ARISTIDE CAVAILLÉ-COLL: A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

by MICHAŁ SZOSTAK

INTRODUCTION
2019 WAS THE 120TH ANNIVERSARY of the death of the father of symphonic organs, Aristide Cavaillé-Coll. It is worth recalling this prominent figure who in the nineteenth century changed the sound of French instruments and thus influenced organ building in Europe and many corners of the world, radiating to the present day.

Aristide Cavaillé-Coll descended from multiple generations of organ builders with family roots in both southern France and in Spain, from which his two-part surname derives. Aristide’s great-grandfather Gabriel Cavaillé (1699–1745) was a weaver in the Gaillac region (Tarn) in southern France. The first organ builder in the family was Gabriel’s brother Joseph Cavaillé (1700–1767), a disciple of the organ builder Isnard and like Isnard a member of a Toulouse religious order. Joseph trained his orphaned nephew (Gabriel’s son) Jean-Pierre Cavaillé (1743–1809) and together they built many organs in the south of France and in the Catalonian region of Spain. In 1767 Jean-Pierre married Maria-Francesca Coll, a young woman from Barcelona (daughter of a weaver and sailmaker). From the marriage of Jean-Pierre Cavaillé and Maria-Francesca Coll, Aristide’s father Dominique-Hyacinthe Cavaillé-Coll (1771–1862), who would also become an organ builder, was born. In 1810, at the age of 39, Dominique-Hyacinthe Cavaillé-

Notes

Diagram of St-Denis organ façade from Adrien La Fage, Orgue de l’église royale de Saint-Denis construit par MM. Cavaillé-Coll père et fils: rapport fait à la société libre des beaux arts (Paris, 1845).
Coll married 22-year-old Jeanne Autard (1788-1864), with whom he’d had an illegitimate son, Vincent, in 1808. Less than a year after the marriage, Vincent’s brother Aristide was born on February 3, 1811 in Montpellier.  

We should also mention one of Aristide’s uncles, Martin Cavaillé (1785-1862), son of Jean-Pierre Cavaillé and his second wife, Marguerite Fabry from St-Thibéry, for Martin was also an organ builder. Descendants of Martin Cavaillé for some time represented the already-famous Aristide and Vincent Cavaillé-Coll in minor organs constructed in the south of France.

---

YOUTH

Due to events following the French Revolution, the young Aristide with his parents and brother had to change place of residence several times, traveling between France and Spain, which significantly worsened their financial situation. Eventually, in 1827, Dominique Cavaillé-Coll settled in Toulouse, where supported by his sons he continued his organ building activity. Toulouse, the largest city in the region, allowed then 16-year-old Aristide to develop under the wings of eminent architects, technicians, mathematicians, and physicists. These contacts, combined with Aristide’s technical capabilities, resulted in his presentation to Charles Mallet (1766-1853), well-known engineer and regional inspector of roads and bridges. It was Mallet who introduced Aristide’s first invention, a modernized circular saw, to the Société d’Encouragement à l’Industrie Nationale, where it was recognized as an important technical innovation.  

It allowed for precise cutting of wood (often exotic and expensive), which was indispensable in the construction of precise mechanisms in musical instruments. Though the design was never patented, this recognition helped young Aristide start an independent career, and gave him entry to other scientific institutions and recognition from other influential scientists and engineers.

The second important fruit of Aristide’s creativity was an aerophonic keyboard instrument with variable dynamics—a completely new musical instrument, and a first step along the way that would lead to creating symphonic organs. (Small parts of this instrument were produced thanks to Aristide’s invention of the modernized circular saw.) Constructed in collaboration

---

3 Ibid. For the day of Aristide Cavaillé-Coll’s birth, some sources also provide Feb 2, 1811, as in Marie-Pierre Hamel, Nouveau manuel complet du facteur d’orgues (Paris: L. Mulo, 1903), 401. Others give Feb. 4, 1811, as in Fenner Douglass, Cavaillé-Coll and the French Romantic Tradition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 9.

with Aristide’s father and brother, the instrument was completed in 1832 and named the poikilorgue (orgue expressif).\(^5\)

On the musical side, the poikilorgue was supported by Rossini (1792–1868) who, during a concert tour to Toulouse in 1832 visited the Cavaillé-Colls and, delighted with the expressive capabilities of the instrument, persuaded Aristide to present it in the French capital city. The cholera epidemic then raging in Paris obstructed initial plans to visit and promote the instrument in Paris salons. But good relations between the Cavaillé-Colls and art critic and collector Adolph Thiers (1797–1877), then France’s Minister of the Interior, led in 1833 to the minister creating a special commission in Paris to examine the possibilities of the poikilorgue.\(^6\) This development ultimately determined Dominique Cavaillé-Coll’s decision to move the entire family and organ-building company to Paris.

