



# The Playground

By Benjamin Pomerance

“They opened their doors for me to practice,” Sheranian remembers. He laughs. “I don’t think that they knew I would show up there to play every single day.” He laughs again. “But after a while, they even gave me a position on their staff. I was 16 years old and getting paid to play the organ and having the time of my life.” ”

Photos courtesy of Andrew Sheranian

IN ANDREW SHERANIAN’S MIND, there is a scrapbook.

With minimal prompting, he flips through the pages. On one sheet, he’s at the keys of the Grand Organ in Notre Dame-de-Paris, 8,000 pipes worth of majesty, with every note echoing amid the beehive of worshippers and tourists. On another, he’s in Japan, center stage in Minato Mirai Hall, with a C.B. Fisk organ named “Lucy” enchanting 2,000 listeners. Flip the page over, and he’s stateside, sounding like a one-man symphony on the Newberry Memorial Organ at Yale University’s Woolsey Hall.

He could point to a memory blindfolded and still strike gold. Looking at the section from England reveals a treasure trove worthy of the Crown Jewels: leading choirs at the cathedrals in Wells, Chichester and Salisbury, the ultimate trifecta for any steadfast Anglican. Glancing at the segment devoted to

New England opens the portals to two of his personal favorites: the chapel organ at Groton School and the organ at the Church of the Advent in Boston, both built by the Boston-based Aeolian-Skinner firm, American classics in style and tone.

Turn back to the beginning, all the way to the portion marked “Childhood,” and an obvious hallmark appears, the type of instrument that could enrapture any Utah kid — the Mormon Tabernacle Organ from Salt Lake City’s Temple Square, with 11,623 pipes, 206 ranks and infinite possibilities. Yet in this spot, too, is a surprise entry for a child raised as a Mormon: the organ at an Episcopal church whose organist was friends with the boy’s father, opening the doors to a kid who kept coming back, parting the waters to the rest of his life.

And over here, in the largest section of the book, is the Parish of All Saints. In the Ashmont section of Boston is Sheranian’s musical haven, an Anglo-Catholic church with

a soaring artistic tradition. Here is where Sheranian has worked as organist and master of chorists since 2010, playing the organs and leading their Choir of Men and Boys, as well as curating his own ensemble devoted to the music of Johann Sebastian Bach.

It is this place that will serve as the broadcast center for Sheranian on March 12, the day that he will present the next virtual program for the Piano By Nature concert series. He will play both of the pipe organs available to him, of course, the C.B. Fisk Opus 103 of 1995 and the Skinner Opus 708 of 1929, because the angst of leaving out either instrument would chew him up inside. He will play Bach, of course, but also music by the lesser-known Herbert Howells and Josef Rheinberger, for to omit these latter two men would feel to him like a criminal act.

From the outset, it has been this way. The fervor, the euphoria, the embrace and, above all else, the certainty that this was home, the belief that his life would become

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He pauses. "Imagine a farmer centuries ago in Europe," he continues. "Here is someone who hasn't heard music all week. And then he comes into town on market day and walks into one of those big, old churches made of stone where someone is playing the organ, and the sound is just reverberating from those stone walls. It must have been a profound experience."

To Sheranian, that profundity remains — even in a contemporary world with a dizzying variety of experiences accessible at the touch of a button. For more than a decade, he has felt his playing at the Parish of All Saints impact others and himself in ways that mere words fail to express. He finds it particularly in music by the likes of Bach, Howells and Rheinberger, all of them writers with the gift of knowing how to make the organ sing. "Vocal beauty," he states of their work. "Beautiful lines of music with something definite to say."

And through the years, this man who can define varying characteristics of organs in language reminiscent of a long-tenured sommelier differentiating between multiple fine wines has reached a potentially unexpected conclusion. It is a determination embodied in the two organs that he will play on his March 12 program: one with electronic action and another with mechanical action. At the New England Conservatory, he worked in an environment where mechanical action predominated. At Yale, organs with electronic action carried the day.

Debates continue to rage about which is better. Yet Sheranian takes no part in them, not out of diplomacy, but rather out of pure interest in both schools of thought. "I'm open-minded about things

like that," he says. "Some organs, he points out, speak in a specific accent, tailored to the French repertoire or Italian Baroque creations, or music of Germanic Romanticism, but Sheranian has not set down stakes in any of these camps. "I don't really have a preference," he concludes. "There's so much beauty in the organ world today, and I'm here for all of it."

All of which means that the scrapbook still has plenty of pages to fill. There is a new organ at St. Thomas Church in New York City that he longs to play, along with the organs at Westminster Cathedral and Westminster Abbey in London. A few years ago, he had a chance to play the storied Sauer organ at the Berliner Dom, the monumental church in central Berlin, but missed it due to a delayed flight, leaving that organ on the ever-evolving wish list, as well.

He looks at that list now with affirmation, validating the dreams of that kid who couldn't even reach the pedals but knew that his universe would be transformed when he could. "It has maintained its fascination for me," he states. "It is an abundant field of inspiration. And it's still a fun playground for me to play on." On that playground, there is equipment enough to go around, whether mechanical or electric, earthly or heavenly, ancient or new, a feeling that moves no pedal to sustain it, beauty created for all time with the sense that it may never stop.

