

THE

John Wanamaker

GRAND COURT ORGAN

by Lloyd E. Klos

The Wanamaker Grand Court Organ! The very sound of those words is in keeping with the prestigious rank which this instrument enjoys when one mentions the great pipe organs of the world. Though it is not a theatre instrument per se, it does have some percussive stops, and the Wanamaker Store was a focal point for one of the sessions of the 1976 ATOS Convention in Philadelphia.

The original organ was but a third the size of the present instrument. It was designed by George Ashdown Audsley and was built by the Los Angeles Art Organ Co. for the St. Louis Exposition in 1904. It required 11 box cars to move the 10,059 pipes, console, and other appurtenances.

Not much is known about the organ's early history. It was installed in the Festival Hall of the exposition, and was played by Alexander Guilmont and nearly every great organist of the time. When the exposition closed in December 1904, the instrument was dismantled and stored in a warehouse for six years. Enter Rodman Wanamaker.

Organs and organ music have

The Grand Court organ console. Notice the 11 expression pedals. There are 729 tablets and 168 pistons included in the 964 controls. It is situated in an alcove high above the main floor. ▶

(Wanamaker Photo)



been a part of the John Wanamaker tradition since 1876. The store's founder, John Wanamaker believed that musical inspiration should be a part of life and work, besides being a form of relaxation and amusement.

On one of his tours of inspection while the store was nearing completion at 13th and Market streets, Rodman Wanamaker, upon seeing the possibility of the Grand Court's being used as a music center, said, "I want the finest organ in the world built up there above that gallery."

Knowing that it would take too long to design an instrument which would fill the area, he sent a staff member to St. Louis to investigate the Exposition organ, still in storage. As a result, the organ was brought to Philadelphia and installed in the store by an organ designer William B. Fleming, and technician William Ruff. It was first heard publicly on June 22, 1911, and has been heard on every business day since.

However, it was soon apparent that the instrument was not large enough for the spacious Grand Court, and additions were made. By 1914, 8,000 pipes were added. In 1917, a five-manual console was completed to handle the 92 new stops. Further additions were made from 1923 to 1930, and the present 2½-ton, 6-manual console installed. The organ had achieved its present size of 469 ranks and 451 stops.

Ironically, Rodman Wanamaker did not live to see the completion of the work, his death coming in 1928. He had stated that "as long as I live, we will continue to enlarge, improve and beautify the organ until it combines the grandeur of a great organ with the tone colors and beauty of a great symphony orchestra."

Space limitations preclude our running the complete stoplist of this organ. However, to get an idea of its immensity, we have provided a list of divisions, ranks, number of pipes, and wind pressures as follows:

| | | | |
|------------|-----------|-------------|--------------------|
| Orchestral | 38 ranks, | 2774 pipes, | 15" to 25" of wind |
| Ethereal | 23 ranks, | 1679 pipes, | 25" |
| Solo | 52 ranks, | 3796 pipes, | 15" |
| String | 88 ranks, | 6424 pipes | 15" to 27" |
| Great | 50 ranks, | 3170 pipes, | 5" to 16" |
| Swell | 71 ranks, | 5171 pipes, | 5" to 22½" |
| Choir | 24 ranks, | 1752 pipes, | 5" |
| Echo | 33 ranks, | 2421 pipes, | 5" |
| Pedal | 90 ranks, | 2880 pipes, | 5" to 25" |

TOTALS 469 ranks, 30,067 pipes

The console is situated in a niche on the east side of the court, on the second floor. It rests on a pivot and track and can be turned at will. There are 42 foot controls, 964 controls, including 729 tablets and 168 pistons of which there are 46 masters and 46 reversibles.

Tremolo pulsation levers to the right and left of the music rack, two for each division, are used to control the tremulants in ten stages. The idea, invented and patented in the Wanamaker shop, enables the organist to adjust the speed of each tremolo, or all of them, to suit his desire.

The string division occupies the largest organ chamber ever built. It is 60 feet by 30 feet and 22 feet

high.

The percussion section is expressive and operates on pneumatic and vacuum action. The major chimes are usually called "tower chimes" because they were made for outside-tower playing. The largest of the set, Note C, is 12 feet long, five inches in diameter and weighs 600 pounds. It is struck by a leather-topped hammer, four inches in diameter, the stroke being nine inches. It weighs 18 pounds, has an impact of 72 pounds of pneumatic pressure. There are 37 major chimes, ranging from Tenor C to C.

