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CATHÉDRALE
DE BORDEAUX

Birth of a Great Organ

The Newsletter of the Great Organ of Bordeaux Cathedral

Editorial

Visitors and regular worshippers at the cathedral were often struck, on entering the building, by the scale of the organ case. Today, it is the emptiness of the western gallery that catches the eye. Between 23 February and 20 March, the organ was completely dismantled. This is the first time this has happened in more than two centuries. The dismantling was carried out perfectly, and according to the planned schedule.

This first phase of work, however, is not yet complete. The next step will be to define the restoration protocols for the historic case and to refine the design of the instrument. The whole project will be submitted to the Regional Directorate of Cultural Affairs next September, after which we will be able to reveal more in this newsletter.

In the meantime, we will continue to introduce you to the world of organ building, so that you may better understand the project itself when the time comes to describe it in detail.

At the same time, fundraising continues: nearly one million euros still needs to be raised before the second phase can begin (construction in the workshop), which must start no later than January 2028. The Cathedra association has launched a pipe sponsorship campaign, which we presented in previous issues.

Finally, we are pleased to announce that the Fondation du patrimoine has joined us. We mentioned this in the previous issue. A meeting around this partnership will soon be organised. You can follow all the latest news on our Facebook and Instagram pages.

The west end of the nave without the organ. Photo © Nicolas Duffaure.



Contents

Issue 4 - Spring 2026

1 News: the organ has been dismantled!

The complete dismantling of the great organ of Bordeaux Cathedral took place between 9 February and 10 April 2026...

2 The cathedral and its organs: 700 years of history (part III).

The history spans nearly seven centuries. The Revolution and the 19th century.

3 What is an organ?

Part four: tonal divisions.

4 Cathedral brief.

News from the cathedral.

5 Frequently asked questions

Each quarter, we answer your questions.

6 Did you know?

The organ record book: the oldest organs.

Make the heart of
Bordeaux's new
great organ beat:
adopt a pipe!



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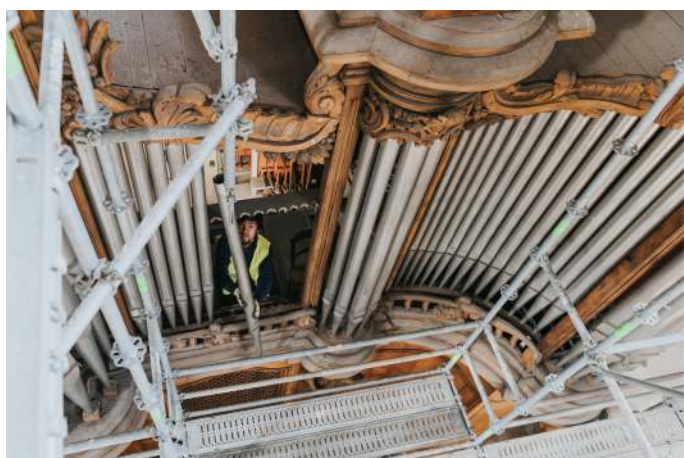
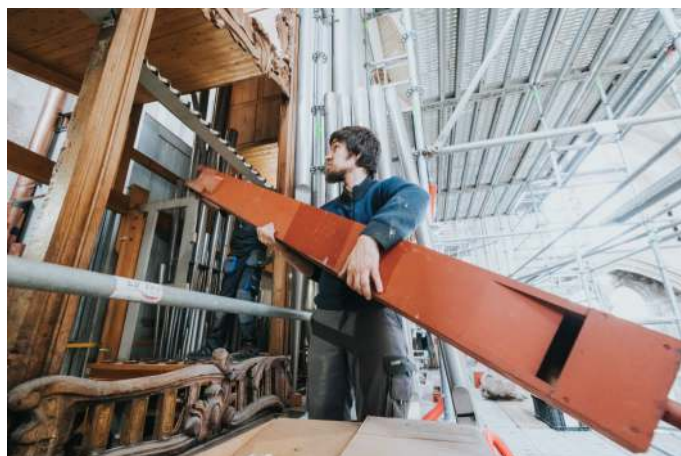
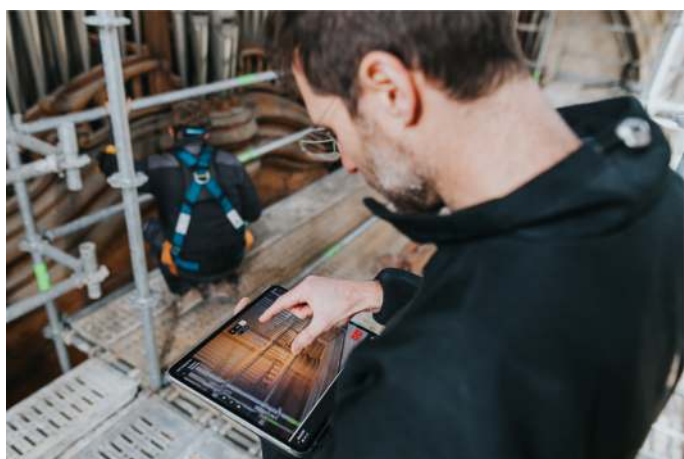


