

Casavant Freres

Historical Notes

According to the most recent edition of the *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*, the first Canadian-born organbuilder of note was Joseph Casavant. While a student at the College of St. Therese, he was asked to restore an old organ to working condition. The copy of the 1766 treatise by Dom Bedos de Celles *L'art du Facteur d'Orgues* which he used as the guide for his first organbuilding venture remains today in its archives. When Joseph Casavant retired in 1866 he had produced some seventeen organs for churches and seminaries in Canada. He died in 1874.

Joseph Casavant's two sons, Claver and Samuel, worked in their father's workshop later travelling widely in Europe, visiting builders and significant organs in France, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Belgium and England, before opening their shop in St. Hyacinthe in 1879. They established themselves as Casavant Freres on the site where the present workshops stand. In their first announcement prospective to clients they stated, "We are capable of building instruments boasting the most recent innovations such as: concave pedalboards, balanced expression pedals, keyboard improvements, etc."

Six years later, they built Opus 8, their first three-manual instrument, a thirty-eight stop organ for the local Cathedral. This instrument, in continuous service since 1885, featured the first adjustable capture combination action mechanism to be installed in an organ.

The instrument which firmly established Casavant Freres as organbuilders of international repute was completed in 1891 for the Church of Notre-Dame in Montreal, a four-manual of eighty-two stops. This instrument, which celebrated its centennial in 1991, included adjustable combinations and speaking pipes of thirty-two foot length in the facade.

In addition to the numerous fine organs on the North American continent, others have been installed in France, the West Indies, South and Central America, South Africa, Australia, and Japan. Voluminous archives, preserved by the company, abound in letters and testimonials from famous organists, including Guilment, Vierne, Widor, Bonnet, and many others who played or inaugurated Casavant organs.

The company continues to build fine pipe organs for churches, concert halls, and teaching institutions around the world. The general trend towards a more classic tonal design and voicing which began in Europe early in the present century, and which later developed in North America after World War II, was adopted by the company in the late 1950's and, since 1960, over 200 modern mechanical action instruments have been built. One of the most recent, Opus 3700, a four-manual organ installed in 1993 at the Temple Complex of the Re-organized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in Independence, Missouri, has been described by an area music critic as "one of the most glorious organs in North America".

In 1996, Broadway Baptist Church of Fort Worth, Texas, dedicated Casavant Opus 3750, a monumental organ (129 stops, 10,615 pipes) to the memory of Rildia Bee O'Bryan Cliburn, mother of the internationally known pianist Van Cliburn. Frederick Swann, Consultant, wrote in the February 1997 issue of the *American Organist*, "... I can best sum up the result by saying that I believe this magnum opus of Casavant Freres to be the art of organbuilding brought to a pinnacle ... Having played hundreds of organs in many parts of the world, I can honestly say that Opus 3750 has few peers ... I hope that everyone who reads this will have the opportunity to experience one of the truly great organs of the world."

During their lifetime, the brothers Casavant established the finest traditions of craftsmanship among their employees and a strong organization to carry on those traditions after them. This organization continues today to stand for the artistic integrity and painstaking care the Casavants cherished.

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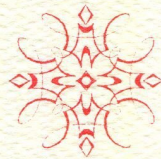
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