

The AGO Westchester Chapter Trip to The Wanamaker Organ, Centenary Festival at Macy's on June 25, 2011

By Virginia Bender

Between 6:30 a.m. and 7 a.m., twelve members and friends of our chapter gathered at the Valhalla United Methodist Church. The van arrived and we piled into it. We left shortly after 7 a.m. and arrived at Macy's in Philadelphia around 9:30 a.m. – shortly before the store opened. We took photos of the entire group outside Macy's and by the Wanamaker plaque on the building.



Left to right: Doris and Donald Dubac, Noriko Yamada, Thomas Zachacz, Judy Abel, Joyce Gardner, Ginny Bender, Timothy Keenan-Devlin, Lynne Hansen, Janine Wallour-Thwaite, David Thwaite



From left: Reid O'Connell, Janine Wallour-Thwaite, Joyce Gardner, Lynne Hansen, Noriko Yamada, Thomas Zachacz, Timothy Keenan-Devlin, Doris and Donald Dubac

Shortly before 10 a.m., one of the store managers came out and told us what was happening for this day of celebration. I frantically wrote down times and places so I would not forget. At 10 a.m., the door opened and the crowd went to the Grand Court where 175 chairs had been placed. I believe everyone waiting found spots.



View of Grand Court from the stage. You can see some of the 175 chairs.

About 10:10, the first concert started. Michael Stairs, the organist for the Philadelphia Orchestra, played four pieces:

