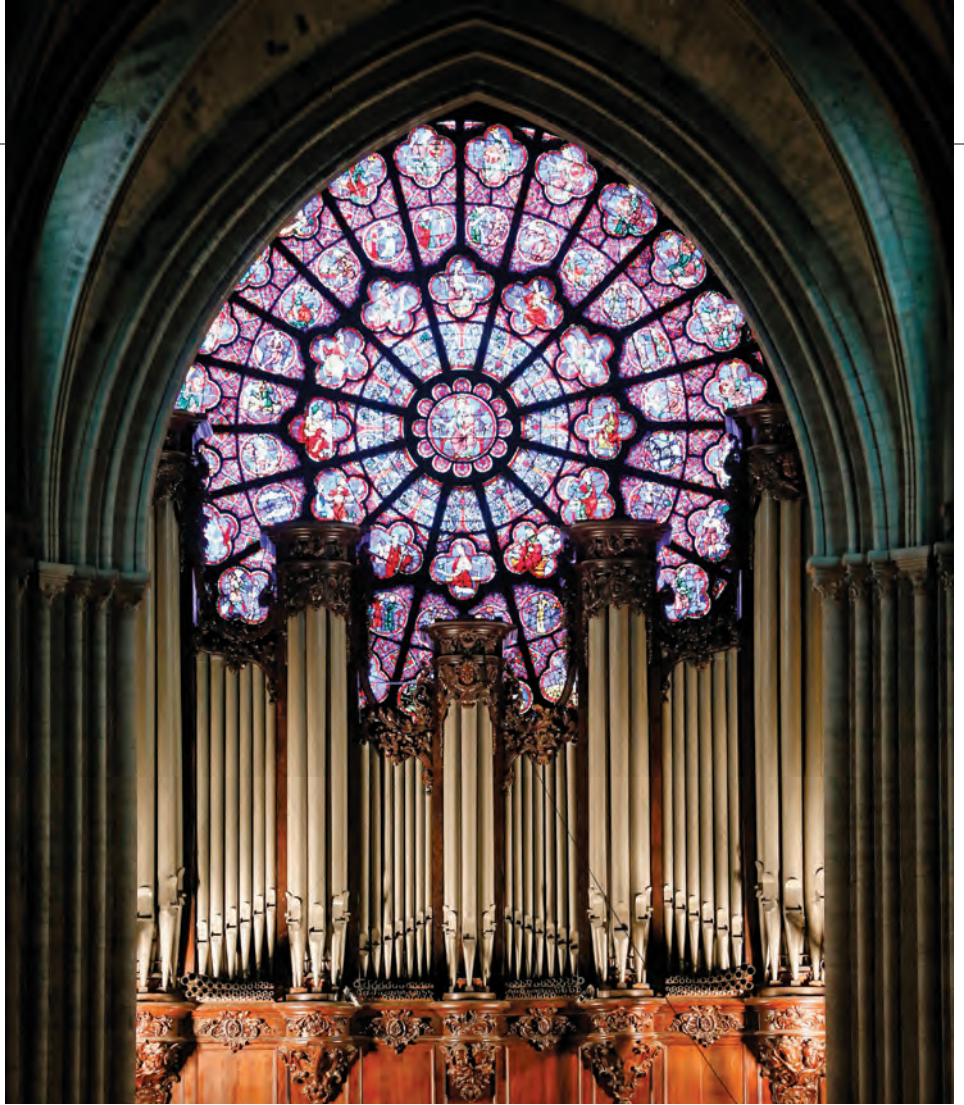


The grand organ of Notre Dame de Paris
PHOTO: PATRICK KOVARIK/GETTY IMAGES



A Vital Organ

A historic and irreplaceable instrument, nearly lost forever, is saved—and organists breathe profound relief.

BY ALAN MORRISON

One of the most iconic pipe organs in the world towers majestically in the rear gallery of Notre Dame de Paris. Its sound is instantly recognizable.

Notre Dame de Paris stands as a magnificent structure: an 850-year-old cultural treasure that represents a spiritual mecca while housing priceless, historically significant works of art. One of the most iconic pipe organs in the world towers majestically in the rear gallery. While there have been several organs in this noble setting over many centuries, the current instrument contains pipework mostly from the French Classical period (early to mid-1700s) and from the French master organ builder Aristide Cavaillé-Coll, who greatly enlarged the instrument in the 19th century. In this form it was dedicated in 1868.

