



(LYRCD 6005)

## THE ROBERT NOEHREN RETROSPECTIVE

### Robert Noehren at St. John's Cathedral, Milwaukee

#### AN ORGANIST BECOMES AN ORGAN BUILDER

Balzac wrote, "The organ is in truth the grandest, the most daring, the most magnificent of all musical instruments invented by human genius." To hear a noble prelude of Bach soaring through the high vaults of a gothic church, or the mystical quality of a Franck choral in the atmosphere of a French Cathedral is an experience never to be forgotten. We dream of hearing a great organ. I too have dreamed, and it is this idea of a great organ that has become part of my becoming an organ builder. But a musical instrument is meaningless until its music has been brought to life by the performer. I often think of the violinist and the great responsibility he has for performance on his instrument. He endures years of effort to bring forth the beautiful sounds he needs for his music, and it is the music he plays which really determines the tonal requirements of his instrument. My first love lies with the music and it's performance, and more especially the pleasure, inspiration and grandeur that comes to us in listening to music. It is then the music and the sound of a wonderful organ which have made me dream of how the organ might have

sounded in the ears of Bach and Buxtehude, of Couperin, of Mendelssohn, or Franck, and instilled the desire within me to build and organ and then to play it in the best style and idiom of the composer.

I discovered as an organ builder I could work in much the same spirit as the violinist and make it serve as the most artistic medium for musical performance. The violinist searches for the most beautiful and idiomatic tone that he can produce from his instrument, whereas the organist, because of the nature of his instrument, must accept the quality of tone that the organ builder has given him, except to choose one color or another from the many registers of the organ. I longed to have greater control of the violinist. I eventually realized as an organ builder that I could determine the complete organization of my instrument and its quality of tone, and thus control the tone production in preparation for musical performance.

The organ is not a "single" instrument with but one tone source like the violin or the piano but is a composite of many instruments, or registers, as they are called; it is really an ensemble instrument, in a sense, much like the orchestra. Just as a symphony of Beethoven requires a certain complement of instruments, the organist requires certain registers and ensembles to fulfill the idiom of a work such as the Passacaglia of Bach. If my organ were to be complete, it would require certain registers for the music of Bach or Buxtehude, another selection of registers and ensembles suitable for the music of Couperin and known to the composer in the French organ of his day, and still other registers for the music of Liszt or Franck. From my varied experience with many organs, old and new, I knew for example that it was quite possible to re-create the tone color of such a register as a Sesquialtera, typical of the Schnitger organs known to Bach and so necessary for the performance of his music; or the Cornet and Trompette of the 17th century French organ for the music of Couperin; or the quality of the Flute Harmonique of the 19th century builder, Cavaille-Coll, indispensable for the performance of a Franck Choral. I saw then the need to create an instrument that would truly bring together all the necessary registers with their characteristic tone colors to make possible a convincing performance of organ music typical of its great heritage. By becoming an organ builder I could approach a greater control of my instrument, and like the violinist I would gain more control of its tonal characteristics. It was my hope then to build a wonderful organ that would truly represent the grandeur and magnificence of the organ, as it was so beautifully expressed by Balzac.

As a player, I had never Intended to become an organ builder, and it wasn't until I had passed my fortieth birthday that I began to pick up organ pipes to voice them. I was already professor of organ and head of my department at the University of Michigan when I began my adventure into organ building. My dean, Earl V. Moore, himself an organist who had studied with Widor in Paris, sensed my unusual desire to approach a greater expressiveness in my performances at the organ and suggested that I seek a grant to finance a serious study of voicing. I responded and spent the next two years in a practical study of voicing organ pipes. I had already enjoyed a recital career throughout the United States and Canada, England and the continent of Europe. I had gradually longed to find the way to make my organ playing more expressive and finally decided to become an organ builder. By then I was convinced that to play a musical work with style and conviction, the instrumental medium had to be more responsive to the intentions of the composer. I was constantly being reminded of the violinist and the intimacy between him and his instrument. I had been traveling again and again in Europe and had gradually become more familiar with the tone and colors of old organs from the great traditions: a Schnitger principal, and the gravity or, in turn, the sharp and brilliant sounds of his choruses; the bell-like quality of the Terz-cymbel; or the firm, clean and brilliant character of the old German organo pleno with the gravity of its 32' pedal, which Buxtehude and Bach had obviously exploited to the limit; or in France the rich tone of the fond d'orgue and the splendor of the Cavaille-Coll reeds. As my taste for the intrinsic colors of the organ developed, I felt the compelling desire to build organs of my own.

