

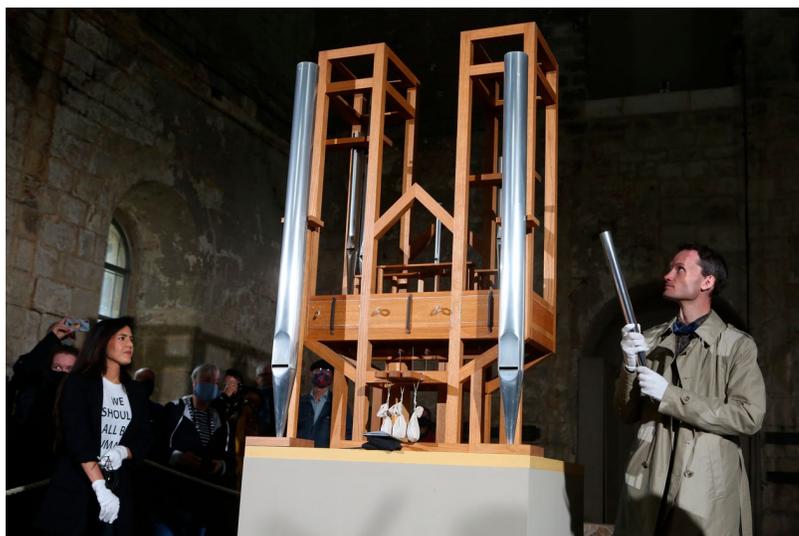
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MUSIC REVIEW

The Staying Inside Guide: The Vital Sounds of Contemporary Organ

Composers have been breathing new life into the centuries-old instrument through experimental pieces, including one that takes 639 years to perform.



Soprano Johanna Vargas (left) and composer Julian Lembke (right) use the organ pipes of the John Cage Organ Foundation Halberstadt inside the Burchardi Church in Halberstadt, Germany in 2020

PHOTO: MATTHIAS BEIN/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By [Paul Jacobs](#)

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We associate the pipe organ with Johann Sebastian Bach and other Baroque masters. But, since the mid-14th century, there has been an unbroken stream of notated organ music, making it the most enduring of any instrument in the world.

John Cage (1912-1992), guru of the American avant-garde, was just one of countless composers carrying on the tradition, which he did with his “Organ2/ASLSP (As Slow as Possible).” As the longest piece of music in the world, it commenced in 2001 in the 14th-

century St. Burchardi Church in Halberstadt, Germany, and its final notes are slated to be played in 2640—619 years from now.

A bellows feeds the organ with a steady supply of wind, and organists periodically insert or extract pipes to realize the evolving chords of Cage's music. A cult-like following gathered last September to experience the latest chord change.

A YouTube video titled "[The Longest Piece of Music](#)" explains its significance; the [John Cage Organ Project](#) website provides abundant information about the work and includes a video of the four-hour tone-changing ceremony last September. Since all the action takes place in the last few minutes, you can consult the much briefer "[As Slow as Possible Note Change, John Cage. Impulse 15; 2020,](#)" on YouTube.

While Cage wrote just a couple of pieces for organ, the instrument was central to the life of Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992). Few have had more impact on modern organ composition. His religious fervor seemed anomalous to the growing secularism of the 20th century. His music aimed to "touch upon all subjects without ceasing to touch upon God." Using the highest and lowest pitches of the organ (which exceed those of a full orchestra), Messiaen depicted everything from visions of the Holy City to the Beast of the Apocalypse. In a YouTube video, "[Olivier Messiaen Improvisations,](#)" the composer coaxes plainchant, birdsong and raw sensuality in a set of inspired improvisations in the Church of the Sainte Trinité in Paris, where he was organist for 61 years.

Another important figure is the avant-garde Hungarian composer György Ligeti (1923-2006). His music was used in Stanley Kubrick's films "2001: A Space Odyssey" and "The Shining." One of Ligeti's most shocking pieces is "Volumina" for organ, which begins with the performer's forearms depressing all the keys before the organ's wind supply is turned on (the motor caught fire at the premiere). What follows is a spectacular, even terrifying, exploration of the sonic effects of air passing through thousands of pipes. An unexpected performance is given online by [Père Patrick Ledergerber](#), a Benedictine friar at Engelberg Abbey in Switzerland on YouTube.



Olivier Messiaen in 1983

PHOTO: FRANCOIS LOCHON/GAMMA-RAPHO VIA GETTY IMAGES

Recent composers have produced compelling, sometimes startling, creations that can be explored online. Naji Hakim (b. 1955) succeeded Messiaen at Saint Trinité. Born in Beirut, he remains a prolific composer of organ, chamber and orchestral music. Despite a flippant remark made by Stravinsky about the organ—“the monster that never breathes”—Mr. Hakim cites him as a major influence over his work. The final movement of “Hommage à Igor Stravinsky,” with its locomotive rhythm, thunders across the piers and vaults of Notre Dame Cathedral in a performance shared on YouTube, prior to the devastating fire of 2019. (Thankfully, the organ survived.)

The Russian composer Sofia Gubaidulina (b. 1931) also makes inventive use of the organ in the richly scored “The Rider on the White Horse” (on YouTube). On a more intimate scale, her “In Croce” for cello and organ entwines these two instruments in a piece of desolate mysticism (also on YouTube). We hear ethereal micro-intervals and the ringing of overtones. While some composers substitute bizarre gimmickry for genuine originality, Gubaidulina’s vision is pure and authentic.

The British are rightly proud of their long choral tradition, which, for centuries, has paralleled the life of the organ. Judith Weir (b. 1954), currently Master of the Queen’s Music, combines these two forces in a hauntingly beautiful work, “Ascending Into Heaven” for chorus and organ. The effervescent organ part carries the human voices like the current of a river. A performance from Maison de la Radio in Paris, which acquired an organ in 2016, can be seen on YouTube.

Major orchestras are taking advantage of the many impressive organs that can be found in the world's great concert halls. Not only have they been commissioning and performing new works for organ and orchestra, but they have increasingly been programming Modern, Classical and Romantic organ concertos in their subscription series. The Philadelphia Orchestra will be streaming a performance of Francis Poulenc's ravishing Organ Concerto from April 29 through May 6.

The San Francisco Symphony recorded Aaron Copland's "Organ" Symphony and Lou Harrison's Concerto for Organ and Percussion, both available on YouTube. In a short YouTube video, conductor Michael Tilson Thomas refers excitedly to the Harrison as "clangorous," owing to its large battery of percussion instruments—including oxygen tanks—that must hold their own against a ferociously fun organ part. The organist plays with wooden slabs in the outer movements.

In its June 2020 release, "A New Century," the Cleveland Orchestra featured the world premiere recording of a spellbinding organ concerto, "Okeanos," by Bernd Richard Deutsch (b. 1977). The work, named after the ancient Greek river-god, evokes the classical elements of water, air, earth and fire in each of its four corresponding movements. The blustery second movement can be heard on YouTube.

All of this suggests that Stravinsky's "monster" will continue to breathe to 2640, and beyond.

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