*Andrew Sheranian will perform a virtual concert presented by the Piano By Nature concert series on March 12 at 7 p.m. Admission is free, but donations are gratefully accepted. To receive the link for this live program or for more information, email [pianobynature@gmail.com](mailto:pianobynature@gmail.com) or visit [pianobynature.org](http://pianobynature.org)*

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wrapped up in that machine that Mozart had dubbed “the king of instruments,” was present even before he knew how to play the thing. Viewed from afar, it looked like a school play area just waiting for recess, with keys, stops and pedals replacing swings, trapeze bars and slides, practically begging for someone with the requisite spirit of fun to jump aboard and explore.

He was too young to play back then, kept off the organ bench because he was too small for his feet to reach the pedals. Yet his parents, both of them musicians, ensured that he would never lack for tonal exposure. At a tender age, they started him on piano lessons. He complied, knowing what else awaited. He had seen the Mormon Tabernacle organ by this time, sensed its vibrations through the wooden pews, and knew that this was the sound that struck his soul.

Finally, after nearly a decade of keyboard practice, the golden day arrived. He was 14 years old, tall enough at last to engage with the instrument physically and adept enough on the piano to know his way around a set of keys. His first organ lesson only affirmed what he already understood. “The beauty of the sound,” he recalls when asked why the instrument captivated him so completely. “The range of emotions that it could evoke and express, and the complexity, too, I was up for a challenge, and I could tell that this challenge could pay off in incredible ways.”

The staunchest challenge came from something he had never anticipated, an issue never touched by his prior piano studies. “The piano has a sustain pedal,” he notes. “The organ does not. You can’t just push a pedal down and keep the sound going. An organist has to learn to play extremely legato [smoothly] and still play all the notes because you have no pedal to assist you.”

It was the type of hurdle that can stop a young musician in their tracks. For Sheranian, though, the potential roadblock became a door for experimentation, seeing how beautiful of

a wall of sound he could build without a sustain pedal aiding him. Only one dilemma lingered: the need for access to an instrument. Unlike the piano, an organ would not fit into his family’s home. That was when his dad called in a favor with the organist at a nearby Episcopal church. It was not a Mormon temple, but the organ was top-notch, and the music could transcend boundaries.

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A couple of years later, he jetted across the country for college, studying at the New England Conservatory of Music with William Porter, one of the most versatile organists on the planet. During those studies, he landed a job as an assistant organist at the Parish of All Saints, not having an inkling that a variety of trails would ultimately bring him back to that same house of worship. “From the start, they welcomed me,” he recalls. “And for the last 11 years, it has been my home.”

But there was much to explore before coming home again. There was a Master of Music degree at Yale University through the Institute of Sacred Music, a stop that included serving as the Fellow in Church Music at Christ Church in New Haven and plenty of exposure to that mighty instrument in Woolsey Hall, a masterpiece built to heroic proportions by the firm of E.F. Skinner, containing even more pipes than the iconic Mormon Tabernacle organ. Then there was a stint at a church in Rye, serving not only as organist, but as choirmaster, as well.

It was this choir from Rye that Sheranian escorted across the Atlantic, taking them to perform at those services in Wells, Chichester and Salisbury, as well as in their sister city of Rye, an old Norman town in East Sussex. A different group of musicians — the Utah

Chamber Artists, directed by one of Sheranian’s first teachers — welcomed him as their collaborator on a trip to Paris, highlighted by playing during Mass at Notre Dame. “The acoustics are outrageous there,” Sheranian states. “And the entire place is packed with people, buzzing with energy.”

A bigger surprise awaited him in Japan, where he embarked on a recital tour in February 2006. Booked to play a mid-week lunchtime concert in Yokohama, he was astounded to walk on stage at Minato Mirai Hall to find 2,000 people looking back at him, eagerly anticipating their American visitor’s performance on “Lucy,” the organ that had taken a team from the C.B. Fisk firm in Gloucester, Mass., seven years to build. “It was beautiful and big,” Sheranian recalls. “And for this city, it seemed like this instrument was a real point of pride.”

He played at Temple Square in Salt Lake City, back to the location from which some of his earliest organ inspirations stemmed. He performed at St. Thomas Church on Fifth Avenue in New York City, enveloping the sanctuary in sounds from one of the most famous pipe organs in North America. And he found other artistic muscles to flex, too, playing jazz on both organ and piano and finding unexpected partnerships working in five synagogues, uniting his art with the vocal lines from the cantor, melodies that resonated from millennia past.

Yet time and time again, he found himself pulled back to the church, subconsciously part of a tradition that allegedly stretches back to the 7th century when Pope Vitalian purportedly introduced the use of an organ in Rome to improve the singing of congregations. “The organ doesn’t have to breathe,” Sheranian explains of the instrument’s appeal to worshippers. “That’s why it is does such a good job of leading a group of people singing. It surrounds them with this constant, unending set of tones.”

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