Other percussive effects include 25 tubular minor chimes, ranging from C to G; a Metalophone of 49 bars, from tenor C to C²; a Mustel

The Wanamaker Store, 13th and Market streets in Philadelphia. It is 12 stories high and over 65 years old. Nearby is Philadelphia's City Hall, its tower surmounted by the famed statue of William Penn. (Wanamaker Photo)



Celeste of 49 bars, tenor C to C²; Piano I; upright piano II with vacuum action and player piano action attached; Harp I; Harp II; and 49 metal-bar gongs with pneumatic action and a range from tenor C to C².

The history of the instrument in Wanamaker's has been linked to some of the world's greatest organists. For example, on March 27, 1919, a high point in organ history was reached when 15,000 music lovers from Philadelphia, New York, Baltimore and Washington gathered to hear the Philadelphia Orchestra, led by Leopold Stokowski, with Charles Courboin, the Belgian virtuoso, at the organ, in the first American performance of Widor's Sixth Symphony.

The following season, 150,000 attended a series of 27 evening recitals, featuring Courboin as guest soloist in which he played 275 compositions from memory!

At the close of 1920, before 12,000, Stokowski, organists Courboin and Pietro Yon presented a program which featured Saint-Saens' Third Symphony, and Yon's "Concerto Gregoriano" for organ and orchestra.

In 1921, Marcel Dupre, organist at the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, made his American debut, and for three years, alternated with Courboin in Grand Court recitals.

Other noted organists at the store have included Mario Enrico Bossi in 1924, Alfred Hollins in 1925 and

1926, Louis Vierne, Nadia Boulanger, Fernando Germani, Dr. G.D. Cunningham, and Virgil Fox.

Choruses, bands, choral groups and soloists have performed at Wanamaker's. The 300-voice Mormon Tabernacle Choir has appeared. And when statesmen, royalty, explorers, artists, authors, actors and other celebrities have been honored guests, the Wanamaker organ has provided background music.

From 1922 to 1928, Wanamaker's operated a broadcasting station, WOO, and thereby became the first to feature organ music on the air. The programs were heard throughout the United States, as well as in Canada, England, Europe, Africa and Australia.

A history of the Wanamaker Grand Court Organ is not complete if we fail to mention the names of those who were hired to play it during store hours.

First on the staff was renowned Mary E. Vogt who played the organ for over 50 years. A pig-tailed youngster from Germantown, Pa., she was first hired to play sheet music for the customers at \$2.50 a week. This was followed by a job as office girl for the store's musical director.

When the organ was being installed in 1911, she began to familiarize herself with it, and former organ technician, George W. Till, showed Mary how to work the pedals. One day, she heard someone playing the organ after hours, and she helped him find the right pedals.

It turned out to be Rodman Wanamaker. "He laughed when I attempted to apologize, and shortly after, I got a \$1,000-a-year raise which just about tripled my wages."

Afterward, she was sent to Europe to sign up guest organists. She easily accomplished her mission, and also collected films on lives of great composers which were shown in the store's auditorium. Her success was rewarded with subsequent trips to Europe for talent and music.

Of small stature, only 5 feet 2 inches and only 115 pounds, Mary Vogt, although she grew up with the Wanamaker organ, had very little formal musical training, none on the organ. Yet, by all reports, she handled the instrument as well as any formally-educated professional. She had to have something going for her, because 50 years in one position says quite a lot. Her whole life was involved in her work, and she lived only a few blocks from the store.

Mr. Reeves Wetherell, Wanamaker's Director of Public Relations, who has been most helpful to the writer in supplying information, has this to say about Mary Vogt:

