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Coffee Break

with Michael Barone



Legendary broadcaster Michael Barone has long been the voice of our community on the airwaves. For nearly half a century, he has captivated and inspired generations of listeners with richly engaging programs exploring the organ—and the people who bring it to life. This month, Michael celebrates his 80th birthday.

ALEX HODGKINSON

I've often been asked a simple question: Why the organ? And my answer would be, Why not? The pipe organ has been around for a l-o-n-g time, more than 2,000 years, and though it has gone through remarkable transformation during that period, it is still "the organ" and still compels our attention. Who can resist?

When I was a child, our family attended a Presbyterian church with a Hook & Hastings organ. We tended to sit toward the front, which meant I had a clear view of the organist, Marion Wallace, as she played. I remember watching her hands moving across the manuals and pulling stops, thinking there was something mysterious and marvelous about the whole process. At the end of the service, she would sometimes let my brother and me flip the switch that turned off the blower. For a child, that was a big deal.

Around the age of twelve, I was introduced to recordings of Bach's organ music played by Édouard Commette and, particularly, Albert Schweitzer, which I found appealing. When I was 13, at the advice of a two-years-older family friend, Robert Wech, I was given an LP of Schweitzer playing Mendelssohn and Widor as a Confirmation gift. That's how my own collection of organ music albums began, funded by income from my afternoon paper route. What started as curiosity grew rather quickly into a specific interest.

I'd started piano lessons at age five with Stella Pickett, literally the little old lady down the street. Miss Wallace, who taught me piano when I outgrew Miss Pickett, was not keen on my taking organ lessons from her, too, and thought I was spreading myself too thin by singing in the high school glee club and playing sousaphone in band. She was right, as my keyboard technique never advanced much beyond the serviceable. When it came time to decide on a college, I was pretty certain I did *not* want to get into music, as either a performer or a teacher.

I ended up at Oberlin College, but music eventually won out, and I transferred to the Conservatory, where I earned a degree in music history with organ as my "applied" instrument. Upon graduation, I had neither the money nor desire to go directly to graduate school, but I



had worked at the campus radio station and thought I might find a job somewhere announcing classical music. By good fortune, I landed a position as music director at a fledgling station in Collegeville, Minnesota, that had been on the air only 18 months. I was the sixth full-time employee of what grew to be a major player in public radio, Minnesota Public Radio, which now has more than 400 employees. Somehow, 58 years later, I'm basically still there.

For my first 25 years at MPR, I was responsible for pretty much everything related to classical music, and our audience was served a lavish buffet, from Renaissance motets and madrigals to Stockhausen's *Gesang der Jünglinge*, a daylong marathon broadcast of Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, and Gavin Bryars's *Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet* (along with plenty of standard fare). Early on, my interest in the organ generated its own show, with Sunday night broadcasts of *The Organ Program* beginning in 1970. Unintentionally, that led to something larger.

It should be mentioned here that for my first twelve years with MPR I lived in St. Cloud and for eleven years was organist at First Methodist Church there. I played everything (within my performer limits) from Scheidt to Messiaen . . . on a 13-rank 1969 Wicks. I moved to St. Paul when MPR's classical department relocated from Collegeville to new network headquarters, and though I played some recitals in the following years, I have not held a church job since.

In 1980 the American Guild of Organists held its national convention in the Twin Cities, and with the help of numerous MPR colleagues, I decided to have as much of the event recorded as possible. Those recordings became a series of 14 radio programs that aired early in 1982: the first *Pipedreams*, which was intended as a onetime project, a way of documenting an important event and giving the AGO its first national broadcast exposure. But the next AGO national convention was soon to be held in Washington, D.C., in 1982, and since NPR showed no interest, I thought, *Well, what the heck—in for a penny, in for a pound*, and arranged to record there. It became much more than a pound, and since October 1983, *Pipedreams* has been a weekly national presence.

The fact that *Pipedreams* has continued for so many decades is a surprise, but every week is a learning experience for me, and a way to spark curiosity and enthusiasm in someone else too, I hope. Over the years, I've had the privilege of interviewing many extraordinary artists: Dame Gillian Weir, Carlo Curley, John Weaver, Richard Proulx, Marie-Claire Alain, and many others.

When someone says “organ music,” what does that actually mean? The pipe organ encompasses an astonishing range of sound, repertoire, and history. Exploring that range in small weekly increments has been one of the great adventures of my life. You could listen to ten different recordings on ten different organs of a Bach prelude and fugue and discover something new in each one. The acoustics, the registrations, the colors, and of course the player's interpretation—everything influences how that composition speaks.

Although the people who build and play organs are fascinating, it's the music that gives the instrument its voice and gives the performer an outlet for interpretation. Whatever the organ may be—large or small, extravagant or modest—it is simply a tool for making music. A truly good organist knows how best to use that tool in a manner that highlights its strengths and gives listeners an experience they can't have any other way.

I think the instrument itself carries a kind of wisdom. The pipe organ has survived centuries of changing tastes, new technologies, and cultural shifts. It has been reinvented many times, yet its essence remains the same: wind moving through pipes to create sound. Digital instruments exist, of course, and some of them are quite impressive. But to me they're a little like approaching infinity by half steps. However close they come, they can't quite replicate the physical reality of wind-blown pipes speaking into a space. There is simply nothing like the real thing. Which is why I still believe that anyone who doesn't find something fascinating about the pipe organ has missed one of life's truly extraordinary experiences.

I'm not quite sure what the future of *Pipedreams* looks like. In this evolving and unsettled cultural and media environment, I would hope that the possibility still exists for people, despite the globally shrinking attention span, to take the time to “gather around the fire,” as it were, and just listen, enjoying stories about the instrument, the people who play it, and the music that they play. That's what continues to drive me after all these years. Would someone like to join me in this project, and perhaps carry it forward? I'd love to hear from them.

To listen to the latest episode of Pipedreams and to explore the entire archive of past programs, visit Pipedreams.org.

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