

Dear Uncle Max

Send questions to Dear Uncle Max, AGO National Headquarters, 475 Riverside Dr., Suite 1260, New York, NY 10115.

(This question was forwarded to me by National Headquarters, though it was not addressed to me personally. I thought it too fascinating not to share.)

I am a novelist, now at work on a historical fiction set in 1901. Incidental to the narrative is the assassination of President William McKinley at the Temple of Music in the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, N.Y., that year. I am looking for atmospheric color . . . Sometimes, reporters grab the most interesting little details.

In a newspaper account of the murder, it is noted that "Organist Gomph" had just reached a natural break in a Bach piece: "Organist Gomph had reached the highest notes in one of Bach's masterpieces on the great pipe organ, and as he stopped at the height to let the strains reverberate through the auditorium, the two shots rang out." It doesn't name the piece, and historians can't answer what the specific piece was . . . So my question is this: What Bach masterpiece for the organ would have such an internal climax that an organist might stop and not ruin the flow? . . . Even if I must fill the historical gap with a fictional piece, I want it to be plausibly authentic. (In other words, I don't want real Bach fans to say, "Nope. Couldn't have been. Can't be played on an organ.")
R.F., Wyo.

During the time I was working on background material to try to clarify this situation, a number of scenarios came to view of this famous event, some plausible, some not.

First Scenario

If we believe the above account, we might try the following: this seems to come dangerously close to asking, "If you were orchestrating a political assassination, what Bach organ music would you recommend, and where, for effect, in the music is the best place to fire two shots?" I am sure we have all been asked questions about which Bach would be best for a wedding or just where in the piece the bridesmaids ought to be started down the aisle. If we can do one, we can do the other. At least a great game! You make your quick review and see what you have for an answer and then we will look at, what seems to me, the most feasible answer(s).

Clues:

- a natural break
- highest point (at the climax)
- pause for strains to reverberate—two shots worth of silence
- must be a masterpiece (well-known?)

We could do worse for clues:

First choice: the ending of the *Passacaglia*, BWV 582—the D-flat-major chord (Neapolitan) going to the G-major dominant seventh chord plus the rests in between would fit perfectly.



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Second choice: Fugue from the *Prelude and Fugue in G Major*, BWV 541, again at the fermata, or hold, followed by a short rest. Here, as in the above, some organists may insert cadenzas during the rests: not so frequently done; it ruins the silence, which for our purposes would be needed here.



Third choice: *Pièce d'orgue*, BWV 572. Differs from the above in that the rests occur between large sections; here the second and third, by substituting a diminished seventh for a final tonic, picked up after the rest in the *Lentement* and then brought to a conclusion.



Fourth choice: *Prelude and Fugue in C Major* (9/8), BWV 547. Breaks occur in both the Prelude and Fugue, but not so dramatically as in the first three choices. The rests are placed a few bars from the end in each. Again, sometimes filled in with passagework by the performer—not good for our purposes.



