

“Wind under the fingertips”

Andrew Carnegie’s organ benefactions in Illinois and the nation



Dr. Paula Pugh Romanaux

[Editor’s note: When most people think of the philanthropy of industrialist Andrew Carnegie (1845-1919), they think libraries. When Dr. Paula Pugh Romanaux considers Carnegie, she thinks pipe organs. A concert organist for more than 45 years, Romanaux has studied and played the “king of instruments” all over Europe, but she got her start in Cass County, Illinois, on an organ purchased with a matching grant from the Carnegie Foundation. The Carnegie organ benefactions are a fascinating, little-known story, one every serious student of music history should know.]

Illinois Heritage: The world knows philanthropist Andrew Carnegie valued education, especially self-improvement, which is why he funded more than 1,400 libraries across the nation. But what was his compelling reason to create organ benefactions—more than 7,500 around the globe and 207 in Illinois?

Romanaux: At the same time Andrew Carnegie was matching dollar-for-dollar the efforts of civic organizations funding the construction of libraries across the United States (1890s until his death in 1919), he was also quietly donating

portions of his wealth to build pipe organs, mostly for churches. Carnegie said in his auto-biography, published posthumously in 1920, “I can’t control what is spoken from the pulpits, but I can influence the music heard in our communities.”

IH: How did the organ benefactions work in the United States? How did church and civil communities learn of Carnegie’s benefactions?

Romanaux: Early in Carnegie’s

career he gave his first pipe organ to their family Swedenborgian church in Allegheny City, Pennsylvania. After the organ installation, a groundswell of applications came forth—applications from the large cathedral in Pittsburgh to small village churches. Carnegie personally handled all the requests and found himself overwhelmed with the time his project took. He said “every church seemed to need a



This Hook & Hastings pipe organ in Virginia, Illinois, was funded with a grant from Andrew Carnegie, and was the organ Paula Romanaux practiced on as a young teenager.

better organ than it had, and as the full price for the new instrument was paid, the sale of the old instrument was pure profit." It was not unusual for a small village church to order organs that could "split rafters."

The organ grant requests were organized into a strict system of giving by the Carnegie Corporation. Carnegie's personal secretary, Mr. James Bertrum (1872-1934), developed a printed schedule of questions and answers to be returned before any further action was taken. In 1935, Pillans & Wilson published *The British Trusts and Their Work*, with a section titled a "Centenary of the Birth of Andrew Carnegie," which enumerates Carnegie's rationale for sponsoring pipe organs:

- (1) That the organ would be an inspiration for leading congregational music and to spiritually uplift;
- (2) That the organ would be an instrument on which students could learn to play;
- (3) That the churches are contributing instrumentalists in the social and cultural advance of a community — the aggregate of communities make the Nation;
- (4) The efficiency of the services of a church is augmented by the use of a pipe organ, hence, through the church the organ indirectly contributes to the social and cultural advance of the community; and
- (5) Directly, the organ when used in recitals and by students of music renders and important cultural service.

The Carnegie pipe organ grant applications required the church to supply the name and denomination of the requestor; number of full members; resources of the church—lot, building, equipment; value of any other church property, including vestments, chalices, bells, candlesticks, church furniture; amount of debt; date church was built; seating capacity; pricing of proposed organ and how the church arrived at the number; if the new organ had been ordered; how much money the organization had raised; the particu-



Andrew Carnegie passion for pipe organs was inspired by his love of the music of George Frideric Handel.

lars of the present organ—age, cost, was it second hand; reasons for displacing the present instrument, how much could be realized from the sale of the old organ.

IH: Carnegie was from a poor family in Scotland. Did he grow up with a music tradition in his family, or was it something he cultivated after he came to America?

Romanau: It was not until after the Carnegie Family immigrated to the United States from Scotland in 1848 that Andrew Carnegie developed an ear for music. Raised under the ridged tenets of the Scottish Presbyterian Church, the Carnegies left their Calvinist roots and, after moving to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, joined other Scottish immigrants in attending the Swedenborgian Church. It was the Swedenborgian Hymnal that most intrigued the young Carnegie, for in the back of the hymnal were several oratorio excerpts. It was George Frideric Handel's music that inspired Carnegie to join the choir. He said "it was more his enthusiasm than vocal quality" that allowed him to remain in the choir, but it was also

the beginning of his interest in the pipe organ. He wrote that listening to hymns transported him more than any scripture.

IH: How did you first learn of Carnegie and his interest in pipe organs?