**DEVELOPMENT**

In Paris, Aristide, 22, using references he’d received in Toulouse, had the opportunity to meet personally the greatest minds in technology of the time. Further support came from Rossini, who visited the assembly hall of the Cavaillé-Coll workshop in Paris to hear organ recitals on several occasions. Rossini’s presence—always recorded by the press—gradually advanced the Cavaillé-Coll position in the Parisian organ world.\(^7\) Although Aristide’s creativity and vision for organ building began to dominate in their company, the idea of family, always headed by Dominique Cavaillé-Coll, remained present in their undertakings.

That same year, in 1833, a carefully organized combination of events led the company to victory in the competition for building a great organ for the abbey church of St-Denis, located in the city of St-Denis (now a northern suburb of Paris). It would be more than seven years before the organ could be finished.\(^8\) Meanwhile, Aristide worked on his next refinement in search of expressivity. In 1839, at one of Paris’s then-fashionable industrial exhibitions, the Cavaillé-Coll company presented an instrument equipped with innovative wind chests consisting of two or three sections differentiated in terms of air pressure.\(^9\) Varying wind pressure was then incorporated into the proposal for the organ for St-Denis. Also in that instrument, Cavaillé-Coll used, for the first time anywhere, the so-called pneumatic lever, creation of the English inventor and organ builder Charles Barker (1805–1879).\(^10\) Furthering his prominence, in 1840 Aristide presented before the Académie des Sciences his paper “Etudes expérimentales sur les tuyaux d’orgues.” Following completion of the organ for St-Denis in 1841, the name Cavaillé-Coll became widely known and valued in the organ industry.\(^11\) As one of the two largest organ builders in Paris—alongside Daublaine-Callinet—Cavaillé-Coll exhibited the St-Denis organ at the 1844 Paris industrial exhibition.\(^12\)

In 1844, Cavaillé-Coll travelled around Europe to learn about the achievements of leading organ builders. During his visit to England, he was impressed by English high-pressure stops, including the English Tuba, which he adopted into his work. During his visit to Germany he visited the organ

\(^{5}\) Ibid.

\(^{6}\) Ibid.

\(^{7}\) Orpha Ochse Organists and Organ Playing in Nineteenth-Century France and Belgium (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 38.

\(^{8}\) Douglass, 17.


\(^{10}\) Barker had invented the lever in 1830 in England; however, it was not met with favour by the English organ builder he approached. Undeterred, he came to France in 1837 where he presented his invention to Aristide Cavaillé-Coll and where he patented the invention in 1839. (a) Douglas E. Bush and Richard Kassel, eds., The Organ: An Encyclopedia. Series: Encyclopedia of Keyboard Instruments (New York: Routledge, 2006), s.v. Barker, Charles Spackman; (b) T. W. Hinton, “The Inventor of the Pneumatic Action,” The Etude 39/9 (1921): 608. For Barker to have come directly to Cavaillé-Coll testifies that the young Cavaillé-Coll must have been a fairly familiar figure in the organ world.


\(^{12}\) Ochse, 38.
builder Eberhard Friedrich Walcker (1794–1872) in Ludwigsburg, and Walcker’s instrument in the Paulskirche of Frankfurt am Main. He is also known to have visited Brno, Zurich, Stuttgart, Hamburg, Haarlem, Rotterdam, Fribourg, Winterthur, Utrecht, Cologne, and London.17 English and Prussian organ builders visited him in Paris. Henry Willis (1821–1901), known as “Father Willis,” paid a return visit to Cavaillé-Coll at the turn of 1848–1849 and expressed his satisfaction with the influence of English construction upon French instruments.18

The revolution of 1848 caused the Cavaillé-Coll company to suspend business for six months.15 At the end of 1849, the father and sons company Dominique Cavaillé-Coll Père et Fils was dissolved, the company Cavaillé-Coll Fils taking its place. The new French ruler Napoleon III entrusted Cavaillé-Coll with the reconstruction of a number of important cathedral organs.16

**MATURITY**

In 1854, at the age of 43, Aristide married 26-year-old Adèle Blanc and gained direct access to the administrative files of the French Republic, professionally occupied by his brother-in-law Hippolyte Blanc. In 1855, Aristide appeared at the Exposition Universelle in Paris.17 His marriage had changed the balance of power in the family business. In 1856, a joint-stock company, A. Cavaillé-Coll Fils & Cie., was created. The head of this business, the 45-year-old Aristide, was a loner who wasn’t willing to share his responsibilities. He used his own investment income by taking out loans with friends only. He independently negotiated contracts on instruments, even with bishops and wealthy clients.18

The years 1850–1860 were the most hard-working for the company: on average, twelve instruments were under construction on a yearly basis; about 140 stops and twenty keyboards were produced per month.19 Aristide refined Barker’s pneumatic lever and he invented a system for pneumatic switching of organ stops, individually and in sets (appel d’anches). He installed all his inventions and improvements in a monumental organ (100/5M+P) finished in 1862 in the Parisian church of St.-Sulpice.

