

Monuments historiques



The *grand orgue* of Nancy Cathedral, photographed by Johann Vexo in 2018

The Organ History of the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Annunciation in Nancy, France

By Johann Vexo and Russell Weismann

Two hundred miles east of Paris, in the rolling hills of France's Grand Est region, lies the city of Nancy. Once the capital of the Duchy of Lorraine, Nancy (along with the surrounding countryside) was annexed to France as a province in 1766 upon the death of King Stanislas I, father-in-law of Louis XV. Stanislas, who was exiled from his native Poland during the War of Polish Succession and named duke of Lorraine in 1737, positioned Nancy as a center of wealth and power, earning for it a reputation of political and cultural importance during the 18th century.¹ Several of the city's Baroque landmarks remain to this day, including the impressive Place Stanislas and the Cathedral of Notre-Dame-de-l'Annonciation (Our Lady of the Annunciation), the seat of the bishop of Nancy and Toul.



Historic images of Nancy Cathedral

Construction on the cathedral began in 1703 under the architect Giovanni Betto and continued after his death in 1722 with Germain Boffrand. Plans for a monumental dome over the crossing were never realized because of limited finances, but an extravagant fresco by the local artist Claude Jacquard depicting *gloire céleste* (celestial glory) adorns the interior in its place. Due to the greater importance at the time of the neighboring Diocese of Toul, the church did not originally possess a cathedral title. When the first indoor public Mass was celebrated in 1742, the building was designated a “primatial,” a ranking analogous to the modern term “co-cathedral.” A formal cathedral title was bestowed in 1777, when the diocesan seat was transferred from Toul to Nancy. Most recently, Pope Pius IX elevated the cathedral to the rank of minor basilica in 1867.

Perched above the cathedral’s nave and encased in a decorative wooden facade sits the *grand orgue*. First built by Nicolas Dupont in 1756–63, the organ comprised 44 stops and was similar to a 42-stop instrument that Dupont constructed for the cathedral church in Toul. Dupont, one of the most prominent organbuilders in Lorraine during the 18th century, built the Nancy organ with a disposition emblematic of large French Classic instruments of the time. Characteristics included plentiful manual Cornets, a Pédale with powerful reeds capable of highlighting a cantus firmus, and an imposing *grand jeu* combination on the Grand-Orgue.

Disposition in 1763		
I. POSITIF	II. GRAND-ORGUE	III. RÉCIT
8 Montre	16 Montre	Cornet V
8 Bourdon	16 Bourdon	8 Trompette
8 Flûte à cheminée	8 Montre	
4 Prestant	8 Bourdon	IV. ÉCHO
2½ Nazard	8 Flûte à cheminée	Cornet V
2 Doublette	4 Prestant	
2 Quarte de nazard	4 Flûte à cheminée	PÉDALE
1½ Tierce	3½ Grosse tierce	12 Flûte*
1½ Larigot	2½ Nazard	6 Flûte
Cornet V	2 Doublette	3 Flûte
Fourniture IV	2 Quarte de nazard	12 Bombarde
Cymbale III	1½ Tierce	6 Clairon
8 Trompette	Cornet V	
8 Cromorne	Fourniture V	Coupler I/II
4 Clairon	Cymbale IV	Soft tremulant
	16 Bombarde	Strong tremulant
	8 1 ^{ère} Trompette	
	8 2 ^{ème} Trompette	
	4 Clairon	
	8 Voix humaine	
	2 Voix angélique	

* The atypical pitch lengths of the Pédale division ranks correspond to the original short-compass pedalboard, which consisted of 18 notes, beginning on F.



One of the organ's most impressive features is its iconic case, designed by Jean-Nicolas Jennesson, a native architect of Lorraine. Along with the Positif-de-Dos along the gallery railing, the domineering yet intricately carved oak woodwork consists of turrets and gracious *rocaille* (rococo) ornamentation. At its center, two impressive 16' pedal towers support a large wooden crest of the cathedral chapter's coat of arms. With an imposing width of 46' and a height of over 52', Nancy's case is undoubtedly one of the most recognizable in France; it was classified as a French *monument historique* on August 9, 1906.