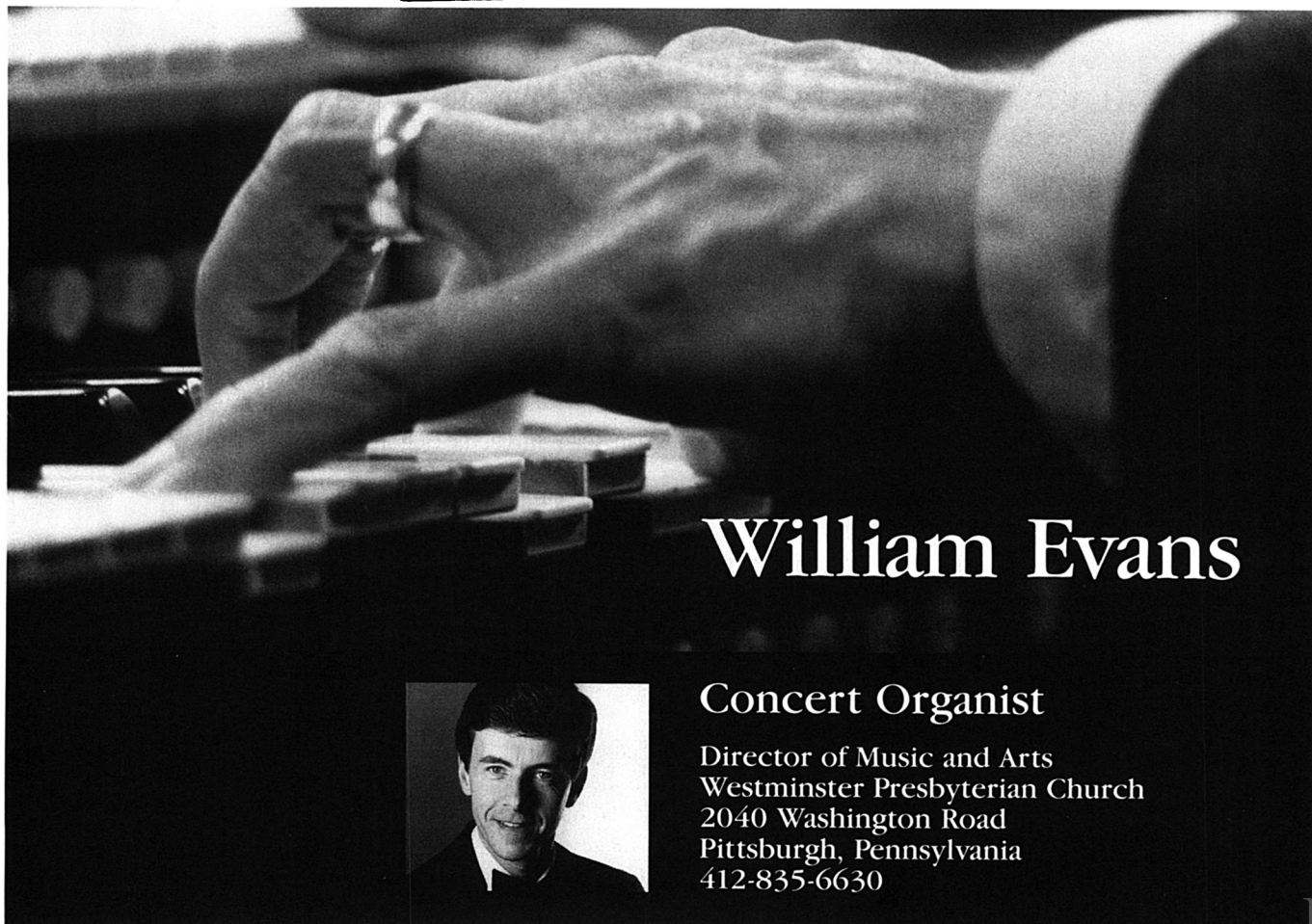
Fifth choice: *Toccata and Fugue in D Minor*, BWV 565. Would make good reading, but its rests occur too soon in the Toccata to be of much use. In any event, has to be ruled out on other grounds as you will see later.

The Background Setting

The Pan-American Exposition ("Now here the Queen city invites the world to come to her midst and be her guest from May first to November first, 1901") was meant to recognize achievement in industry and culture of the Americas as it passed into the 20th century. It had elegant grounds as well as eye-catching buildings, celebrating all sorts of colors—this for the "Rainbow City." Ninety-five percent of the buildings were made from wooden frames plus chicken wire coated with plaster. Too bad it was a very wet winter! The buildings got soggy and decayed quickly during and after the Exposition.

The Temple of Music was one of the most beautiful buildings, light yellows with red and gold trim, light blue panels in the dome. The auditorium seated 2,200 people and had one of the largest pipe organs built in the Americas to date—the magnum opus of Emmons Howard of Westfield, Mass., and Buffalo, N.Y., built at a cost of \$18,000. Originally ordered, according to David Snyder, the Buffalo organ historian, for Buffalo's St. Louis Church, it, for some reason, was not placed there but went directly to the Exposition. At the close of the Exposition it was purchased by J.N. Adams, given to the city, and installed in the Buffalo Music Hall, where it stayed until approximately 1939, when the Music Hall was torn down and replaced. The organ, rather ignominiously, went to the Buffalo City Horse Barn, where the weather got to it, like the buildings of the Exposition themselves, and it was destroyed and scrapped.