After the organ of St-Sulpice, Aristide was looking for another challenge: he wanted to fill, with the sound of one of his organs, Paris’s Notre-Dame Cathedral, in which major religious and national celebrations were held. He believed that the First Cathedral of France should have an organ equal to the one built in the neighbouring church St-Sulpice. Driven by passion for art, inspired by the majestic architecture of the cathedral, and additionally encouraged by a great renovation, he realized his ambitions by installing a monumental instrument (83/5M+P) inaugurated in 1867.20

In 1866–1867, he set up a new workshop with living quarters at Avenue du Maine, nos. 13–15, which—as a building—exists to the present day.21 In October 1868, when he was 57, his wife died. Two years later, the war of 1870 slowed the company’s operations. Beginning about 1872, a tablet with the inscription “A. Cavaillé-

---

14 Ebrect, 17–19.
15 Oehse, 44–45.
17 Oehse, 52.
Coll” appears on the company’s instruments. In 1873, the company built a magnificent instrument (64/4M+P) for the Albert Hall in Sheffield, England.

The great organs in Paris’s St-Sulpice and Notre-Dame, and international fame, led him to submit in 1875 a project for a monumental organ (124/5M+P) for the Basilica of St Peter in Rome. Unfortunately, despite many years of efforts by Cavaillé-Coll and an international group of ambassadors, among whom there were crowned heads, the project was never implemented.  

During the Paris World Exhibition of 1878, for which the beautiful Trocadero Palace had been built, Aristide installed in the Trocadero’s huge concert hall another monumental organ (66/4M+P). For decades following, the most popular organists performed in concert series there. Also at around this time, he opened another workshop on Avenue du Maine. At the peak of 1878, Cavaillé-Coll employed 75 employees.

During the last twenty years of his life (1879–1899), more instruments confirmed that Aristide Cavaillé-Coll had achieved mastery of his style. But at the beginning of 1885 the company began to make significant reductions of employment. The global recession, which in 1885–1888 deepened even more, had reached the Cavaillé-Coll company.

In April 1889, inauguration of another large instrument took place in his home town of Toulouse in the church of St-Sernin; the organ (54/3M+P) was inaugurated by Alexandre Guilmant. Finally, in 1890, Cavaillé-Coll installed a great organ (64/4M+P) in the church of St-Ouen in Rouen, which was inaugurated by Charles-Marie Widor.

In addition to the above-mentioned great organs, each of which made an important contribution to the evolution of the idea of the symphonic organ, Cavaillé-Coll also produced a large number of smaller instruments that also met the symphonic organ’s objectives. At the end of 1889, the total number of Cavaillé-Coll instruments built from scratch was estimated at 479, of which 364 instruments were installed in France and 115 exported elsewhere in the world. In total, Cavaillé-Coll worked on 678 organs.  

LAST YEARS

The organ for St-Ouen was followed by bankruptcy. That same year, due to a ravaging economic crisis, Cavaillé-Coll was forced to close his workshop. In 1891, the company’s building was seized by creditors for the second time, which led to the liquidation of the company in the spring of 1892. In subsequent years, Cavaillé-Coll was professionally active thanks to the patronage of Baron Albert de L’Espée. In 1894, Cavaillé-Coll built an organ (41/3M+P) for the baron’s Parisian residence, and in 1898 another instrument (70/4M+P) for his enormous chateau in the south of France. The second instrument was the largest instrument built from beginning to end by Aristide Cavaillé-Coll in all of his company’s history. In 1913, this instrument—after having been sold back to the company in 1903—was moved to Sacré-Cœur Basilica in Paris.

Until 1897, when he was 86, Aristide held one of ten places at the La Chambre Syndicale de la Facture Instrumentale. Having no successors among his sons, in 1898, one year before he died, Cavaillé-Coll sold the remains of the company to his student and appointed successor Charles Mutin (1861–1931). The company operated under the name “Cavaillé-Coll-Mutin” until March 15, 1924. Subsequently the workshop passed into the hands of Auguste Converse and operated under the name “Société Cavaillé-Coll.”

CONCLUSION

The biography of Aristide Cavaillé-Coll reminds us of some specific factors that led to the creation of the idea of “symphonic” organs and their implementation in Cavaillé-Coll’s work. First, family traditions and his well-functioning father’s company gave him technical facilities and knowledge that he absorbed in a natural way during adolescence. Second, his personal character traits were those of a man who only looks forward and does not focus on problems. Third, his father as mentor was succeeded by his wife’s family, who, together with a group of favourable and influential friends and musicians, gave him a sense of relative security in realizing his vision. Historically, heavy damage and outright destruction of organs during the revolution of 1789–1799 had created a “poverty of organs” in France. That poverty together with changes in sound aesthetics and the biographical factors mentioned above brought forth a towering figure, recognized in organ building not only in France and Europe but all around the world.

Dr. Michal Szostak, Polish organist, researcher, and author, holds a Doctor of Musical Arts degree in organ performance from the Fryderyk Chopin University of Music in Warsaw. He regularly performs recitals in Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, the U.K., Italy, Nigeria, Poland, Russia, Ukraine, and the U.S., and has recorded three CDs. His research is regularly published by Polish and international organ magazines.

22 Ebrecht, passim.
23 Ochse, 105.
25 Ebrecht, 170.