

## In the wind...

### The start of a century

At 10:24 a.m. on October 15, 1947, Air Force test pilot Chuck Yeager flew the X-1 experimental aircraft faster than the speed of sound. That's 761.2 miles per hour at 59-degrees Fahrenheit. It was quite a technological achievement. You have to generate a lot of power to move a machine that fast. But there was a spiritual and metaphysical aspect to that feat. Engineers were confident that they could produce sufficient power, but they were not sure that a machine would survive the shock wave generated by a machine outrunning its own noise. They supposed that the plane would vaporize, or at least shatter, scattering Yeager-dust across the landscape.

In his swaggering ghost-written autobiography, *Yeager*, he casually mentions that he had broken ribs (probably garnered in a barroom brawl) and had to rig a broomstick to close the cockpit hatch. He took off, flew the daylight out of the thing, and landed, pretty much just like any other flight. By the noise, and by the cockpit instruments, he knew he had broken the sound barrier, but to Yeager's undoubted pleasure and later comfort, the worries of the skeptics proved untrue.

### Invisible barriers

Remember Y2K? As the final weeks of 1999 ticked by, residents of the world wondered if we would survive the magical, mystical moment between December 31, 1999, and January 1, 2000. Of course, the world has survived some twenty-five changes of millennia since we started to count time, but this would be the first time with computers. The myth that computers would not be able to count to 2000 had us hyperventilating as we ran to ATMs to grab as much cash as we could. People refused to make plans that would have them aloft in airplanes at that horrible moment, supposing that cockpit computers would fail and planes would fall from the sky. The collapse of the world's economy was predicted. Public utilities would cease to function. Nuclear power plants would overheat, and soufflés would fall.

As the clock ticked closer to midnight on New Year's Eve, we waited breathlessly. Fifteen, fourteen, thirteen...*sometimes it causes me to tremble...* eleven, ten, nine, eight, seven...*all good children go to heaven...* four, three, two, one...

Humpf.

I have no idea how the venerable astronomers settled on how to organize the calendar and define our concept of time. I imagine a committee of bearded and wizened wise men gathered in a pub, throwing darts at a drawing of a clock. However they did it, they didn't fool us.

Cell phones, ATMs, airplanes, power plants, railroads, and thank goodness, icemakers just kept on running. However accurately that moment was defined, it was meaningless—a randomly identified milestone amongst the multitude.

Then we worried about what we call those years. The oughts? The Oh's? Shifting from ninety-seven, ninety-eight, ninety-nine to oh-one, oh-two, oh-three seemed impossible. I managed, and so did you.

### Centennials

The twentieth century started without the computer-induced hoopla, but I suppose that our heroes—Widor, Puccini, Saint-Saëns, Dvorák, and Thomas Edison—watched in suspense as the clock ticked past the witching hour. The real upheaval happened more than thirteen years later. On May 29, 1913, Ballets Russe danced the premiere of Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* at Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. Stravinsky had used traditional and familiar instruments and all the same notes that people were used to, but the way he arranged the tonalities, the maniacal organization of rhythms, the angular melodies, and the radical orchestration set the place in an uproar. The bassoon that played those haunting melismatic opening solos could have been used to play continuo in a Bach cantata the same day. Legend has it that the audience couldn't contain itself and there was wild disturbance. How wonderful for a serious musical composition to stir people up like that. I haven't seen people so worked up since the Boston Bruins failed to win the Stanley Cup.

### Everything's up to date in Kansas City

About five weeks before Stravinsky tried to ruin the theater in Paris, the Woolworth Building designed by Cass Gilbert was opened on Lower Broadway in New York, April 24, 1913. Like Stravinsky, Cass Gilbert used a traditional vocabulary—the prickles and arches given us by the Gothic cathedrals. But Rodgers & Hammerstein's "gone and built a skyscraper seven stories high" was not as high as a building ought to go. Cass Gilbert went fifty-seven stories—792 feet; the building remained the tallest in the world until 1930. Gilbert hung those classic Gothic features on a high-tech structure and startled the world of architecture and commerce.

Besides the technical achievement of supporting a massive structure that tall, the building had thirty-four newfangled elevators. The engineers executing Gilbert's design had to figure out how to get



Cass Gilbert's Woolworth Building



Frank Gehry's 8 Spruce Street

water more than 700 feet up. Just think of that: pulling up to the curb in a shiny new 1913 Chalmers Touring Car, and stepping in an elevator to go up fifty-seven stories. Those folks in Kansas City would have flipped their wigs.

