

# The Virgil Fox Touring Organ

by Len Clarke

Resting in the sanctuary of the Southern Baptist Church in New York City is a beautiful four-manual drawknob Allen digital computer organ. If the console could speak other than musical sounds, it could tell a story all its own. Designed for the research and development display room at the Allen Organ Company, Macungie, Pennsylvania, the console was made of only the best matched-grain walnut. Originally, it controlled an electron tube organ, later a transistor organ, and finally a huge digital computer organ. However, circumstances changed the destiny of this console rather suddenly. It was to become the Virgil Fox Touring Organ.

Traveling organs are not exactly common, but they do exist. Allen has built several. Naturally, any type of electronic traveling organ is somewhat less complicated than a traveling pipe organ. Virgil Fox was well known for his use of a traveling organ which was made available at an attractive fee for prominent artists. Making certain that a model was available became an issue from time to time, only to prove the value of having one of his own. He could have purchased the organ he was using, but why not have one made just for him to meet his specific needs?

Whenever Mr. Fox was in town or nearby,

he kept up his contacts with Allen. One day he was advised that one of their traveling organs which had been built for Carlo Curley was in Philadelphia and set up for a concert. Naturally he was interested in seeing and hearing the organ. He never forgot the impression it left with him.

Later, a very tight and conflicting schedule forced him to a decision. Could Allen build one to his specifications fast? Of course, only a five-manual would fill the bill. Allen tried to convince Fox that a three-manual was a possibility. A four-manual he might consider, but how fast? With their vast experience, the specific voicing demands by Mr. Fox proved to be more of a challenge than a problem.

On the floor of the R & D display room stood the beautiful walnut four-manual drawknob console. They could, with changes to his specification, make up a touring organ on a rather fast schedule. The final design: 150 stops, more than 300 console controls, 53 toe studs, 11 computer memory banks and an audio system comprised of 26 channels and 600 speakers — the largest audio system Allen had built for a single organ. Self-storing cables with special connectors made it possible to unload the organ from a truck and have it assembled ready to play in an hour. Besides

all the usual choruses typically found in larger instruments, extra reeds were included for performances with symphony orchestras.

To make the console more impressive in appearance, Mr. Fox requested that the top be raised several inches; also, it must be painted black. Who is to argue with Virgil Fox? Fortunately, the available shell was only 46" deep, which was within specifications to allow for easy access through standard stage doors.

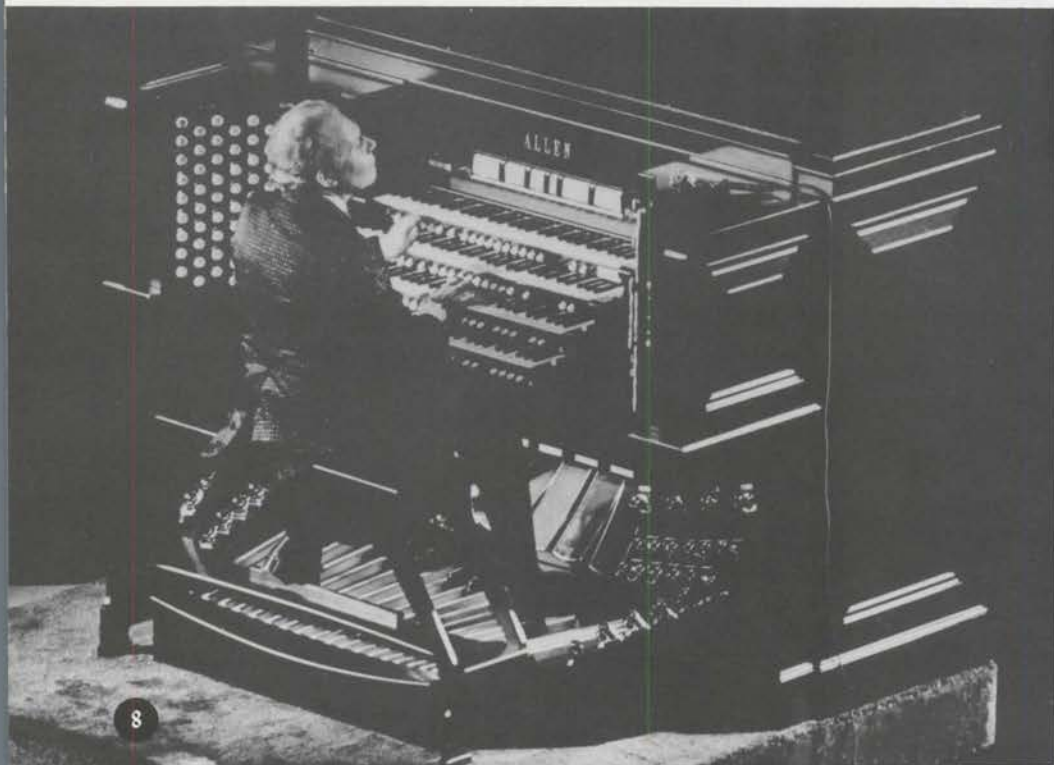
The fact that Allen was building a touring organ for Virgil Fox was kept a secret as much as possible from the dealers. They held off any announcement until the annual dealer seminar in May of 1978, held in Macungie, Pennsylvania. The day arrived and Virgil was kept out of sight (actually he was asked to stay in the men's room) until the proper time. Mr. Pearce, Vice President of the company, started to demonstrate the new organ as it was unveiled and the dealers were thrilled to get their first look at the Virgil Fox Touring Organ, not dreaming they were to meet the famous artist. Only a few notes were played when Virgil appeared and with his usual dramatic gestures, all in good fun, said, "Mr. Pearce, you can't play that organ — that's my organ." Virgil rushed to the console and gave an impromptu ten-minute concert to a cheering crowd of 300 — easily one of the most exciting experiences of their careers for Allen dealers. The tour then began with appearances in cities throughout the country and with a number of major orchestras.