Romanau: I learned to play on a Carnegie grant instrument at the Christian Church on E. Beardstown Street in Virginia, Illinois. It was, originally a hand-pumped instrument my father pumped when he attended there as a child. But when I was practicing on that organ as a teenager, the bellows had been converted to an electric pumping system. It was this mechanical action organ, an instrument that has direct control of the individual pipe sounds, in essence, "wind under your fingertips," that profoundly influenced me throughout my career as a performer and teacher.

My father, Richard Pugh, told me about Carnegie and how the Virginia pipe organ was purchased. The organ was and remains an Opus No. 2194 of the firm E. and G.G. Hook & Hastings, of Boston, Massachusetts. A mechanical stop and key-action instrument, it was built and assembled in 1908 with two manual keyboards and one pedal keyboard. The top keyboard (the Swell) had a mechanical swell shade and 14 registers. To this day the organ is, except for the electric blower, unaltered.

IH: The Christian Church you practiced on is a long way from the Carnegie Foundation. How did churches learn about his grants?

Romanau: I have found no records or advertisements for Carnegie organ grants; however, we know that after the Allegheny City, Pennsylvania, organ installation, the prominent Pittsburgh Cathedral contacted Carnegie about funding a new instrument. Denominational gatherings could have also encouraged inquires. When looking at the demographics of Carnegie organs, it is clear word of mouth played a role, but this was also at a parallel time when the Carnegie libraries were being built. Libraries start conversations. Pennsylvania, where the first organ was built, received 1,351

Carnegie gift instruments, followed by Ohio with 440 instruments, New York (home of the Carnegie Foundation and the Carnegie residence) with 290, and Illinois with 207. The total number of organ benefactions at Carnegie's death was 4,092 in the United States (7,689 around the world), valued at \$3.6 million in 1919 [*about \$55 million in today's dollars*].

IH: Can you say something about the organ companies that constructed these instruments? Where any of the manufacturers from Illinois? Are any still in business?

Romanaux: Interesting is the prominence of Carnegie instruments in smaller towns in central Illinois, where we also see Carnegie libraries. The Hinners Organ Company of Pekin, Illinois, was established in 1879, and that company built several pipe organs in Mason, Menard, and Tazewell counties before ceasing production in 1947. The Disciples of Christ churches (Christian Churches) — congregations within 30 minutes of our home in Petersburg — still have playable Carnegie organs in Virginia (Hook & Hastings), Petersburg (Hinners), and Havana (Hinners).

Hinners was the first mail-order company to ship pump organs in the country, and sold more than 3,000 pipe organs beginning in 1902 (the year after Carnegie's organ benefactions went public). Hinners' reliable, mass-produced organs featured eight to ten stops, two manuals (keyboards), a pedal board, mechanical action, and a hand pump. They were priced from \$700-\$1000 and, with add-ons, could range upwards to several thousand dollars.

Other organ companies prominent throughout Illinois were the Wicks Organ Company of Highland and the E. & G.G. Hook & Hastings Organs (1827-1935), of Boston, which offered stock models and custom instruments to small and midsize churches, and grander models to churches in Chicago and wealthy suburbs. These larger instruments had dominating rear-gallery installations of three to four keyboards, 40-plus stops, intricate pipe



This impressive Carnegie-funded pipe organ was installed in the Methodist Episcopal Church in Mattoon, but was later replaced with a more modern instrument.

shade decorations, and price tags exceeding \$20,000.

IH: Your interest in Carnegie organ benefactions also includes the organ repertoire of the late 19th and early 20th century, especially composers who might have written for these instruments. What have you discovered so far?

Romanaux: Recognizable organ music from this time was by Cesar Franck, Louis Vierne, Johannes Brahms, Johann Sebastian Bach, Marcel Dupré, Josef Rheinberger, Felix Mendelssohn, and many others. To date I haven't found any special music commissioned for Carnegie organs, but I can't imagine none exist. Theatrical organs still are in every major city in the country and composers wrote for them often; I would love to find an original composition that honors Carnegie's gifts.

IH: Are you still looking for Carnegie organs in Illinois?

Romanaux: Yes, absolutely. I have identified at least 80, although many have been destroyed, altered, or decommissioned. Recently we visited a Baptist church in Palmyra that I believe has a Carnegie organ. It needs some minor work but it is a beautiful instrument. I'm sure there are many others in similar condition. *Illinois Heritage* readers who think they know of a Carnegie organ can write to me at Paulapughromanau@gmail.com.

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