The Woolworth building is still there a hundred years later. Like *The Rite of Spring*, it's a staple in our lives, and it seems a little less radical than it did a century ago. After all, a few blocks away at 8 Spruce Street, by the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge, the new tallest residential building in the Americas (seventy-six stories and 876 feet), designed by Frank Gehry, towers like a maniacal grove of polished corkscrews. Gehry took the functional aesthetic of the glass-and-steel Seagram Building (375 Park Avenue, designed by Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson, built in 1958), and gave it a Cubist ethic by twisting the surfaces to create the signature rippling effects.

How poetic that the Woolworth Building and 8 Spruce Street, opened almost exactly a century apart, stand just a few blocks apart, trying to out-loom each other. I took these photos of them while standing in the same spot on City Hall Plaza.

Frank Woolworth made a fortune in retail, the Sam Walton of his day. F. W. Woolworth stores dotted the country, making goods of reasonable quality available to residents of small towns. However, I doubt that anything sold in his stores would have been found in his houses. His principal residence, also designed by Cass Gilbert, was at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 80th Street in Manhattan, across the street from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Among dozens of priceless artifacts was a large three-manual Aeolian organ. Woolworth was one of Aeolian's prime customers, and, rare among that heady clientele, he could play the organ.

His estate Winfield (the "W" of F. W. Woolworth) on Long Island boasted the first full-length 32-foot Double Open Diapason to be built for a residence organ. Now that would shake your champagne glasses.

Woolworth's funeral was held in the Fifth Avenue mansion. Frank Taft, artistic director of the Aeolian Company, was on the organ bench.

### The twenty-first-century pipe organ

There's a lot going on here in lower Manhattan. South of Union Square at 14th Street, Broadway stops its disruptive diagonal path across the city, and assumes a more reliable north-south orientation, forming the border between Greenwich East Village and Greenwich West Village. On the corner of 10th and Broadway stands Grace Church

(Episcopal). Three blocks west on the corner of 10th and Fifth Avenue stands Church of the Ascension (Episcopal). Both are "Gothicky" buildings—Grace is whitish with a tall pointed spire, while Ascension is brownish with a stolid square tower with finials. Both have pretty urban gardens. Both are prosperous, active places. And both have radical new 21st-century organs.

Taylor & Boody of Staunton, Virginia, is coming toward completion of the installation of their Opus 65 at Grace Church, where Patrick Allen is the Organist and Master of the Choristers. In 2011, Pascal Quoirin of Saint-Didier, Provence, France, completed installation of a marvelous instrument at Church of the Ascension, where Dennis Keene is Organist and Choirmaster.

Both of these organs have as their cores large tracker-action organs based on historic principles—and Principals. And both have large romantic divisions inspired by nineteenth- and twentieth-century ideals. Both are exquisite pieces of architecture and furniture, and both have been built by blending the highest levels of traditional craftsmanship with modern materials and methods.

At Church of the Ascension you can play the core organ from a three-manual mechanical keydesk, and the entire instrument from a separate four-manual electric console. At Grace Church, the whole organ plays from a four-manual detached mechanical console, and contacts under the keyboards allow access to electric couplers and the few high-pressure windchests that operate on electric action.

A more detailed account of the organ at Church of the Ascension has been published (see *THE DIAPASON*, November 2011) and no doubt, we can expect one about the Grace Church organ—so I'll limit myself to general observations, and let the organbuilders and musicians involved speak for themselves. I admire the courage and inventiveness exhibited in the creation of these two remarkable instruments.

I expect that purists from both ends of the spectrum will be critical, or at least skeptical of these efforts to bridge the abyss. But I raise the question of whether purism or conservative attitudes are the best things for the future of our instrument. We study history, measure pipes, analyze metal compositions, and study the relationships between ancient instruments and the music written for them. We have to do that, and we must do that.

After finishing the restoration and relocation of a beautiful organ built by E. & G. G. Hook (Opus 466, 1868) for the Follen Community Church in Lexington, Massachusetts, I wrote an

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Woolworth Building, street-level detail

essay in the dedication book under the title, *The Past Becomes the Future*. In it I wrote about the experience of working on such a fine instrument, marveling at the precision of the workers' pencil lines, and the vision of conceiving an instrument that would be vital and exciting 140 years later. I saw that project as a metaphor for a combination of eras. And I intended the double meaning for the word *becomes*. The past not only transfers to the future, but it enhances the future. I could carry the play on words further by misquoting the title of a popular movie, *Prada Becomes the Devil!*

Another tense of that use of the word become is familiar to us from Dupré's *Fifteen Antiphons: I am black but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem*. We don't typically use the word that way in conversation, but if you read in a Victorian poem, "she of comely leg," you'd know exactly what it meant!