In every instrument he built, Cavaillé-Coll introduced tonal and mechanical elements that changed the course of organ composition from the late 1800s through the early 1900s. He added orchestral stops such as the *flûte harmonique* (large-scaled flute) and clarinets to the rich tonal palette already available, and pedal ventilators that allowed the organist to make changes to the sound without requiring the aid of a registrant. The great organ symphonies by Charles Marie Widor and Louis Vierne, among others—still widely played today—were inspired by these innovations. The numerous surviving instruments by this master builder are in varying states of preservation; the most authentic in Paris is at the church of St. Sulpice.

The grand organ of Notre Dame de Paris is instantly recognizable upon hearing the sheer brilliance of the *tutti*, or full organ. Over the years the console has been replaced, new stops have been added, and tonal adjustments have been made to the older pipework, but the changes in no way diminish the experience of playing this instrument.

HANDS-ON EXPERIENCE

Having graduated from Curtis in organ in 1991 and in accompanying in 1993, I returned to teach organ in 2002 and quickly realized that I could only explain so much during a lesson in Field Concert Hall about the instruments designed to play specific repertoire, or the repertoire that grew from organ-building innovations such as Cavallé-Coll's. The only way for the student to be fully informed interpretively was to play the actual instruments for which the music was written.

So we began taking study trips to encounter these organs. When they play them, my students in many cases are not only touching, playing, and feeling the same keyboards that the composers knew so well, but hearing the same sounds and sharing the same visual experience. This instantly helps dictate appropriate tempo, articulation, and technical approach to the keyboards.

The first time the Curtis organ studio visited Notre Dame together, we were met by Olivier Latry, titular organist of Notre Dame, outside the side tower. There we climbed countless stairs up a winding passageway to the rear gallery. Mr. Latry proceeded to play crashing chords on the tutti and the students scattered wildly, like mice, to the four corners of the balcony, covering their ears.

One of my strongest memories from that trip in 2007 was my student Ahreum Han playing Louis Vierne's Symphony No. 3 in its entirety. This monumental work was written at Notre Dame. Not only that, she was sitting on the same bench Vierne was playing from when he collapsed and died during a recital. Tears streamed down her cheeks when she finished. It suddenly all made sense to her and it was the most valuable experience she'd had up to that point.

Equally valuable is watching and listening to the titular organists improvise during a service. On our most recent study trip in May 2018, my students were invited to the organ loft, where they could experience the creative improvisations during a mass. Depending on mood and text, the organist Vincent Dubois, co-titular organist of Notre Dame, launched into breathtaking spontaneous creations at the appropriate times, using not only unique harmonic language but matching it with the vast tonal palette of the organ. From slow and somber to fast and furious, this extraordinary art form is still at the forefront of the French tradition of organ playing—and my students were able to witness it firsthand.

NARROW ESCAPE

When the news broke of the great fire at Notre Dame de Paris, my heart stopped. I was in shock, as was everyone who saw the footage. My first thought was of the significant musical history of the Notre Dame school of polyphony, which I learned as a Curtis student from Dr. Ford Lallerstedt. Léonin and Pérotin were two of the school's pioneering composers at Notre Dame from the mid-12th to mid-13th centuries—just as this monumental cathedral was first being planned and built—who changed the course of composition forever in much the same way as Notre Dame itself changed the course of architecture.

Then it hit me that this structure has stood the test of time, surviving wars and other violence through the centuries since. And to see it in flames was surreal. My last thought was that my solo recital at Notre Dame de Paris, scheduled for the evening of August 20, would not be happening—a very insignificant event in the grand scheme of the devastation from this fire. I had just sent in my proposed program the night before the news broke, and had been so excited to be featured on Notre Dame's prestigious series, performing on this famous instrument.

But the silver lining came a few days later, with the news that the grand organ had indeed survived. While it will need to be fully cleaned up—a major task given the amount of soot and some water damage—it will continue to sing and provide music for years to come when the cathedral is reopened. Until then, I am grateful for the opportunities my students have had to hear and play what is perhaps the most famous organ in the world. ♦

Alan Morrison holds the Haas Charitable Trust Chair in Organ Studies at Curtis.

Upon returning to Curtis to teach organ, I quickly realized that the only way for students to be fully informed interpretively was to play the actual instruments for which the music was written.



Top: A few ranks of the Notre Dame de Paris organ
PHOTO: STEPHANE DE SAKUTIN/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Above: A snapshot of Curtis students at Notre Dame de Paris in 2018: (l. to r.) Monica Czausz, Clara Gerdes, Bryan Dunnewald, and Adrian Binkley.
PHOTO: ALAN MORRISON