Trumpet Tune in C by John Stanley, arr. Alec Wyton

Theme from Romeo and Juliet by Tchaikovsky

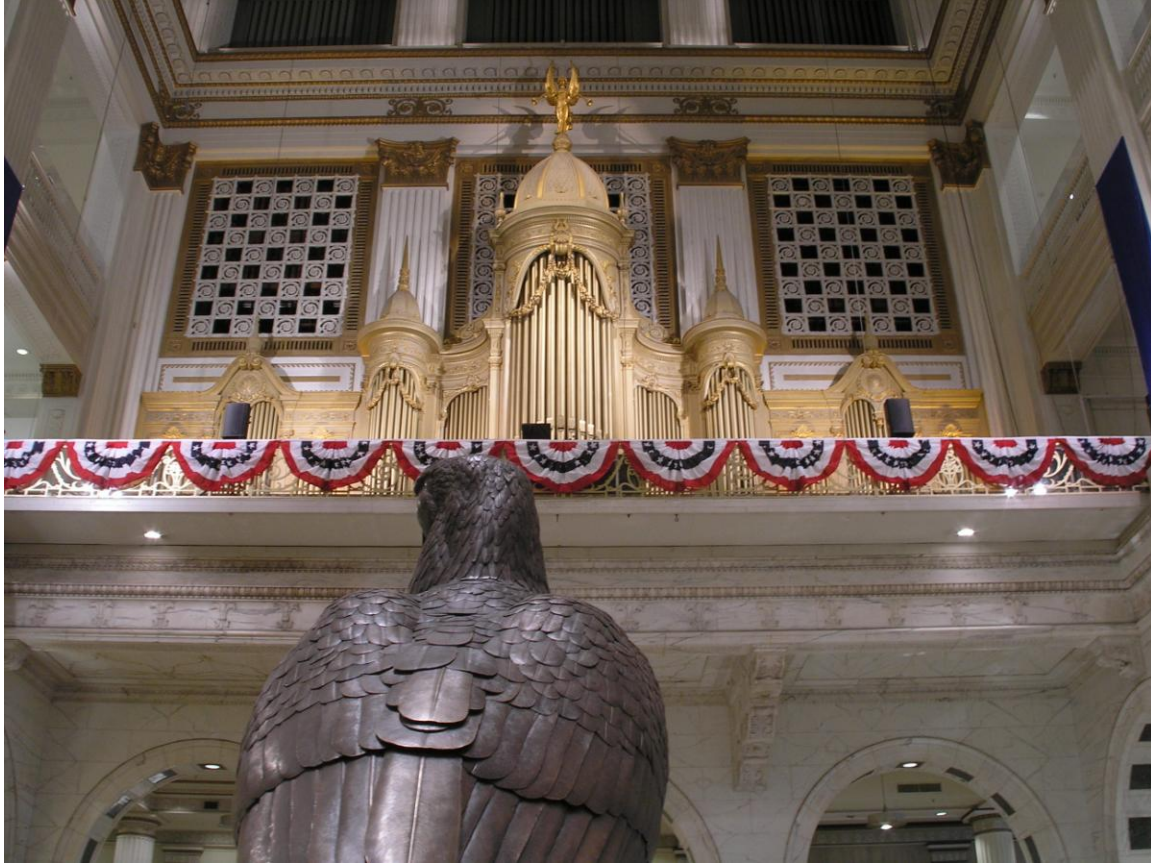
Aria by Andrew Carter

A Mighty Fortress by Sigfrid Karg-Elert



A little blurry, but this is Michael Stairs.

After him, we heard five more pieces with Colin Howland as the organist. He currently is the Director of Music and Arts at a Dallas Church and one of the founding members of the Philadelphia Organ Quartet, a unique ensemble which arranges and performs music for four organs and organists! He played a Fanfare, and three pieces in memory of Keith Chapman who formerly played at Macy's and had been his teacher. The first piece was *Bist Du Bei Mir* by Bach. The first movement of Handel's *Organ Concerto #4*, and *Pastorale* by Keith Chapman. His final selection was a Louis Vierne piece.



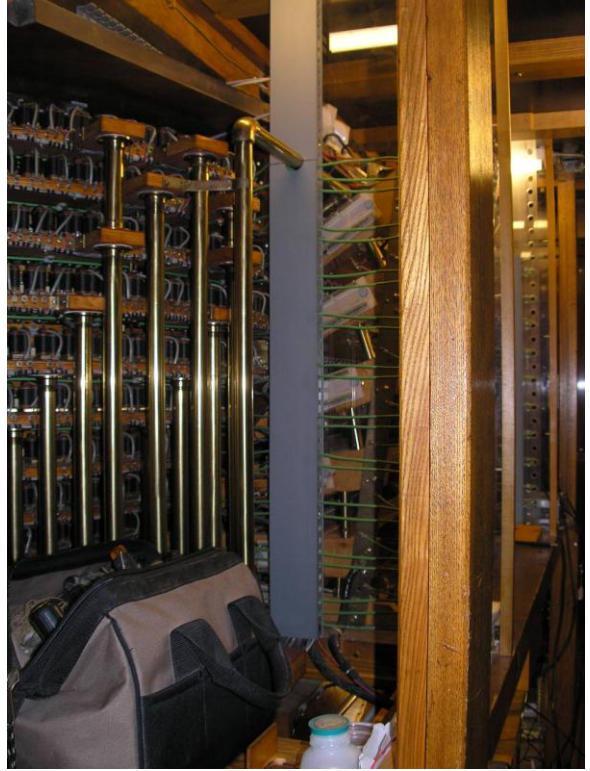
My view during the concert

This finished around 11:15 and we had a break until the Jill Pasternak's Crossover live broadcast on WRTI-FM radio from the Grand Court at 11:30 a.m. For this, she talked to Peter Richard Conte, the current Wanamaker Organist and the other three Philadelphia Organ Quartet members: Colin Howland, Rudolph Lucent, and Michael Stairs. There were also appearances by Peter Krasinski and Jeremy Filsell, a pianist. Michael Stairs started this off with three of the pieces he played for the concert: the pieces by John Stanley, Andrew Carter and Sigfrid Karg-Elert. Rudolph Lucent is the Dean of the Philadelphia Chapter of AGO and played *Solemn Entry* by Richard Strauss. Peter Krasinski did an improvisation on *Jerusalem* and another theme. He had been an assistant organist at Wanamaker in the '70s. On the evening program, *Rachmaninoff's Concerto #2 for Piano and Organ* was going to be played with Jeremy Filsell at the piano. So, he and Peter Richard Conte played a small section of this. Then, Peter Richard Conte ended the show with *Sonata on the 94th Psalm* by Julius Reubke and a Finale.