Upon Dupont's death in 1781, the task of maintaining the instrument was passed to his pupil Jean-François Vautrin, who in 1788 made minor repairs and added a *grosse caisse* (bass drum) device, activated via its own stopknob. Remarkably, the organ was spared during the French Revolution (1789–99), mainly because the organist at the time, Michelot, *homme de cœur et de bonté* (kind and heart-full man), played revolutionary anthems on the instrument, acquiring for it secular admiration.²

Vautrin again modified the instrument in 1808. Part of this work included the following alterations:

- Extension of the keyboard compasses from d³ up to f³
- The addition of five ranks to the Récit
- Several modifications to ranks in the Grand-Orgue and Positif, including the combining of the Grand-Orgue's Fourniture V and Cymbale IV into one stop, and the replacement of the Positif Larigot with a Basson-hautbois

Lastly, in 1814, Vautrin expanded the Pédale division with two Bombarde ranks at 32' and 16'.³ In addition to the new pipework, he also extended the pedalboard from F down to C, but the only ranks that began on C were his newly added Bombardes.

Disposition in 1814

Bold indicates Vautrin's additions.

I. POSITIF	II. GRAND-ORGUE	III. RÉCIT	PÉDALE
8 Montre	16 Montre	16 Flûte	12 Flûte
8 Bourdon	16 Bourdon	8 Grosse flûte	6 Flûte
8 Flûte à cheminée	8 Montre	8 Deuxième flûte	3 Flûte
4 Prestant	8 Bourdon	4 Flûte	32 Contrebombarde
2½ Nazard	8 Flûte à cheminée	Cornet V	16 Bombarde (wood)
2 Doublette	4 Prestant	16 Trompette en taille	12 Bombarde (metal)
2 Quarte de nazard	4 Flûte à cheminée	8 Trompette	6 Trompette
1⅓ Tierce	3⅓ Grosse tierce		
Cornet V	2½ Nazard	IV. ÉCHO	Coupler I/II
Fourniture IV	2 Doublette	Cornet V	Soft tremulant
Cymbale III	2 Quarte de nazard		"Grosse note"
8 Trompette	1⅓ Tierce		"Petits oiseaux"
8 Cromorne	Cornet V		Bass drum
8 Basson-hautbois	Plein-jeu IX		Cymbal
4 Clairon	16 Bombarde		
	16 Contrebasson		
	8 Trompette		
	4 Clairon		
	8 Cromorne-basson		
	8 Voix humaine		

Following Vautrin's death, further modifications were made to the organ's winding mechanisms by the organbuilder Joseph Cuvillier, and additional minor tonal modifications were made in 1841 by Frères Claude, a Parisian firm, who added a 4' Clairon to the Pédale and extended the remainder of the ranks in that division down to C. Despite these changes, by the second half of the 19th century the organ remained a fine, classic example of 18th-century French organbuilding.



Cavaillé-Coll's console

With the rise of 19th-century symphonic organbuilding, the celebrated Parisian builder Aristide Cavaillé-Coll was appointed in 1857 to reconstruct the organ in a symphonic style, bringing drastic changes to the instrument. Beginning with correspondence in 1857 between the cathedral organist, Henri Hess, and Cavaillé-Coll, the latter specified that one of his main objectives would be to increase the importance of lower-pitched stops, in order to enhance the organ's bass resonance.⁴ While much of the earlier pipework was retained, the instrument was expanded to 65 registers. The new tonal scheme resulted in the creation of a separate Bombarde division (consisting of upperwork and reeds originally from the Grand-Orgue) and an enclosed and expanded Récit. Additionally, Cavaillé-Coll included identical replacements of Vautrin's 32' and 16' Bombardes in the Pédale, reconstructed the wind system to allow for multiple pressures among the divisions, redesigned the mechanical key action, and built a new console.

Disposition in 1861

Bold indicates Cavaillé-Coll's additions.