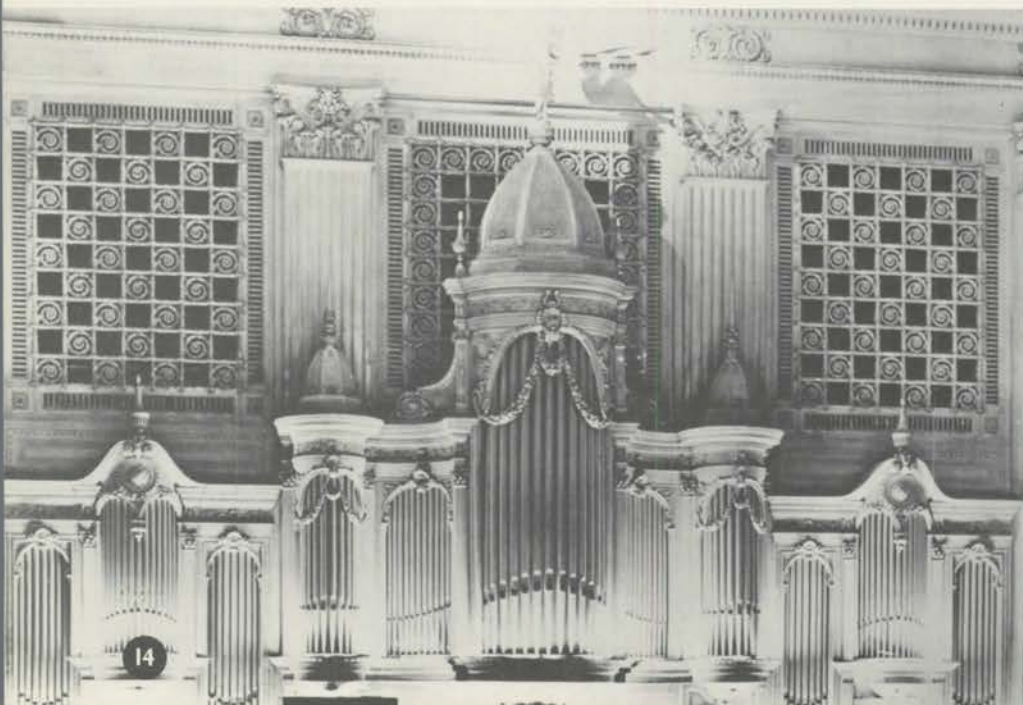
"She was the person best known as related to the organ. Mary came to work at Wanamaker's when she was about eight years old. Children of that tender age were employed in stores before there were child labor laws. She took over the concerts about 1917, was a fine musician, and played until 1966 when she had to retire for health reasons. She died a year later.

"She was most beloved by all and extremely popular. No one really knew her age as she kept it a very dark secret. All during her tenure, there were others who subbed (including Leonard MacClain), but she was the regular."

After Mary, Keith Chapman became Wanamaker's staff organist. He burst on the musical scene in 1966 when he was appointed to the post at the tender age of 19. Studying music since age five, he had progressed steadily until he was named assistant to his teacher, famed Richard Purvis, at San Francisco's Grace Cathedral. Later, he was awarded a four-year scholarship to study organ under Dr. Alexander McCurdy at Philadelphia's Curtis Institute of Music.

Mr. Chapman's professional cred-

Wanamaker's decorative casework, situated at the end of the Grand Court, at second-floor level. There are other chambers situated above these three. (Wanamaker Photo)



its are impressive. He has appeared with the Philadelphia Orchestra under Leopold Stokowski and Eugene Ormandy, and also recorded with that organization. Holder of a Master of Music Degree, and an Associate Degree of the American Guild of Organists, he has served as a recording consultant for RCA Victor. Heard over WUHY-FM weekly from the Grand Court, Mr. Chapman has made two recordings on the instrument. One is out of print, the other still selling very well, (in 1976 when this was written).

Several recording companies tried over the years to capture the sound of this instrument. Virgil Fox did a recording some years ago which was the first really acceptable sound. It is now out of print.

"Wanamaker's organ," says Mr. Wetherell, "has been played by almost every notable organist. They come from all over the world to play it, and of course, they are very welcome. Actually we allow qualified people to play upon request, and many people take advantage of this.

"When the organ was transported to Philadelphia from St. Louis, it required 13 flat cars. To move it in its present state would require 26 cars.

"Maintenance has always been a big problem. The leather bellows wear out, and there is a never-ending repair and maintenance job to do. John McCormack and Nelson Buechner are our two maintenance men, and both have been with us many years. People with their abilities are rare, believe me.

"One thing we have discovered regarding maintenance is that as our civilization produces more and more carbon, mostly from automobiles, this carbon seeps into the store and the organ. This element eats the leather bellows, and slowly and painfully, the crew is converting from leather to plastic. With 30,000-odd pipes, there is much to do."

For those desiring to hear the Wanamaker Grand Court Organ when in the Philadelphia area, there are three concerts daily when the store is open. Of 30-minute duration, they are scheduled at 10 a.m., 12 noon, and 5:30 p.m.

It is a memorable event to hear this fabulous instrument, as those who heard it during the 1976 ATOS Convention will attest. □



The staff organist of Wanamaker's with the longest tenure of service was Mary Vogt. Here she poses in April 1929 at the five-manual console which was replaced by the present one in 1930 as the organ was enlarged.

(L. Klos Coll.)

Leonard MacClain, Hall of Fame organist, shown at the Wanamaker console in 1961. "Melody Mac" frequently subbed for Mary Vogt.

(L. Klos Coll.)

