

# CASAVANT CELEBRATES

## 125TH ANNIVERSARY

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On February 6, 2005, organ aficionados will gather at the Université Laval in Québec City to hear Casavant historian Simon Couture lecture on the history of the French Canadian organ-builder Casavant Frères, illustrated by various organs in the Québec City region. This event will conclude a 125th anniversary celebration involving many Casavant organs around the world.

Casavant, founded in 1879 by brothers Samuel and Claver Casavant, has remained Canada's best known organ-builder, and is the longest-tenured builder in continuous operation in North America. Its workshops remain on the property surrounding the Casavant family homestead in St.-Hyacinthe, just east of Montreal.

As it approached this historic milestone, Casavant's staff designed a nine-month celebration climaxing with "Casavant Weekend," November 13-14, in which organists who play Casavant instruments performed Dan Locklair's *In Mystery and Wonder: The Casavant Diptych*, commissioned by Casavant for the anniversary.

Casavant president André Gremillet reflected, "As we considered an appropriate way to celebrate the occasion of our 125th anniversary, we wanted to honor not only Claver and Samuel Casavant, who founded Casavant Frères, but also to recognize the contribution of composers and organists, for without them the instruments have no meaning or purpose. What better way to recognize the contribution of our founders and all musicians who make music on

our instruments than to commission a new work for organ?"

Gremillet continued, "Finding in Dan Locklair a composer whose enthusiasm for this commission matched our desire to have a work that would mark the importance of this anniversary with something of lasting significance has been most rewarding. It is our hope that those who give form to this music through performance will reflect upon the contribution of the artisans who, with their talent and through their hands, shaped the raw materials of wood and metal into musical instruments."

Reflecting on this piece, Locklair wrote, "It is my genuine hope that organists and listeners throughout the world will find *In Mystery and Wonder (The Casavant Diptych)* rewarding, and that this new creation will help Casavant celebrate its past 125 years and effectively launch the company into its next 125 years."

Six other events complemented the Casavant observance. On June 18, Casavant tonal director Jacquelin Rochette was the featured lecturer as the Fédération québécoise des amis de l'orgue celebrated Casavant's anniversary. Rochette focused on the restoration of the Mitchell organ at Notre-Dame Church in Lévis, Canada. A recital by Gaston Arel followed featuring the premiere of *Suite pour orgue en hommage à Casavant Frères* by Claude Thompson.

On August 21, Casavant Frères paid homage to its craftspeople in the city of St.-Hyacinthe. The homage began with a joint recital by Jacquelin Rochette and

voicer Jean-Sébastien Dufour featuring works by Bach and the Locklair commission. It was followed by a gala evening honoring the work of current and retired artisans, which included an archive exhibit. The oldest Casavant artisan, Albert Bonin, who worked with the Casavant brothers in 1925 and who retired in 1976, was present, as were several generations of Casavant artisans.

On September 16, the "Festival Orgue et Couleurs" and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation paid tribute to Casavant by presenting a recital at Saint-Nom-de-Jésus Church in Montreal featuring Pierre Grandmaison (Notre-Dame Basilica, Montreal, 1891), Patricia P. Wright (Metropolitan United Church, Toronto, 1930), Jacquelin Rochette (Notre-Dame-de-l'Assomption Church, St.-Hyacinthe, 1961), and John Tuttle (St. Paul's Anglican Church, Toronto, 1915).

This event was followed by an additional Rochette lecture on September 30 that examined Casavant's tonal philosophy viewed through the legacy of its tonal directors.

October 24 marked a recital on the 191-rank instrument at Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Tex. Pierre Pincemaille, organist at Saint-Denis in Paris, played works by Duruflé, Franck, Widor, Bach, and an improvised symphony based on unpublished themes written for Casavant in the 1960s by Marcel Dupré. The recital also highlighted the Locklair work with the composer as a guest for the evening.

Gremillet concluded, "During the course of the 125 years since the formal announcement of the workshop opening in 1879, Casavant artisans have built and installed instruments on every inhabited continent of the world. That the vast majority of these instruments continue to serve their intended purpose is not only a source of genuine pride, but also carries an obligation of responsibility to those who have followed in the footsteps of our founders and predecessors. It is awe-inspiring to consider the thousands of hours of music that already have been performed and will continue to be played upon these instruments. We are truly humbled to contemplate the impact Casavant organs make upon those who play and hear them."