I. POSITIF

- 8 Montre
- 8 Bourdon
- 8 Flûte harmonique**
- 8 Viole de gambe**
- 4 Prestant
- 4 **Dulciane**
- 2 Doublette
- 1 Piccolo**
- Cornet V
- Plein-jeu VII*
- 8 Trompette
- 8 Basson et hautbois
- 8 Cromorne
- 4 Clairon

IV. RÉCIT (enclosed)

- 16 Quintaton**
- 8 Bourdon†
- 8 Flûte harmonique**
- 8 Viole de gambe**
- 8 Voix céleste**
- 4 Flûte octaviane**
- 2 Octavin**
- 16 Basson**
- 8 Trompette**
- 4 Clairon**
- 8 Basson et hautbois**
- 8 Voix humaine**

II. GRAND-ORGUE

- 16 Montre
- 16 Bourdon
- 16 Flûte conique**
- 16 Viole de gambe**
- 8 Montre
- 8 Bourdon
- 8 Flûte harmonique**
- 8 Flautone**
- 8 Viole de Gambe**
- 4 Violon**

PÉDALE

- 32 Sousbasse**
- 16 Flûte
- 16 Contrebasse**
- 16 Sousbasse**
- 8 Flûte
- 8 Violoncelle**
- 4 Flûte
- 32 Contrebombarde**
- 16 Bombarde (wood)**
- 16 Bombarde (metal)
- 16 Contre-basson**
- 8 Trompette
- 8 Basson**
- 4 Clairon
- 4 Baryton**

III. BOMBARDE

- 4 Flûte douce
- 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ Quinte
- 2 Doublette
- Cornet V
- Plein-jeu IX
- 16 Bombarde
- 16 Basson
- 8 1^{ère} Trompette**
- 8 2^{ème} Trompette
- 8 Cromorne
- 4 Clairon

II/P

- I/II, III/II, IV/II
- Barker machine assist II and couplers
- Reed ventsils I, IV, Pédale
- Reed ventill 32'
- Sub-octave coupler
- Tremolo IV

* Cavaillé-Coll combined Dupont's Positif division's Fourniture IV and Cymbale III to form the Plein-jeu VII.

† The treble of the 8' Bourdon is the 8' rank of the former Récit Cornet V of Dupont, extended into the lower compass with new pipework by Cavaillé-Coll.



Unique to Cavaillé-Coll's specification was the large number of reed stops, which made up one-third of the entire instrument. In particular, Cavaillé-Coll wished to achieve a "majestic and imposing character" in the Pédale, where more than half of the stops (8 of 15) were reeds.⁵ This ratio is unique among Cavaillé-Coll's instruments, including his notable installations at Saint-Sulpice and Notre-Dame in Paris. In envisioning his plan for the instrument, Cavaillé-Coll wrote, "I consider that the Nancy organ, restored and perfected as we have planned, would be one of the most beautiful instruments in Europe."⁶

At the time of installation, the Nancy Cathedral organ was Cavaillé-Coll's largest instrument in France outside of Paris. It stood largely unaltered until 1965, when a complete restoration was initiated by the French organbuilding firm Hærpfer-Erman.⁷ Parisian organist Gaston Litaize was the consultant for this restoration, which sought to augment the instrument's tonal scheme with 17th- and 18th-century French Classic qualities, which were then enjoying a resurgence. Aspects of Hærpfer-Erman's work included the following:

Positif

- Removal of 8' Gambe, 8' Flûte harmonique, 4' Dulciane, and Plein-jeu VII
- Addition of 1½' Larigot, 1¾' Tierce, Cornet V, Fourniture IV, and Cymbale III
- Return of Dupont's 2¾' Quinte, formerly relocated to the Bombarde

Grand-Orgue

- Removal of 16' Gambe, 16' Flûte conique, 8' Gambe, 8' Flautone, and 4' Violon
- Addition of 2¾' Quinte, 3½' Tierce, and 1½' Septième
- Transfer of 2' Doublette from the Bombarde

Bombarde

- Removal of 16' Basson, 2¾' Quinte, 2' Doublette, and Plein-jeu IX
- Transfer of Cornet V from the Positif
- Addition of Principal ranks at 8', 4', and 2', plus Fourniture V and Cymbale IV

Récit

- Removal of 8' Flûte harmonique
- Addition of 8' Principal, Cornet V, and Plein-jeu IV

Pédale

- Replacement of 8' Violoncelle with Fourniture IV

Despite many of the organ's preexisting ranks being modified and revoiced during Hærpfer-Erman's redesign, the wind system, key and stop actions, console, and wind-chests were preserved according to Cavaillé-Coll's 1861 design. The organ's pipework was now composed of 25 stops (38 percent) original to Dupont, 21 stops (32 percent) original to Cavaillé-Coll, and 17 stops (26 percent) newly added by Hærpfer-Erman. Only one stop remained from Frères Claude (4' Clairon in the Pédale), and one stop from Vautrin (8' Cromorne in the Bombarde).⁸