Built for the job it was to do, it's ruggedness was put to the test when the truck carrying the organ overturned and came to rest upside down. This happened in Lordsburg, New Mexico, a small town of about 3500, while the organ was en route to Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas, for a concert two days later. A local crew was dispatched to the wreck site. The organ was eased out of the demolished truck and moved to a nearby warehouse where it could be righted from its upside-down position and inspected more carefully. "Is it playable?" was the first question. To learn the answer as soon as possible, the organ was then loaded on a U-Haul for delivery to the university's Laurie Auditorium in San Antonio. The movers would not release the organ until they were paid over \$1200 in cash — no credit cards here. The organ finally arrived at the auditorium just 12 hours before the concert. It was completely set up, and after a thorough physical check, the system was turned on, voltages were checked, amplifiers reset, and everything worked! The concert was played on schedule.

To quote Fox's own words, "The organ was ultimately loaded into a U-Haul truck and brought to the Laurie Auditorium stage where we waited. After taking stock of the damage that was visible, we hesitatingly connected everything and were delighted beyond all possible imagination when the instrument actually played without any trouble. This is nothing short of a near miracle when one considers that the console and computer section came to rest in the wreck in an upside-down position with the keyboards hanging free and the stop jambs knocked out of alignment. I

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Virgil Fox at the console of his touring Allen organ.





thought computers were delicate!" In Milwaukee five days later he again played the organ in concert; five days after that in Madison. It was another four days before the organ finally reached the Allen factory to have the damages repaired.

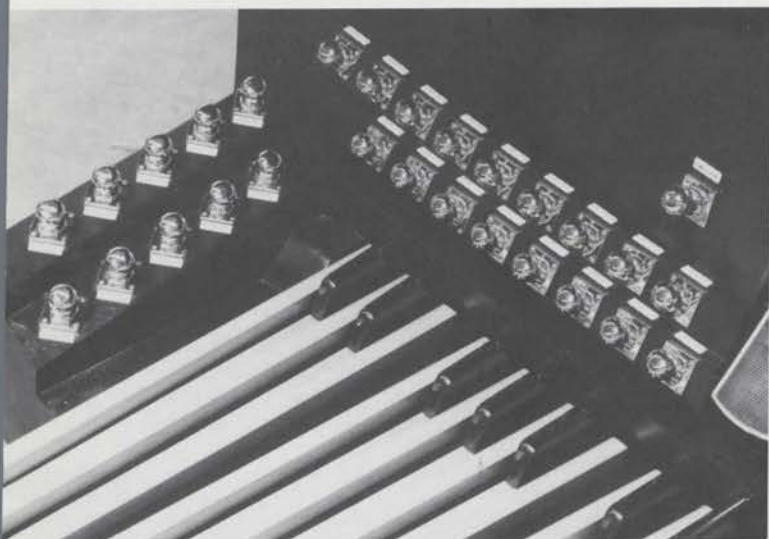
On August 25, 1980, only eight weeks before his death, Virgil Fox visited his friends at Allen Organ Company. Mr. Pearce and Allen President Jerome Markowitz recall that his enthusiasm was as high as ever. He visited Allen's Octave Hall and was intrigued with some

additional sounds that had been developed. He started to discuss details of adding these to the touring organ.