This all ended around 1:15 p.m. From 1 – 2 p.m., we were allowed to tour the Main Chamber, the Stage, and also the console. I managed to fit all three in before the 2 p.m. happening. These tours were on the second floor of Macy's.



Some of the pipes on the façade – taken from the stage right below them.



The inside of the console
The inside of the console



The stage as seen from the console.



The six keyboards of the console.

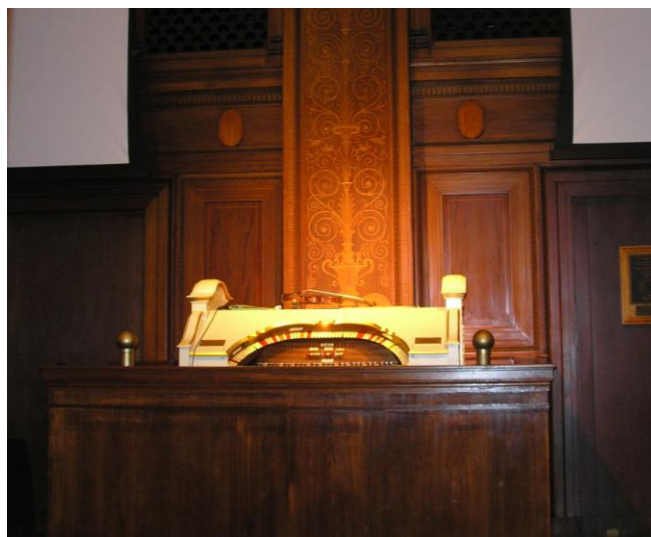


The edge of the keyboards with the right bank of stops.

The next event was the 2 p.m. silent movie in Greek Hall (on the third floor of Macy's.) This is the only concert while we were there for which we had to pay. When I heard it was going to be a 2 hour silent movie, I wasn't sure I wanted to go as I thought it would seem extremely long. However, since I had made the effort to go and since I finished the tours I for sure wanted to see in time for the concert, I went to this too. I also found most of the rest of the group there. In the crowd, we had lost each other for the concerts. The movie was D.W. Griffith's *Way Down East*. Peter Krasinski played at the Mighty Wurlitzer. (I had wondered how they were going to do this movie since the Grand Court was open and not conducive to making it dark for a movie.) Well, they had a second organ – the Wurlitzer – in another huge room. The movie was about a naïve country girl (Lillian Gish) who is tricked into a sham marriage, then abandoned with her child. While the movie sounds sort of ho-hum, along with the music, it was absolutely fantastic. I never realized that two hours could seem so short. So, this finished slightly after 4 p.m.



The tile that will be put into the cement sidewalk along one of their streets. It is considered the Walk of Stars, Peter Richard Conte was just honored with this. This picture was taken in the console area where it was standing.



The "mighty" Wurlitzer and the edges of the screens

From 4 p.m. to 5 p.m., we could tour the fourth floor and see the string pipes, among others, and the blower room. Again, I managed to see the three rooms – it was made even more fun as the organ was rehearsing with the orchestra and chorus at the time, so we could see the swell shutters open and close from behind them instead of from the side you see during performances. If one looked closely at the various floors above the stage, one could see the swell shutters, a floor that was not open, and then another floor that had some exposed pipes. So, the pipes were contained from floor 2 though floor 6. The pipes that one sees at stage level (floor two) are simply fakes. So the only real pipes seen are the ones on floor 6 or 7.



Some of the pipes on the fourth floor



This photo shows the different floors (the facade starts on the second floor, the top part of it is on the third floor). Above the peak of the facade is the fourth floor and you can see the swell shutters there. Then, if you go to the top floor which is either the 6th or 7th floor, you can see some of the exposed pipes

By the time this was finished, I had just enough time to scurry to Dunkin Donuts to pick up a container of milk and gulp it down in time to get back for the 5 p.m. concert. This time, I chose to watch it from the third floor so I could look down on the organ and stage. The Philadelphia Brass, Friends of the Wanamaker Organ Festival Chorus, Peter Richard Conte and Rudolph Lucente, organists, and Jonathan Coopersmith, conductor performed 8 pieces.