Disposition in 1965

D=Dupont, V=Vautrin, FC=Frères Claude,
CC=Cavaillé-Coll, HE=Hærpfer-Erman

I. POSITIF

8 Montre (D)
8 Bourdon (D)
4 Prestant (D)
2½ Nazard (D)
2 Doublette (D)
1¾ Tierce (HE)
1½ Larigot (HE)
1 Piccolo (CC)
Cornet V (HE)
Fourniture IV (HE)
Cymbale III (HE)
8 Trompette (D)
4 Clairon (D/HE)
8 Cromorne (D)

IV. RÉCIT EXPRESSIF

16 Quintaton (CC)
8 Principal (HE)
8 Bourdon (D/CC)
8 Viole de gambe (CC)
8 Voix céleste (CC)
4 Flûte octaviante (CC)
2 Octavin (CC)
Cornet V (HE)
Plein-jeu IV (HE)
16 Basson (CC)
8 Trompette (CC)
4 Clairon (CC/HE)
8 Basson-hautbois (CC)
8 Voix humaine (CC)

II. GRAND-ORGUE

16 Montre (D)
16 Bourdon (D)
8 Montre (D)
8 Bourdon (D)
8 Flûte harmonique (CC)
4 Prestant (D)
4 Flûte douce (D)
3½ Grosse tierce (HE)
2½ Quinte (HE)
2 Doublette (D)
1½ Septième (HE)

PÉDALE

32 Soubasse (CC)
16 Flûte (D)
16 Contrebasse (CC)
16 Soubasse (CC)
8 Flûte (D/CC)
4 Flûte (D/CC)
Mixture IV (HE)
32 Contrebombarde (CC)
16 Bombarde (CC)
16 Bombarde (D)
16 Contrebasson (CC)
8 Trompette (D)
8 Basson (CC)
4 Clairon (FC)
4 Baryton (CC)

III. BOMBARDE

8 Principal (HE)
4 Principal (HE)
2 Principal (HE)
Cornet V (D)
Fourniture V (HE)
Cymbale IV (HE)
16 Bombarde (D)
8 1^{ère} Trompette (CC)
8 2^{ème} Trompette (D)
4 Clairon (D/CC)
8 Cromorne (V)

Pedal couplers I, II, IV

I/II, III/II, IV/II
Barker machine assist II and couplers
Reed ventsils I, IV
Reed ventil Pédale (for the three Bassons)
Reed ventil 32' (for the strong reeds)
Tremulant I
Tremolo IV

At the conclusion of the 1965 renovation, the nucleus of the organ largely retained Cavaillé-Coll's imprint, due to the abundance of original Cavaillé-Coll pipework, the Dupont pipework revoiced by Cavaillé-Coll, and the Cavaillé-Coll console. The preservation of these attributes retained the instrument's symphonic disposition, leading to its designation as a French *monument historique* in 2003—the same status bestowed on the casework nearly a century earlier.⁹

The largely unaltered portions of the instrument were beneficial to its future preservation, because just as quickly as the mid-20th-century Neoclassical organ reform rose in popularity, it faded. Currently, the organ is entering its fifth reincarnation, with a complete restoration by a team of France's finest organbuilders, including Michel



The empty organ case during restoration, photographed by Johann Vexo in 2022

Jurine, Jean-Christian Guerrier, Bertrand Cattiaux, and Olivier Chevron. The intent of this latest project is to reverse the changes made to the instrument during the 1965 Hærpfer-Erman redesign and return it to Cavaillé-Coll's 1861 design. The €1.4 million project began in 2021 and is expected to last until 2025, when the organ will be rededicated and celebrated in a series of recitals marking its return.¹⁰

As is customary in most cathedrals and large churches throughout France, in addition to the cathedral's *grand orgue* there is a smaller *orgue de chœur* (choir organ), located in the sanctuary. The current instrument was crafted in 1912 by Merklin-Kuhn and placed in the 1844 case that housed the original choir organ, built by Joseph Cuvillier in the same year. The Merklin-Kuhn operates via tubular-pneumatic action and is currently in need of major restorative work. Rather than repairing this instrument, the cathedral organized a committee known as the Association pour le Renouveau des Orgues de la Cathédrale de Nancy to investigate replacement options. Fortuitously, the association purchased the very last organ built by Cavaillé-Coll (Opus 699), and plans are underway to retrofit the instrument to the cathedral's 1844 choir organ case.