Even to the end, Virgil Fox would never accept the seriousness of the state of his health. Obviously in very poor health, he surprised everyone with a final decision to go ahead with the performance playing his touring organ with the Dallas Symphony Orchestra on September 26, 1980. With enormous courage he performed beautifully; at the end, he received a five-minute standing ovation. This

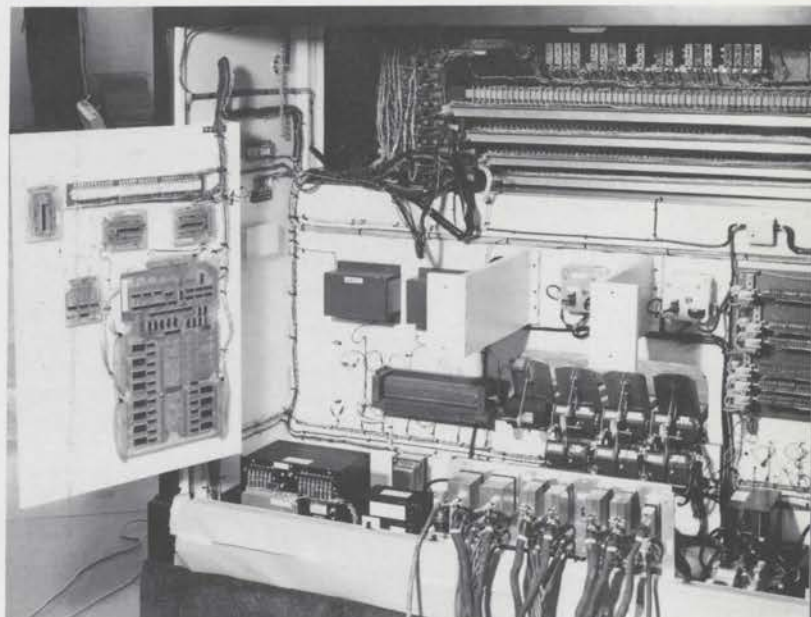
was his final performance. Twenty-nine days later, he passed away in Florida.

As the organ had been purchased by Mr. Fox, it became the property of his estate and was temporarily set up at the Allen factory and put on display. After a few months, the instrument was sold by the estate to the Southern Baptist Church of New York. It is fitting that the organ now has a home with glorious acoustics and a congregation that fully appreciates the historic significance of this unique Allen organ. □

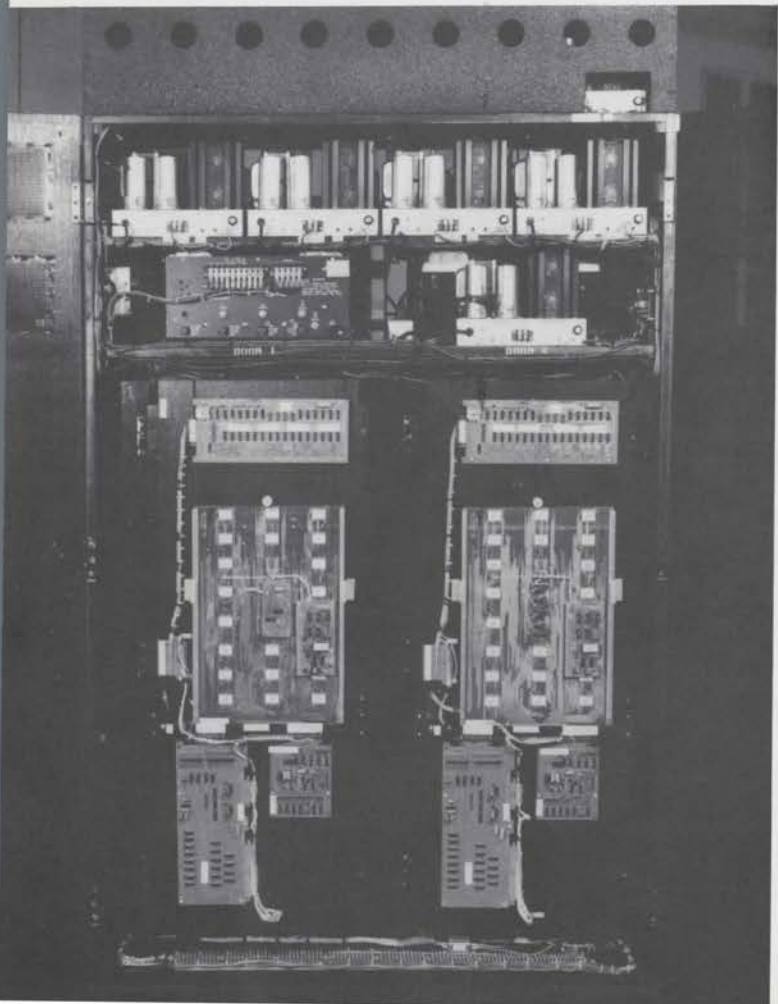


The left pedalboard jamb is fitted with 28 toe studs. The right jamb contains 25 more, for a total of 53.

Two of the 11 digital computer tone generation systems employed in the instrument. All of the generators are housed in three of these cabinets on casters.



Interior of the Fox touring organ console is surprisingly uncluttered. The large microcircuit board on hinged panel at left comprises half of the instrument's capture combination action.



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