Peter Richard Conte was the organist for:

Swell the Full Chorus by George Friederic Handel
I was Glad by Charles Hubert Hastings Parry
Choral by Joseph Jongen
and *Empire March* by Elgar

Rudolph Lucente played *Fanfare and Procession* (a premier performance) by Keith Chapman and arranged by Michael Stairs

Then, Peter Richard Conte was the organist for the final three numbers:
Sing by Charles-Marie Widor, arr. David Willcocks
America the Beautiful arr. by Richard Webster
National Anthem arr. by Peter Richard Conte.

The audience was invited to sing with the National Anthem.



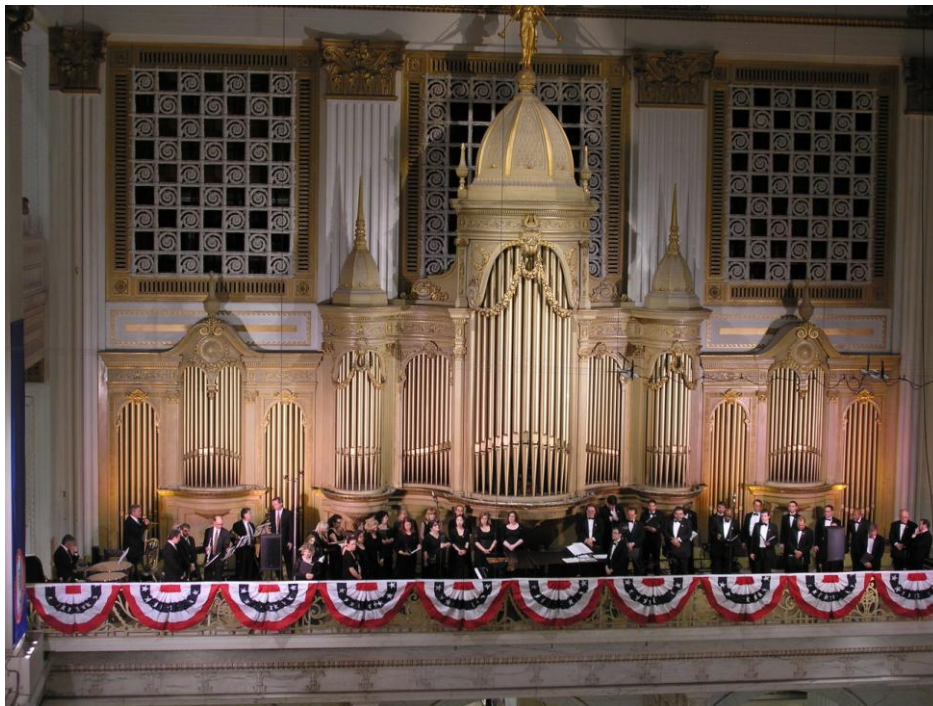
The Philadelphia Brass and the Friends of the Wanamaker Festival Chorus on the stage.



This shows Peter Richard Conte at the console with the edge of the stage on the far right.



This photo shows the console on the left of the second story, and the Grand Court where the people sat in the center on the bottom. The stage is in front of them on the second floor – you can see the banners that were on the front of the stage at the very top.



A closer view of the Brass and Chorus



A closer view of the Philadelphia Brass



The eagle in the center of the Grand Court

This finished at 6 p.m., so we had about 45 minutes to wander around and look at the Friends of the Wanamaker display and things they were selling, go to Starbucks, wander Macy's, or simply sit and relax after a very exhausting day.

We left Philadelphia at 7 p.m. and were back in Valhalla at 9:15 p.m. after a very exhausting but marvelous day. I have put some photos on the website to show you what you missed. Hopefully, if we do this again, more of you will be enticed to go.

Ginny Bender
June 26, 2011