Opus 699 was a rare and exciting find. Originally installed in 1898 in Nancy's Salle Poirel, the city concert hall, the organ was dedicated on March 12, 1898, by the Parisian organist Eugène Gigout, a native of Nancy. The instrument was removed from the Salle Poirel in 1919 and relocated to Nancy's Théâtre Municipal, which is currently known as the Opera House.¹¹ This placement lasted until the early 1970s, when the city decided to remove the seldom-used organ. A local organist then took possession of the instrument, and it was forgotten about until it was rediscovered and sold to the association in 2013.¹²



The choir organ case



Cavaillé-Coll Opus 699 in storage

Disposition of Cavaillé-Coll Opus 699

I. GRAND-ORGUE

- 16 Bourdon
- 8 Montre
- 8 Flûte harmonique
- 8 Bourdon
- 4 Prestant
- Plein-jeu III
- 8 Trompette

II. RÉCIT EXPRESSIF

- 8 Cor de nuit
- 8 Viole de gambe
- 8 Voix céleste
- 4 Flûte octavante
- 8 Trompette
- 8 Basson-hautbois

PÉDALE

- 16 Soubasse
- 8 Basse
- Effet d'orage* (thunder effect)
- I/P, II/P, II/I, II/I 16'
- Reed ventilis I and II
- Tremulant II



Ongoing fundraising for the €500,000 project to permanently reinstall Opus 699 in the cathedral is supported by the association. Upon completion, the cathedral would be home to an exceptional pairing of two great Cavaillé-Coll organs, adding to Nancy's centuries-old status as a city with admirable cultural attributes and an illustrious organ history.

NOTES

1. Robert Martin and Marc Grosjean, *Nancy* (Paris: Hachette, 1959), 27.
2. "Grandes Orgues de la Cathédrale de Nancy—History of the Organ," Association pour le Renouveau des Orgues de la Cathédrale de Nancy, accessed July 27, 2022, <http://www.orgues-cathedrale-nancy.fr/en/historique-de-l-orgue-2/history-organ#Vautrin>.
3. Famously, this was the first 32' Bombarde to be built in France. Philippe Cicchero, *Les Orgues des cathédrales de France* (Précy-sur-Oise, France: EMA, 1999), 206.
4. Aristide Cavaillé-Coll, letter to Henri Hess, Nov. 27, 1857.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. In the 1930s, Marcel Dupré served as a consultant between the cathedral and the Roethinger organbuilding firm in Strasbourg on a project to electrify the organ's key and stop actions. Fortunately, this undertaking was canceled due to the outbreak of World War II.
8. The original Vautrin 8' Basson-hautbois was reinstalled by Bertrand Cattiaux in 2012. It took the place of the Hærpfer-Erman Cymbale III in the Positif division.

9. The *monument historique* title offers state funding for the protected object, as well as safeguards against future modifications that would alter the historical designation.

10. "Nancy Cathedral (Meurthe-et-Moselle)," Ministry of Culture–Drac Grand Est, accessed July 22, 2022, <https://www.culture.gouv.fr/en/regions/drac-grand-est/actu/plan-relance/patrimoine/cathedrale-nancy>.

11. During the relocation to the Théâtre Municipal, the organ lost its original casework.

12. "Very Last Cavaillé-Coll: For a Revival," Association pour le Renouveau des Orgues de la Cathédrale de Nancy, accessed July 28, 2022, <https://en.dernier-cavaille-coll.fr>.

Johann Vexo was born in the French city of Nancy. At age 25 he was appointed choir organist at the Cathedral of Notre-Dame, Paris. Soon thereafter he was also appointed titular organist of the cathedral in Nancy. Vexo is also professor of organ at Strasbourg's Conservatory and its Superior Music Academy. Active internationally as a recitalist, he is represented by Phillip Truckenbrod Concert Artists.

Russell Weismann, AAGO, is director of chapel music, organist, and adjunct professor of music at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. A native of Pittsburgh, his primary research centers on the life and work of the German organbuilder Rudolf von Beckerath. Weismann is past dean of the District of Columbia AGO Chapter and chairs the AGO Committee on Educational Programming.