The specifications are of interest. Here they are as given in Barbara Owen's *The Organ in New England: An account of its use and manufacture to the end of the 19th century*.



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The boundary of the 19th century has happily been extended to include this New England-trained organbuilder's masterpiece.

TEMPLE OF MUSIC, BUFFALO, N.Y.
Emmons Howard & Son, 1901.

GREAT	CHOIR	SWELL
Open Diapason 16	Double Dulciana 16	Lieblich Bourdon 16
Open Diapason (large) 8	Open Diapason 8	Open Diapason 8
Open Diapason (medium) 8	Geigen Principal 8	Salicional 8
Doppel Flöte	Dulciana 8	Aeoline 8
Viol Di Gamba 8	Lieblich Gedackt 8	Stopped Diapason 8
Gross Flute 8	Melodia 8	Quintadena 8
Octave 4	Fugara 4	Vox Celeste 8
Flauto Traverso 4	Flute D'Amour 4	Flute Harmonique 4
Twelfth 2½	Piccolo Harmonique 2	Violin 4
Fifteenth 2	Orchestral Oboe 8	Flautino 2
Mixture IV	Clarinet 8 ("with bells")	Dolce Cornet III
Bombarde 16		Cornopean 8
Trumpet 8	PEDAL ("Augmented")	Oboe & Bassoon 8
Clarion 4	Contra Bourdon 32	Vox Humana 8
	Open Diapason 16 (wood)	
SOLO	Open Diapason 16 (metal)	
Tuba Mirabilis 8	Bourdon 16	
Stentorphon 8	Violon 16	
Philomela 8	Quint 10½	
Fugara 4	Violoncello 8	
	Flöte 8	
	Gedackt 8	
	Trombone 16	

Manual compass: 61 notes, CC – c₄.

Pedal compass: 30 notes, CC – f₁.

Mechanicals: Swell-Great, Swell-Great Super Octave, Swell-Great Sub Octave, Swell-Choir, Choir-Great, Solo-Great, Great-Pedal, Swell-Pedal, Choir-Pedal, Solo-Pedal, Swell Tremolo, Choir Tremolo, Great-Pedal Reversible, Sforzando Pedal, Balanced Swell Pedal, Balanced Choir Pedal, Balanced Crescendo Pedal, Adjustable Combinations: 3 plus cancel for Great, 3 plus cancel for Swell, 3 plus cancel for Pedal, 2 plus cancel for Choir, 2 plus cancel for Solo.

Kenneth F. Simmons has an article entitled "The Temple of Music Organ" that includes an elegant picture of the front pipes and console in *The Tracker*, Vol XIV (1970 Winter), No. 2, in which he lists some of the distinguished organists who played it: Frederic Archer, William C. Carl, Gaston Marie Dethier, J. Frank Donahoe, I.V.V. Flagler, Harry Rowe Shelley, Everett E. Truette, Samuel P. Warren, to name a few. Organists, orchestras, and bands were featured according to a pamphlet on *Music at the Pan-American Exposition*, which quoted Wordsworth on its title page:

"Where music dwells
Lingering, and wandering on as loath to die,
Like thoughts whose very sweetness yieldeth proof
That they were born for immortality."

Biographies of the performers were included. "... it has been the aim to have as many sections and important cities in the United States and Canada represented by their leading organists, as possible. . . . A special effort has been made to secure a large representation of women organists . . . who have won distinction as performers on this instrument." About 75 organists played.

Second Scenario

Less exciting than the first. During the Presidential Reception, as reported in the *New York Tribune* and other papers, an orchestra was playing a Bach Sonata. It is summarized this way in Margaret Leech's biography, *In the Days of McKinley* (Harper and Brothers, N.Y., 1959, p. 595); "... while a Bach sonata was purling under the din of the crowd, the President's reaching hand was struck aside, and a man lurched forward. Two shots cracked sharply . . . a moment of dead silence."

ANNOUNCING AMERICAN GUILD OF ORGANISTS NATIONAL YOUNG ARTISTS COMPETITION IN ORGAN PERFORMANCE August 2000–July 2002

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No more than 25 applicants will be accepted as official competitors. They will participate in the PERFORMANCE ROUNDS: a preliminary recorded-performance round judged in strict anonymity, then semifinal and final rounds in live competition at the 2002 AGO National Convention in Philadelphia, Pa. Complete rules will appear in the August 2000 issue of THE AMERICAN ORGANIST. The deadline for applications is April 30, 2001.

