

Organs in Québec

**An introduction to the history of organs and organ building in Québec,
with a selected list of those which are considered of particular interest.**

The beginnings



Holy Trinity Cathedral in Québec
Photo : François Brault

The word organ comes from the Greek organon, meaning instrument. The use of this word in the ancient world of the Mediterranean was secular in origin, referring either to tools or to musical instruments. Ten centuries later the Church borrowed the term to denote the instrument which it favoured for liturgical use and which has since then been continually developed up to the present. The organ's first appearance in North America was in the west of the continent during the founding of Spanish missions. Its first appearance on the eastern side of the continent was in Québec city. The first organs can be traced back to the parish church in 1657 and the Jesuit chapel in 1661. Of course, there were others. For example, in the Parish Church of Québec, an organ was installed in 1664 which had been brought over from France by Mgr de Laval. The Church of Notre-Dame de Montréal is also known to have had an organ in 1705.

There is little knowledge or documentation about these first instruments. There is, however, an organ that is very well known thanks to the research of Élisabeth Gallat-Morin. It was built by the Parisian organ builder Robert Richard in 1753 for the Cathedral of Québec. It had ten stops and a pedal board 'en tirasse' which was highly praised by the specialists who examined it in Paris. Unfortunately this treasure was lost in 1759 when the Cathedral caught fire during the conquest. After 1759 organs were imported from London. For example, in 1802, Thomas Elliot built the organs for the Catholic and Anglican Cathedrals of Québec, and in 1816, he built a third one for the Anglican Church of Christ Church of Montréal.



Christ Church Cathedral
Photo : D. Stiebeling



Basilica Notre-Dame de Montréal
Photo : Germain Casavant

These organs were imported. Does that mean to say that nobody was building organs in Québec at that time? Louis Bertrand de La Tour, who wrote the biography of Mgr de Laval, explains that the organ brought over by the latter served as a model for a gifted priest who then made imitations "with a very pleasing sound". It is also known that the sculptor Paul Jourdain known as Labrosse (1697-1769) made or assembled an instrument for Québec in 1723. A hundred years later Jean-Baptiste Jacotel, a French immigrant, made a few organs. His son and son-in-law continued the business. However, no trace of any of these organs can be found today. Towards 1840 Joseph Casavant (1807-1874) began to build organs as a self-taught

craftsman. He built seventeen in all but again, these have disappeared. The name of Casavant became famous, however, due to his sons, Samuel and Claver (see professional organ building).

Professional organ building in Québec

The first professional organ builder in Québec came to Montréal in 1836. His name was William-Russell Warren (1809-1882), and he was an American who was trained in Boston by the famous Thomas Appelton. Warren was a prolific organ builder. During his fifty years in the profession, he built over 350 organs (most of which are no longer in existence) mainly for the Montréal area, although he also built some for the Saint Lawrence Valley area as far as Kamouraska, as well as for

Toronto, and for the United States. He was very open-minded for his time and introduced into his work innovations from America, Britain and France. He also has the distinction of having trained at least two remarkable disciples: his son, Charles S. (1842-1933) who made his career in Toronto, and the famous Louis Mitchell who began to build organs under his own name in 1860.

Mitchell earned a great reputation for himself, notably on account of the huge instruments which he installed in the Basilica of Québec, the Church of Holy Trinity of Chicago, and the Cathedral of St-Boniface (Manitoba). All of these were unfortunately lost in fires. However, some of his average sized organs still exist in Vaudreuil and St-Fabien de Panet for example. Listening to these, one can gain some idea of the splendid sound which the remarkable instruments of St-Sauveur (Québec) and especially the one of Notre-Dame de Lévis will produce once their pipes are restored to their original purity and brightness. Did not the organist Paul Letondal (1831-1894) write in the *Courrier du Canada* of 8 August 1870 that the organ in Lévis was "the finest to be found in the whole of British America"!



Christ Church of Sorel
Photo: CPRQ

Mitchell's design was solid and well-structured, and the pipes were made of pewter which gave to the tone, especially of the reeds and full organ, a clarity and brilliance to be found in the best French tradition.

Eusèbe Brodeur followed the same tradition. In 1866, he bought Joseph Casavant's workshop in St-Hyacinthe. He left for Europe in 1870 to improve his knowledge. It was he who introduced the Casavant brothers to organ building and then worked under their direction towards 1880. This did not prevent him from putting his own name to several instruments later on. Three of these, built between 1888 and 1898, still sing out beautifully today

In Québec, Napoléon Déry built about fifteen organs between 1874 and 1894. Some of them have remained exactly as they were built. Others have just kept their original pipes; and sometimes these have been integrated into a re-building or an enlargement including the modern provision of an electro-pneumatic action. This is what happened to the one in Saint-Jean-Baptiste (Québec) where the 37 stop organ by Déry in 1885 was increased to a 75 stop organ by Casavant in 1921.

In 1879 the Casavant brothers founded their business. During the previous year Claver (1855-1933), who had worked for Brodeur and for Mitchell, improved his knowledge in Versailles (France) under John Abbey, and Samuel (1859-1929) joined him there and stayed for several months in order to visit the great European organ builders. The two brothers were soon very successful and their reputation grew considerably after they built the huge organ (1890) for the Basilica of Notre-Dame (Montréal), which still resounds in that prestigious building today. As there is already an existing internet site dedicated to the Casavant Brothers, we will just mention that this business, which is still active today, was almost the only enterprise in organ production between 1900 and 1965.