As a final facet of its anniversary celebrations, Casavant anticipates a 2005 release of a 125th anniversary CD featuring music performed during the anniversary celebration.

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## CASAVANT FRÈRES: A BRIEF HISTORY

Joseph Casavant, recognized as the first Canadian-born organbuilder of importance, received his first contract in 1840, making Casavant the oldest continuing name in North American organbuilding. Joseph's sons, Claver and Samuel, grew up observing their father's love of organbuilding and, after Joseph's retirement, worked in the shop of his successor. In 1878, Claver went to France, where he worked for John Abbey. Later, after Samuel joined him, they spent time in Paris with Cavallé-Coll and traveled extensively, visiting builders and organs in Europe and England. On their return to St.-Hyacinthe in 1879, they established Casavant Frères on the site where the present workshops stand.

The first organ, completed in 1880, was followed in 1885 by their first three-manual instrument. Installed in the cathedral in St.-Hyacinthe, Opus 8 featured the first successful adjustable capture combination-action mechanism. The Organ Historical Society has cited this and six other Casavant organs as being historically important. The instrument that firmly established their international reputation was completed in 1891 for Notre-Dame Basilica in Montreal. That all of these instruments and many others built by the brothers



Prior to the October 24 Fort Worth recital, composer Dan Locklair (far left) joins Casavant staff (left to right) Stanley Scheer, vice president; André Gremillet, president; Didier Grassin, director of tracker organs; Simon Couture, project manager/historian; and Jacquelin Rochette, tonal director, with Casavant Opus 3750 in the background.

are extant bears witness to their commitment to quality. During their career, they received much recognition, including the Grand Prix at the 1930 International Exhibition in Antwerp. In addition to numerous organs on the North American continent, they installed others in France, the West Indies, South and Central America, South Africa, and Japan. Today, there are Casavant organs on every inhabited continent, including instruments in all of the provinces in Canada and all 50 of the United States.

Samuel and Claver were partners who worked together with their individual interests and talents complementing one another. As their reputation and business grew, they added other dedicated individuals who would function as a part of a strong team, thus assuring continuity in the event of illness and enabling the company to continue long after them. During the last decade of their work, they brought a young Englishman, Stephen Stoot, into the firm. He was not only a well-trained craftsman but also an accomplished organist who first finished instruments during the tenure of the Casavant brothers, later succeeding Claver Casavant.

The leadership at Casavant has always taken keen interest in keeping abreast of new developments. The interest in historical instruments, principally those of the 17th and 18th centuries, was embraced in the mid-1950s. During this time, Lawrence Phelps worked to establish an approach to organbuilding based upon classical design principles that led to a return to building mechanical-action organs in addition to instruments with electric action. In 1972, Gerhard Brunzema

joined Casavant. His training, background, and extensive experience with historically important European organs allowed Casavant to hone its already well-established mechanical-action capabilities.

The early 1980s witnessed an awakening of interest in organ design of a broader perspective than had been practiced for some time. Realizing the importance of this movement, Casavant brought Jean-Louis Coignet to the firm as tonal director. His lifelong interest in the organ, European training, and his position as the organ expert for the city of Paris brought a new perspective and vitality to the company and the instruments built under his leadership. In 1984, Jacquelin Rochette joined the firm, first as Mr. Coignet's assistant, later becoming associate tonal director. Together they have developed a tonal palette of great variety where the color of individual stops is developed to the fullest extent while working to blend them so that the ensemble becomes more cohesive as stops are added to the texture, resulting in versatile and eminently musical instruments. Their practical approach to tonal design based on a synthesis of classical, symphonic, and modern principles has won admiration from musicians around the world.

During their lifetime, the Casavant brothers established the finest traditions of craftsmanship among their artisans and a strong organization to carry on those traditions after them. This organization continues to stand for the artistic integrity and painstaking care that the Casavant brothers cherished and fostered.

STAN SCHEER, Vice President  
Casavant Frères