Recorded-Performance Round

J.S. Bach, Sonata No. 3 in D Minor, BWV 527 (complete, all repeats)
César Franck, Prelude, Fugue and Variation
Petr Eben, Moto Ostinato (*Nedelni Hudba*) (*Sunday Music*)

Semifinal Round

J.S. Bach, Prelude and Fugue in D Major, BWV 532
Jean Adam Guillaume Guilain, Tierce en taille, Basse de trompette (*Suite du deuxième ton*)
Maurice Duruflé, Scherzo, Op. 2
Stephen Paulus, Movement III: Impassioned (*The Three Temperaments*)
(available from the composer through Paulus Publications:
shpaulus@ibm.net; phone 651-644-6274; fax 651-647-6488; mail address, 1719 Summit Ave., St. Paul, MN 55105)

Final Round

Nicolaus Bruhns, Praeludium in E Minor (The Great)
J.S. Bach, Allein Gott in der Höh' sei Ehr', BWV 663
Robert Schumann, Study No. 4 in A-flat Major (*Studien für den Pedal-Flügel*, Op. 56)
Louis Vierne, Allegro maestoso (*Troisième Symphonie*, Op. 28)

Third Scenario: About the printed program for the day later.

But who was Gomph? Born in 1878 in Albany, at the time of our story he was organist of the Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church in Buffalo as well as director of the First German Baptist Choral Society. He became an Associate in the Guild in 1899 and was appointed the official organist of the Pan-American Exposition. He was still listed in the Guild's 1946 50th Anniversary Directory with an address!

His obituary, appearing in the *Buffalo Evening News* for September 8, 1948, gives this version: "Mr. Gomph's death terminated a musical career spanning more than half a century. An organist at the Pan-American Exposition, he was playing in the Temple of Music when President McKinley was shot at the entrance to the structure. Recalling the tragic event long after, Mr. Gomph said he had played a few measures of the Prelude to Gounod's "Slumber Song" when the assassin's shot echoed through the temple. 'I ran down the steps,' he said, and began fanning the president as he lay on the ground. I can remember McKinley looking up and smiling at me as he said, 'Kindly desist.' I have never been able to forget those two words or the way he said them."

In speaking with Martha, Gomph's daughter, still living in Buffalo, and asking her about the obituary facts, she said, "Where did they get that! My father always told me he was playing Bach!" Perhaps, over a half a century he simply got tired of the story and varied it for the sake of dramatic effect.

Fourth Scenario

On September 6, 1901, the day the President was shot, several events were celebrated besides the program for McKinley, which was to begin at 4:00 P.M.—it was also Mayflower

Day. The official program of music for the Temple lists the first program of the day as being played by Lund's Pan-American Orchestra, 10:00 A.M. to 12:30 P.M., composers Auber to Zeller, no Bach. This program was preceded and followed by band concerts at two separate bandstands, while from 5:00 to 7:00 P.M. the 113th Free Organ Recital was to have been played by Everett E. Truette of Boston, assisted by Miss Bessie M. Greenwood, soprano. It was to have begun with Bach's *Toccata and Fugue in D Minor*. The grounds were cleared after the 4:07 shooting.

Since, in the final analysis, everything is still pretty much a guess, it *may* have gone like this: Mr. Gomph, who was not slated to play at all on the official program, was nonetheless there to see the President, greet Mr. Truette as official organist, and check things out, when along comes his boss who says, "Bill, the crowd is getting big, we can't fit them all in for the reception and I am afraid they will get restless. Would you go out there and play something, anything, to help keep them calm and in good order." "Sure," Bill says, and to himself, "Let's see, what's lying about. What have I got here—Bach? Gounod? Bach. Gounod. Bach-Gounod . . . here goes." At this point, I am sure President McKinley is looking down and saying, "Kindly desist."

Postscript

I am grateful to Ron Franscell for much information and the many leads that we shared. His forthcoming novel-in-progress is tentatively titled *A Far Country*. It will be worth watching for to see what conclusions he comes to and you will find out more about the assassination and its background.

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