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How About a Little Pipe Music at Geffen Hall?

The planned $550 million 'reimagination' of the home of the New York Philharmonic should include a real organ.

By Paul Jacobs

Dec. 16, 2019 5:16 pm ET

A rendering provided shows proposed changes to Geffen Hall **PHOTO:** LINCOLN CENTER AND NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC

When officials at Lincoln Center, earlier this month, announced details of the planned $550 million "reimagination" of Geffen Hall, home of the New York Philharmonic, one detail was conspicuously absent: whether the new space would have a pipe organ.

According to Adam Crane, vice president of external affairs for the orchestra: "There will be an organ. We just don't know what type it will be, whether a pipe organ or a digital one." That and other aspects of the hall are in the design and development stage, he added, with space being one of the factors playing a role in the decision-making. Maybe there's hope Geffen will include a real pipe organ, not an electronic substitute.

Shortly after I moved to New York in 2003, it became clear to me that the organ was not a priority: The Aeolian-Skinner pipe organ at Avery Fisher Hall (now Geffen) had been removed in 1976 and was never replaced. Carnegie Hall, too, had abolished its pipe organ in the early 1960s and chose not to replace it during renovations in the mid-1980s.

For centuries, canonical composers such as Bach, Handel, Mozart, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Brahms, and Liszt all played and wrote for the instrument. And the orchestral repertoire involving the organ is vast. Hundreds of works exist, a few being Gustav Mahler's "Resurrection" Symphony and "Symphony of a Thousand," Richard Strauss's "Also Sprach Zarathustra," Ottorino Respighi's "Pines of Rome," and Camille Saint-Saëns wildly popular "Organ" Symphony. Additionally, there is a burgeoning number of splendid contemporary organ concertos.

Yet two generations of New York music lovers have been deprived of any substantive encounters with organ music in the concert hall. There are no concerts in New York presenting the organ and a full symphony orchestra—other than the rare exception at a handful of the city's largest churches. (While Alice Tully Hall does have a pipe organ, the space is scaled primarily for chamber music and solo recitals.) Given the proposed renovation budget for Geffen, the cost of an organ would be relatively minor—roughly an added 1%. Elsewhere, the organ has been on the ascent; other orchestras have included the instrument in their renovation designs and come to realize how programming symphonic works with organ can be an integral and riveting experience for concertgoers.

The Cleveland Orchestra, under the baton of Franz Welser-Möst, rediscovered the beauty of its historic Skinner organ in Severance Hall when it was restored to use in 2000. Since then, they regularly program organ works, and audiences now embrace the instrument as a point of pride. In May 2020, the orchestra is releasing a recording of Austrian composer Bernd Richard Deutsch's brilliant 2015 organ concerto, "Okeanos," which we performed together last season. The Philadelphia Orchestra and conductor Yannick Nézet-Séguin are fully committed to the instrument, part of Verizon Hall since it was unveiled in 2006. Likewise, this year the Nashville Symphony and Giancarlo Guerrero undertook a live recording project that will include three diverse works by Horatio Parker, Wayne Oquin, and Paul Hindemith, whose colossal Organ Concerto had its premiere by the New York Philharmonic in 1963.

Allow me, as someone who has devoted his entire professional life to the organ, to urge the New York Philharmonic not to choose an electronic version. The pipe organ is a magnificent instrument, providing an unparalleled thrill when its forces are combined with those of a large ensemble. Whether purring gently beneath an orchestra or in fiery conversation with it, it is

transformative in a way that no other combination can match. Electronic organs, whose synthesized sound is emitted through loudspeakers, cannot compete with the richness of tone produced by authentic organ pipes—thousands of vibrating columns of air—ranging in size from a soda straw to a telephone pole.

A pipe organ is destined to become a fixed part of the architecture in which is resides. Organ builders work routinely with architects to discover successful strategies to incorporate their instruments into available space, even if it's limited. Provided the vision and commitment exist, a solution usually isn't far behind.

While some organists today refer to electronic organs as "digital," it's not uncommon to hear them more colloquially called "toasters." And the comparison to a household appliance isn't a compliment. Certainly, there are occasions when organists have no choice but to play a "toaster," but it's generally not preferred. The reasons become clear after spending time with fine acoustic instruments—like those played by every other member of the symphony orchestra. Would a discerning audience derive the same satisfaction from Beethoven's "Emperor" piano concerto rendered on a state-of-the-art Kurzweil keyboard? Would the violinists, oboists and trumpeters ever consider trading in their instruments for electronic imitations?

The modern pipe organ traces its roots back to Ancient Greece. It's been a wind instrument for over 2,000 years and remains the most complex of any instrument. Anyone who steps for the first time inside an organ chamber and stands amid a forest of organ pipes is immediately awed—even before a note of music is played. But when human expression is coaxed from those thousands of pipes, the astonishment turns to profound emotion.

The great Scottish philosopher and essayist Thomas Carlyle famously said, "Listen, and for organ music thou wilt ever, as of old, hear the Morning Stars sing together." Somehow, I doubt he would have said the same thing after listening to a "toaster."

—Mr. Jacobs is a Grammy Award-winning organist who regularly performs as a soloist with major symphony orchestras and is chairman of the organ department at the Juilliard School.