**Speaking of the ballet...**

Recently, renowned organist Diane Belcher mentioned on Facebook that the recording she made in 1999 (JAV 115) on the Rosales/Glatzer-Götz organ in the Claremont United Church of

Christ, Claremont, California, has been released on iTunes. Buy it. This is a smashing recording of wonderful playing on a really thrilling organ. It's a big, three-manual instrument with mechanical action and a wide variety of tone color. The recording has long been a favorite of mine—I transferred it from the original CD to my iPhone and listen to it in the car frequently.

The first piece on the recording, *Tiento de Batalla sobre la Balletto del Granduca* by Timothy Tikker, was commissioned by the organbuilder to showcase the organ's extraordinary collection of reed voices. The piece opens with a statement of a measured dance, familiar to organists who grew up listening to the recording of E. Power Biggs, and proceeds in a dignified fashion from verse to verse. I picture a large stone hall lit by torches, with heavily costumed people in parade. But about three minutes in, things start to go wrong. It's as though someone threw funky mushrooms into one of the torches. An odd note pokes through the stately procession—you can forgive it because you hardly notice it. But oops, there's another—and another—and pretty soon the thing has morphed into a series of maniacal leaps and swoops as the reeds get more and more bawdy. Tikker established a traditional frame on which he hung a thrilling, sometimes terrifying essay on the power of those Rosales reeds.

**New threads on old bones**

• Igor Stravinsky used an ancient vocabulary of notes and sounds to create revolutionary sounds. The same old sharps and flats, rhythmic symbols, and every-good-boy-deserves-fudge were rejiggered to start a revolution.

- Cass Gilbert used 500-year-old iconography to decorate a technological wonder.
- Frank Gehry gave the familiar skyscraper a new twist.
- Taylor & Boody and Pascal Quoirin have morphed seventeenth- and eighteenth-century languages into twenty-first-century marvels.
- Timothy Tikker painted for us a portrait of the march of time.

Organists are very good at lamenting the passage of the old ways. Each new translation of the bible or the *Book of Common Prayer* is cause for mourning. I won't mention the introduction of new hymnals. (Oops!)

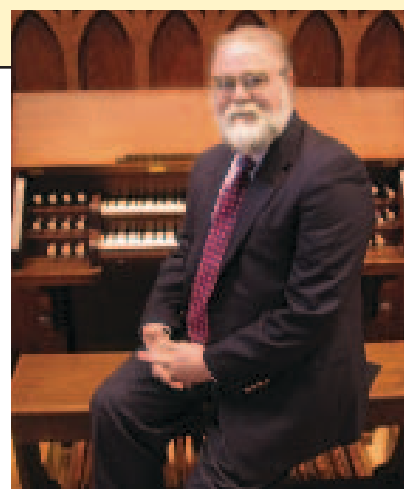
We recite stoplists as if they were the essence of the pipe organ. We draw the same five stops every time we play the same piece on a different organ. And we criticize our colleagues for starting a trill on the wrong note.

I don't think Igor Stravinsky cared a whit about which note should start a trill.

**The end of the world as we know it**

Together we have witnessed many doomsday predictions. I've not paid close attention to the science of it, but it seems to me that the Mayan calendar has come and gone in the news several times in the last few years. A predicted doomsday passes quietly and someone takes another look at the calendar and announces a miscalculation. Maybe the world will end. If it does, I suppose it will end for all of us so the playing field will remain equal.

But we can apply this phrase, *the end of the world as we know it*, to positive developments in our art and craft as the twenty-first century matures. Your



denomination introduces a new hymnal—the end of the world as you know it. So, learn the new hymnal, decide for yourself what are the strong and weak points, and get on with it.

Chuck Yeager broke the sound barrier, and kept flying faster and faster. On October 15, 2012, at the age of 89, Chuck Yeager reenacted the feat, flying in a brand new F-15 accompanied by a Navy captain. But imagine this: it was the same day that Austrian Felix Baumgartner became the first person to break the sound barrier without at airplane! He jumped from a helium balloon at an altitude of twenty-four miles, and achieved a speed of 843.6 miles per hour as he fell before deploying his parachute. Both men lived to see another day.

A Taylor & Boody organ with multiple pressures and expressions, powerful voices on electric actions, and seething symphonic strings—the end of the world as we know it. Embrace the thoughtfulness and creativity that begat it. And for goodness' sake, stop using archaic words like *comely* and *begat*. ■



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