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10 Fingers, 2 Feet and 5,000 Pipes, Breathing Life Into the Present

You don't need to go to a jazz club to hear spontaneous riffs and exciting musical invention. You can go to church.

By Annik LaFarge
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The last time I was in a church was the week before New York City's coronavirus lockdown, nearly five months and a lifetime ago.

I was at Grace Church in the Village to hear "Bach at Noon," a daily "meditation" set to works by J.S. Bach and played by the church's longtime organist Patrick Allen on a magnificent four-manual, 5,000-pipe organ. For the past couple of years I've been regularly visiting churches at lunchtime to hear music. These concerts, which are free and open to the public, take place all over the city, from St. John the Divine on the way Upper West Side to St. Paul's Chapel at the southern tip of the island.

The daily Bach recital at Grace Church started after the Sept. 11 attacks as a gesture of healing for the community, but it didn't actually begin with Bach.

It began with improvisations. In those early days following the terrorist attack, Mr. Allen told an interviewer, "there simply needed to be sound in that space" because "silence was too strong."

Day after day he improvised on hymn tunes until someone said "Why don't we have some Bach?" And so it has gone for 19 years. On my last visit, on March 5, Mr. Allen played three chorales, including the haunting "Alle Menschen müssen sterben" — "All men must die."

I'm not a Sunday churchgoer but lately have fallen in love with the pipe organ, an instrument thought to have been invented in Alexandria, Egypt, in the third century B.C.E., long beforeChristians gave it a primary role in religious service.

It's one of the oldest, most perpetually evolving pieces of human technology: Its pipes were first made to sing through the power of hydraulic energy, then, by the Middle Ages, human legs pumping air into bellows and finally, in the modern era, courtesy of electricity.

When you hear a pipe organ, you're listening to the sounds of our most ancient past, and usually — if you're in a church, which is where most of these massive instruments can be found — you're likely to be hearing music from a distant era: Bach, Buxtehude, Messiaen, Handel, Franck, Poulenc, Vierne, all great composers who wrote for what has come to be known as "the king of instruments."

But this king is not stuck in the past; the organ has a long, distinguished role in the art of improvisation. You don't need to go to a jazz club to hear a keyboard artist spontaneously create musical inventions that spring from the heart. You can go to church.

My introduction to this world came when I was researching a book about Frédéric Chopin. As a 15-year-old conservatory student, Chopin was tapped to play the organ during services at a Warsaw church and was famous for his improvisations.

People in the pews would sit spellbound as he tore brilliantly through a series of improvised harmonic ideas, entirely forgetting they were in church. One Sunday a sacristan stormed up to the organ loft on behalf of a highly irritated priest, who had been unable to complete his Mass over the wild and unceasing playing of the young organist.

When Chopin got to Paris in 1831, he found a very different situation: a culture in which a great many Parisians were flocking to Sunday services not just for religious reasons, but also for musical ones. They were showing up for the same reason people today go to jazz clubs and music festivals — to hear popular and new music played in inventive and unexpected ways.

In many of the great churches of Paris, the clergy was happy to oblige, allowing secular improvisations to mingle with standard liturgical fare. Sometimes the priest and organist even worked from completely different texts.

Visitors from other parts of Europe, especially Germany and England, were scandalized by the “grotesque” and “irreligious” music they heard in Paris churches: riffs on hunting songs, polkas, improvisations on opera arias, waltzes, even drinking songs. It was a long way from reverential improvisations on Gregorian chant and familiar hymns.

What the French Romantics did was start a musical liberation, a tradition of secular improvisation that is still alive and well, and constantly adapting to the new realities of the modern world.

In January I finally got to experience that jolt of excitement 19th-century churchgoers knew so well when David Briggs, one of world’s greatest contemporary organists, gave a recital at St. Paul’s Chapel.

Opened in 1766, St. Paul’s is the oldest surviving church building in Manhattan and sits in the heart of the Financial District, where it was an unlikely survivor of the Sept. 11 attacks. The church has a long history of blending secular and liturgical music; its first organ was imported from England in 1802, before there were builders in America, and it has since been upgraded, replaced and modified as the state of the art evolved.

In the modern era the pipes of St. Paul’s organ had to be altered to account for vibrations caused by the network of subway lines running directly below it.

When you sit in this lovely, historic chapel you see, hear and feel the modern world all around you: Trains rumble by underneath your chair, a giant video screen shows the hands and feet of the performer in the organ loft above your head, and the sounds, which range from a heraldic trumpet to a more delicate stop designed to sound like a nightingale, envelop you in a mingled world of harmony, polyphony and percussion.

That cold day in January when Mr. Briggs gave his recital, he announced an improvisation on a theme he wouldn’t identify in advance but promised we would all know. First he played it through straight, the 30-odd notes of the famous melody by John Williams from the epic space opera “Star Wars.”

Then, after a tiny pause, Mr. Briggs organized his feet on the pedals, hunched his shoulders with a devilish expression on his face and set into a series of loud, heavy chords, conjuring a full orchestra with his hands and feet, pulling out different stops as he went along.

A fugue-like section morphed into a riff on a carnival organ, then wandered into a minor-key lament in a performance that married the joy of improvised music with the unlimited capacity of the pipe organ. Turning around to face the audience and take a bow, Mr. Briggs made a gesture that's unique among organists: He motioned to the instrument — his orchestra — so that we could applaud it too.

When the pandemic shut down live musical performances, Mr. Briggs retreated to a small town in coastal Massachusetts, where he was given the keys to a local church, the Ascension Memorial in Ipswich. From its much smaller but still grandly expressive organ, Mr. Briggs set up his phone and started streaming what became an 11-week series of daily "Hibernation Improvs," short pieces that ranged from the meditative to the silly, with tributes to old masters — Bach, Purcell, Vierne, Duruflé — tossed in the mix.

Shut off from the real world, he tapped into that instinct that is clearly bred in the bone of every organist: to live in the moment by creating music that simultaneously evokes the past, vamps on the present and points a way to the future.

Annik LaFarge is the author of the forthcoming "Chasing Chopin: A Musical Journey Across Three Centuries, Four Countries, and a Half-Dozen Revolutions."