

History of the 1917 Casavant organ (Opus 700)

Ian Wakeley

Emmanuel Church, 15 Newbury St, Boston MA

The Casavant organ now in the Gulangyu Organ Museum was originally built for the Emmanuel Church, Boston in the USA. The cornerstone of the Emmanuel Church was laid in 1861, however, the building was expanded in 1864 by the addition of a west transept and largely remodelled between 1898 and 1899, when the church acquired the main elements of its present form: a large stone building with neogothic architectural features.

In 1913, Mr Lynnwood Farnam was appointed organist of the Emmanuel Church, a post that he held until 1918. Mr Farnam was a very accomplished musician, and it is he, who was largely responsible for having the Emmanuel Church's organ remodelled and enlarged in 1917, which resulted in the instrument that eventually found its way to Gulangyu

The Hutchings-Casavant Organ

When the Emmanuel Church organ was bought for the Gulangyu Museum, it consisted of two main parts: the first had been in the chancel of the church, and the second placed on a gallery at the back of the building. A small third section was placed in the Church's Chapel.

The Chancel organ was originally built in 1890 by G.S. Hutchings as a separate instrument (Opus 216). However, in 1899, Hutchings rebuilt the organ with electric action, a moveable console and the addition of pedal reeds, which resulted in 52 stops on 3 manuals and pedals (Opus 444). It was housed in an organ chamber adjacent to the choir and thus only required a limited case, consisting mainly of display pipes behind the choir pews, with a small additional façade in the Church's south aisle, pipes that still grace the façade of the Chancel Organ in Gulangyu today. In 1917, thirty stops of this organ (with two extensions) were incorporated by the Canadian organ building firm, Casavant Frères, into their organ for the Emmanuel Church: twenty-nine stops and the two extensions in the remodelled Chancel Organ and one Hutchings stop in the new Gallery Organ. In addition, a new console was provided from which both organs could be played.

Both the Hutchings and the Casavant facades are historically and visually interesting. The Chancel Organ's façades date from 1890, but it is the organ case of the Gallery Organ that is visually exceptional, both in terms of its craftsmanship and in its artistic qualities. This case of solid oak wood is abundantly decorated with intricate carvings, which have been expertly restored by Rieger Orgelbau to form a magnificent focal point in the newly created organ venue at Gulangyu.

Casavant Opus 700

The remodelled and combined instrument was given the Opus Number, 700, by Casavant, which resulted in the contribution by Hutchings to the Chancel Organ (outlined above) becoming less visible than its significance may have warranted.

Robert Noehren, who studied with Farnam made the following comments about the Opus 700 organ in the American Organist Magazine (February 1990 issue): 'It was to become then the largest church organ on the North American continent. It was built to Farnam's design and well represents his experiences with the tonal resources of the organ up to that time. The Chancel organ was presumably in the style of an English cathedral organ, and the Gallery organ was to be reminiscent of a French cathedral organ. Nevertheless, his design also embraced much that was typical of American and Canadian organs before World War I.'

The tonal style of the instrument can be described as 'romantic' or 'symphonic', and reflects tastes at the turn of the 19th and early the 20th Centuries, when a warm and round sound was popular - preferences that were to resurface in the 21st Century, especially for concert hall organs, thus making the Gulangyu organ both historic and contemporary at the same time.

During the 1970's alterations were made to some parts of the organ, according to the fashion of the time, when the romantic tonal ideal was replaced by a classical (neo-baroque) type of sound. The music being performed at the Emmanuel Church reflected this, which resulted in an attempt to make the organ's sound more classical. Some large Pedal pipes were removed from both the Gallery and Chancel organs and replaced with smaller high-pitched pipes to give the organ more brilliance.

By the latter part of the 20th century the organ had become largely unplayable and in 2002 the Chancel organ was removed from the church to make way for building works. At this time the console was disconnected and moved to storage with the Chancel organ parts. The Gallery organ remained in its original position until 2007.

Moving the organ to Gulangyu

In 2006, Ian Wakeley, an organ builder and engineer from Australia, discovered that the organ was for sale in Boston, and spoke to Mr Hu Youyi, who had established a museum for a large collection of pianos in Gulangyu and was doing the same for organs. Mr Hu was very interested in the organ, particularly the beautiful, carved casework of the Gallery section of the instrument, which led to his purchasing the organ in 2007 and Ian Wakeley's travelling to Emmanuel Church in Boston. With the assistance of nine colleagues the Gallery pipe organ was dismantled. The Chancel organ had been dismantled approximately 5 years earlier, and so, both organs were packed into five 40' containers and shipped to China.

The organ's third smaller section, the Chapel Organ, remained in Boston. Accordingly, the 8 stop knobs on the console that controlled Chapel organ stops are now blank.

In October, 2007 the shipment arrived in Xiamen. Under the supervision of Ian Wakeley, the many thousands of organ parts were unpacked, transferred onto ferries and transported to Gulangyu, where they were transported to the Bagua Mansion Organ Museum in hand carts.

As there was no venue large enough to accommodate the organ in the Museum, it was decided to construct a new purpose-made hall, which was designed in 2008 by an American architect in consultation with Ian Wakeley and Mr Hu Youyi. The plan was to make the building similar in size and area to Emmanuel Church, however, the restrictions placed on its size and height resulted in a building slightly smaller than Emmanuel Church; nevertheless, one with relatively favourable acoustics.

Restoration by Rieger Orgelbau, Austria

After the Boston organ arrived in Gulangyu, many options for its restoration were explored. The original concept was to have the two sections of the organ (Gallery and Chancel) at opposite ends of the building, similar to how they were in Boston; the console was to be in the middle; the Chancel organ was to be set down in the floor and the internal parts were to be visible via a walkway. Mr Hu and Mr Wakeley also determined to have as much as possible of the restoration work carried out on-site in Gulangyu so as to avoid transporting the whole instrument to northern America or Europe with the concomitant risks of damage. The firm whose proposal satisfied these conditions was Rieger Orgelbau of Austria. Accordingly, the restoration was entrusted to Rieger.

As described in the accompanying essay on the restoration, Rieger restored the organ to be as close as possible to how it was conceived in 1917. In line with international good practice, all existing parts were carefully restored and re-used, including the pneumatic action of the console, which, now being detached from the Chancel organ and mobile, needed to be fitted with its own wind supply, built into the console's podium. Missing parts and 10 lost stops were remade; and the latest Rieger electronic capture system adapted to the existing pistons and added to the console, in order to bring the instrument up to modern concert hall standards. Based on the number of hours required, the restoration was comparable to building a new organ of similar size.

Conclusion

The Boston organ restoration project was monumental and required extensive resources to complete. Carrying out most of work on-site was logistically difficult and required the organ restorers to spend a large amount of time away from home. With the oldest parts of the organ stemming from 1890 and the newest from 2018, would it be out of place to refer to this magnificent organ now as the Hutchings-Casavant-Rieger organ?

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