From the aesthetic point of view, the tonal quality of organs built in Canada after 1920, like organs everywhere, seemed to flounder in a welter of lifeless and heavy sounds. Now and then this would be punctuated by a thunderous blast from the reed-stops, as if the organ had renounced altogether its bell-like qualities and had given up striving after that incisive clarity of the older instruments and could no longer achieve the warm roundness of tone like that of an Aristide Cavallé-Coll.



Church of Saint Jean-Baptiste
de Montréal
Photo : A. Kilbertus

On the other hand, from the end of the nineteen-thirties, there was a return to healthier traditions in Europe which reached America not long after the end of the Second World War. In Québec, this development took place at the Casavant firm towards 1958. The master organ builder was impressed with the determination of these youngsters who

had come back from their studies in Europe. He was also impressed by the instruments they produced for Montréal. In his wisdom, he recruited young experts (especially from Europe) who were able to train the excellent personnel working for the firm in the how and why of a new aesthetic, bringing back the best of the past and open to new developments in materials and working methods. This transition took place with an amazing rapidity and the Casavant firm once more became the leaders in the North American continent as the Casavant brothers had been in the world of organ building in Québec.

Therefore, from 1960, Casavant put his signature to several electro-pneumatic instruments built in a neo-classical style. He re-introduced the tracker-action which had been abandoned in 1904, and built organs inspired by the Germanic baroque and French classical styles. His success soon prompted some of the people who had largely contributed to the work produced by the Casavant firm to start their own businesses. Kark Wilhelm, in 1966, and Hellmuth Wolff, in 1968 founded their own firm. In 1979 Guy Thérien (Guilbault-Thérien) and Fernand Létourneau, who had learnt their profession mainly at the Casavant firm, also left. Finally, in 1994, Denis Juget, a young Frenchman who had worked in Europe and America, also established himself near to Montréal.



Church of Saint-Jean-Baptiste
de Québec
Photo : Denyse Lécaré

These six Québec organ builders concentrate on designing and producing new organs deriving their inspiration from various sources. Juget, Wilhelm and Wolff are only interested in tracker-action whereas Casavant, Guilbault-Thérien and Létourneau also deal with electro-pneumatic manuals. A significant part of their work is concerned with the maintenance and repair of organs, even re-voicing the stops to improve a dull tone.

Another field of activity which is increasing in importance is the restoration of beautiful, old instruments. This is sometimes supported by the Canadian Heritage department, but especially by the Commission des biens culturels du Québec, and has been for several decades. The *Québec Religious Heritage Foundation* was founded in 1994, and an advisory committee about organs was set up within it. This gave support to the enthusiasts for the cause, seeing that the churches were no longer able to find the necessary finance on their own. In an attempt to summarise briefly the achievement of organ building in Québec over the last four decades, it is no exaggeration to say that from both the stylistic and technical points of view it has reached its zenith. It is a field in which we are among the best in the world. That undoubtedly explains why the United States and countries as far away as Japan or Australia import over three-quarters of Québec's production.

Antoine Bouchard
Text translated by Rachel Tunnicliffe

Antoine Bouchard received his training as organist from the Masters Leon Destroismaisons, Claude Lavoie and Gaston Litaize. At Laval University, where he taught between 1961 and 1997, he was involved in training many organists of which several have acquired notoriety. He has performed concerts in North America and Europe, and has many records and radio recordings to his credit. The abbot Bouchard is also adviser for organ construction, and has published articles on the history of the organ in Canada and on the evolution of liturgical music in Quebec since the Second Vatican Council.

Selective list of instruments of particular historical interest

Instruments with tracker action (except : St-Charles de Caplan, electro-pneumatic)

PLACE	YEAR	NUMBER OF STOPS
CASAVANT		
St-David de Yamaska	1888-op20	17
St-François du Lac	1891-op29	15
Ste-Cécile de Milton	1897	16
Lacolle (anglican Church)	1885-op9	5
St-Thomas-de-Joliette	1894-op52	15
Caplan (St-Charles)	1905	11
Notre-Dame-de-Jacques-Cartier, Québec		
Très-Saint-Nom-de-Jésus, Montréal		
St-Jean-Baptiste, Montréal		
KARN		
Longueuil (St.Mark's)	Aound 1896	5
KARN-WARREN		
Ste-Foy (anglican Church)	Around 1897	15
NAPOLEON DERY		
St-Joachim	1885	8
St-Michel de Bellechasse	1897	17
St-Roch-des-Aulnaies	1874	10
St-Isidore de Dorchester	1889	14
Saint-Jean-Baptiste (Québec)		
EUSÈBE BRODEUR		
Les Cèdres (Soulanges)	1898	20
Cacouna	1888	18

Ste-Monique (Nicolet)	1893	19
LOUIS MITCHEL		
St-Norbert (Berthier)	1881	16
St-André de Kamouraska	1874	8
St-Fabien-de-Panet (Montmagny)	1875-80	18
Vaudreuil	1871	18
St-Roch-sur-Richelieu	Installed in St-Roch in 1905	20 or 21
Notre-Dame-de-Lévis		
Saint-Sauveur (Québec)		
SAMUEL WARREN		
St.Stephen's anglican church	1854	7
Frelighsburg (anglican Church)	?	7
Dunham (anglican Church)	Around 1860, purchased in 1911	5
SAMUEL WARREN AND SON		
Deschambault	1892	16
GUILBAULT-THÉRIEN		
St-Patrice (Rivière-du-Loup)		
Cathédrale de Rimouski		
Cathédrale de Valleyfield		