The American organ I had grown up with suffered from a kaleidoscope of changing tastes. An organ only 15 years ago could already be out-of-date! The design of organs was forever being furiously debated. Here at St. John's Cathedral in Milwaukee I simply tried to build an organ that carefully followed the important traditions of design, scaling and voicing. It avoided the changing pattern of contemporary organ building and was based solely on the respect for the indignant relation of the instrument to its music.

When, on my trips abroad, I heard colors I thought were typical and beautiful, I recorded the measurements of the pipes from all kinds of organs. Over the years I acquired a large collection of these measurements and later, in a simple way, used them appropriately in

the design of this organ. For instance, the diameters of the pipes of the Great principal 8' at C are:

C	TC	c1	c2	c3
155mm	90	52	31	20

In a similar way I recorded other details of the pipework representing tone I liked, such as the thickness and content of the metal and details of the voicing. I concluded too that the wind-pressure should be at least 2-1/2" to supply a wind which would provide the necessary energy for the tone but kept below 3-1/2". I noted that the most "natural" quality of tone seems to be realized when there is no undue restraint on the wind either at the toe or the wind-way, the mouths cut high enough and the languids placed fairly low. Every musical instrument develops a normal quality of tone. Perhaps this can be sensed by listening to musical instruments of the orchestra. If a trumpet, violin or oboe is played too softly, it momentarily loses its most characteristic color. The magnificent sound of a full orchestra is due to the presence of all the characteristic colors of its various instruments sounding forth in a completely uninhibited way. Like the orchestra, the organ of the best quality will then possess individual colors that are speaking freely. Needless to say, when these colors are brought together to form an ensemble of one kind or another, the accumulated sound is sometimes likely to be strong. Such an instrument, as it is played, requires skill and restraint. In fact, the more colorful the organ, the more skill and taste is required in performance.

My studies in voicing made me realize that the art of the organ builder depended first on his taste and ability as a voicer; that the voicing too should largely determine the character of the organ's construction; ideally speaking, the builder had to be the voicer and I was determined to voice the instruments I built. If the builder-voicer were also an organist, with his experience as a player, he would then come closer to the violinist's ability for a more complete control of his instrument.

- Robert Noehren

Robert Noehren, Organ  
St. John's Cathedral, Milwaukee (Noehren Organ 1966)

## TRACKS

1. Hymn d'Action de Grace, "Te Deum" by Jean Langlais  
(4:11)
2. Pasticcio (2:05)  
In Assumptione BMV, L'Orgue Mystique, Suite 35 - Charles Tournemire
3. Prelude to the Introit (1:31)
4. Offertory (4:08)
5. Elevation (1:05)
6. Communion (2:15)
7. Paraphrase-Carillon (9:07)  
Toccatà and Fugue in D minor ("The Dorian")  
Johann Sebastian Bach
8. Toccatà (4:55)
9. Fugue (7:14)
10. Communion (Les oiseaux et les sources)  
Olivier Messiaen (6:18)
11. Piece Heroique by Cesar Franck (7:42)
12. Hommage a Josquin-des-Pres  
Jean-Jacques Grunenwald (5:02)  
Toccatà and Fugue in A minor (from opus 80) Max Reger
13. Toccatà (2:44)
14. Fugue (3:34)
15. "So long as the mind keeps silent" Ross Lee Finney (7:28)

## THE COMPOSERS AND THE MUSIC

Three great 20th century composers for the organ, Jean Langlais, Charles Tournemire and Olivier Messiaen - all began their careers as Paris organists, each with unusual gifts as an improviser. Tournemire and Langlais became successors to Cesar Franck at the Church of St. Clotilde on the famous Cavaille-Coll organ. As composers, each had his own distinctive way of writing for the organ. Langlais, who had heard recordings of Robert Noehren made at St. John's Cathedral, Milwaukee, wrote: "These recordings are most magnificent in every respect, and the splendor of the organ in St. John's Cathedral makes these records of priceless value."

1. Hymn d'Action de Grace, "Te Deum" Jean Langlais (1907-1991)
2. Pasticcio

In Assumptione BMV, L'Orgue Mystique, Suite 35  
Charles Tournemire (1870-1939)

3. Prelude to the Introit

4. Offertory
5. Elevation
6. Communion
7. Paraphrase- Carillon

8-9. Toccata and Fugue in D minor ("The Dorian")

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

One of the great masterpieces for organ. The Fugue stands amongst the supreme heights of pure music.

10. Communion (Les oiseaux et les sources)

Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992)

Messiaen is perhaps the most important figure in French music and remains at the center of controversy. This movement from his Pentecost suite is a favorite of Robert Noehren.

11. Piece Heroique Cesar Franck (1822-1890)

This work opens with a bold theme followed by a lovely hymn-like passage which is variously developed. There is a return to the first theme and a noble and sonorous choral brings the work to a triumphant close.

12. Hommage a Josquin-des-Pres

Jean-Jacques Grunenwald (1911-1982)

Born in Annecy, Grunenwald became the distinguished organist of the Church of St. Sulpice in Paris.

13 – 14. Toccata and Fugue in A minor (from opus 80)\*

Max Reger (1873-1916)

Reger, an amazing musical personality and one of the most prolific composers in history, is probably the most important composer for the organ since Bach.

15. "So long as the mind keeps silent"\*\*\*

Ross Lee Finney (1906-1997)

American composer and teacher who taught at Smith College and later at the University of Michigan. He has written in a variety of style and experimented with serial technique. The organ work heard on this disc was commissioned by the First Unitarian Church of San Francisco for the dedication of its Noehren organ in 1967.

\*Played on the Marcussen organ of St.Paul's Church, Aarhus, Denmark

\*\*Played on the Noehren organ of the First Baptist Church, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

ST. JOHN'S CATHEDRAL - MILWAUKEE  
NOEHREN ORGAN (1966)  
DISPOSITION

GREAT ORGAN

Principal 16"  
Quintadena 16"  
Principal 8"  
Rohrfloete 8"  
Octave 4'  
Spitzfloete 4'  
Octave 2'  
Waldfloete 2'  
Mixture VI  
Scharf VI  
Cornet IV  
Bombarde 16'  
Trompette 8'  
Clairon 4'

SWELL ORGAN

Bourdon 8'  
Gambe 8'  
Voix Celeste 8'  
Flute octaviante 4'  
Octavin 2'  
Plein jeu VI  
Basson 16'  
Trompette 8'  
Hautbois 8'  
Voix Humaine 8'  
Clairon 4'  
Tremulant

PEDAL ORGAN

Principal 16'  
Subbass 16'  
Octavebass 8'  
Gedacktbas 8'  
Octave 4'  
Octave 2'  
Mixture VI  
Harmonics VI  
Contre-Bombarde 32'

Bombarde I  
Bombarde II  
Trompette 8'  
Clairon 4'

#### POSITIV ORGAN

Gedackt 8'  
Principal 4'  
Rohrfloete 4'  
Octave 2'  
Scharf VI  
Sesquialtera II  
Cromhorne 8'

#### BOMBARDE ORGAN

Bourdon 8'  
Flute Harmonique 8'  
Principal 4'  
Octave 2'  
Plein jeu VI  
Trompette 8'  
Clairon 4'

#### CHOIR ORGAN

Bourdon 8'  
Gemshorn 8'  
Unda Maris 8'  
Flute Harmonique  
Flute conique 4'  
Nazard 2-2/3'  
Piccolo 2'  
Tierce 1-3/5'  
Larigot 1-1/3'  
Flageolet 1'

#### ROBERT NOEHREN

Robert Noehren, organist, organ builder and composer, is Professor of Music Emeritus of the University of Michigan. He has concertized extensively throughout the United States and Canada and has made many tours of Europe, where he has become well-known for his appearances on great and historic organs. He has made many recordings and was awarded the Grand Prix du Disque for a recording of the Bach Trio Sonatas, and was named recipient of the first International Performer of the Year Award, sponsored by the American Guild of Organists,



following a recital in Alice Tully Hall, New York, in 1978.

Robert Noehren received a grant from the Carnegie Foundation to study French organs of the 17th and 18th centuries and later two grants at the University of Michigan to make special studies in the voicing of organ pipes. he has not been content with the problems of musical performance alone and believes that a complete understanding of musical expression at the organ demands comprehensive knowledge of tonal design, organ building and especially voicing. As a voicer he is known for his ability to voice in different traditions and perhaps remains unique as the only organist of international standing in history who also became an organ builder. He has built several large and unusual instruments, including those for St. John's Cathedral in Milwaukee, the First Unitarian Church in San Francisco, and the First Presbyterian Church in Buffalo.

At the University of Michigan he has trained many young organists. Noehren studied composition with Paul Hindemith and is the composer of a sonata and fantasia for organ, and other works for piano, strings and choir.

Here is a unique organist who, searching for a way to reach the highest means to artistic realization, became an organ builder. Is there another organist in history who felt so compelled to combine the skills of an organ builder in his efforts to enhance his effectiveness as a performer, an artist dedicated to the art of the organ playing, with the talent to exploit a large and comprehensive repertoire, even the complete organ works of Bach.

#### CREDITS

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