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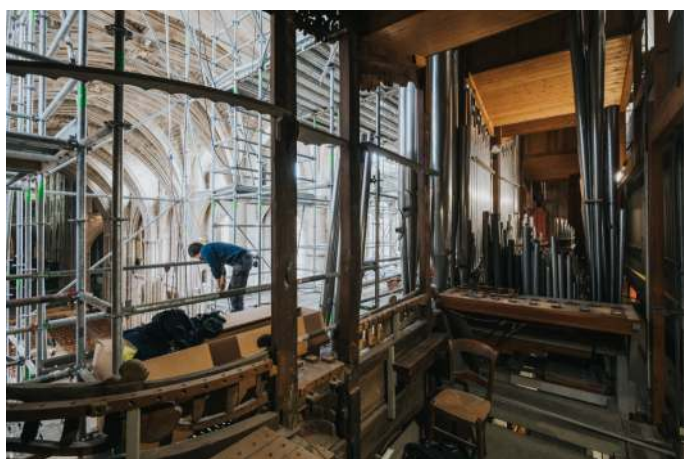
News: the organ has been dismantled!

The complete dismantling of the great organ of Bordeaux Cathedral took place between 9 February and 10 April 2026. The removal of the organ itself mobilised six to seven companion organ builders from Rieger and Orglez between 23 February and 20 March. Beforehand, the site installations, including an imposing scaffold, had been set up by LvTec, before being removed once the operations were complete.

The organ builders and other contributors answered questions from journalists, who came regularly to follow this spectacular stage of the project. The quality of the worksite was widely praised, by visitors, journalists and the project's stakeholders alike, including DRAC Nouvelle-Aquitaine: efficiency, cleanliness, organisation, respect for the planned schedule, and exemplary overall management.



Some stages in the dismantling of the organ.
Photos © Nicolas Duffaure.



Today, the gallery is entirely empty. For a few weeks, it offers a striking view of the west end of the nave, probably unseen for more than two centuries, since the gallery was built by Combes around 1811.

This absence marks a decisive stage: the entire organ has left the cathedral for the workshops of the manufacturers in Austria and Brittany, making way for the restoration of the building's interior, due to begin next May.

The dismantling was documented by the photographer Nicolas Duffaure. Some of his magnificent photographs, including several examples reproduced in this issue, are published on our Facebook and Instagram pages. They preserve the memory of this historic stage.

The cathedral and its organs: 700 years of history (part III).

Both instruments, together with almost all the cathedral's furnishings, disappeared during the Revolution. A report dated 25 Frimaire Year III stated that the pipes of the great organ were to be melted down: "their metal will be used to make buttons for uniform coats." Worship was restored in 1801, and an organ had to be reinstalled on the 16th-century gallery, which had stood empty for more than ten years. In April 1804, the organ of La Réole, built in 1766 by the Toulouse organ builder Micot, was transferred to Saint-André Cathedral and stored in the cloister while awaiting reassembly. At that time, the interior of the cathedral was being reorganised by the architect Combes, who notably ordered the demolition of the Renaissance rood screen. The organ was then installed by Isnard and Bayssac-Labruyère, before being dismantled again in 1810 to allow the gallery to be rebuilt. Consideration was then given to exchanging the interior of this organ with that of Sainte-Croix Abbey, since Micot's organ proved insufficient for the primatial cathedral. The exchange was definitively decided

one year later, by ministerial decree of 17 April 1811. The organ of Sainte-Croix Abbey, attributed to Dom Bedos de Celles, had been built in 1748 and was regarded as one of the greatest masterpieces of organ building. The exchange decided in 1811 concerned only the windchests and the internal pipes of the two instruments: the façade pipes, prestants and wind systems remained in their respective places. Many reused pipes, as well as sixty new façade pipes, were needed to complete the works on the new cathedral organ, entrusted to Joseph Isnard and Simon Bayssac-Labruyère. The case was enlarged and repainted according to Combes's plans. The works were completed in 1816 and, although the majesty of the sound was admired, the result fell well short of expectations, despite an enlargement of pipe scales by transposition intended to increase the sound volume. The organ, then comprising 47 stops over four manuals and pedal, was accepted in March 1817, but with reservations. *To be continued...*

What is an organ? Part four.

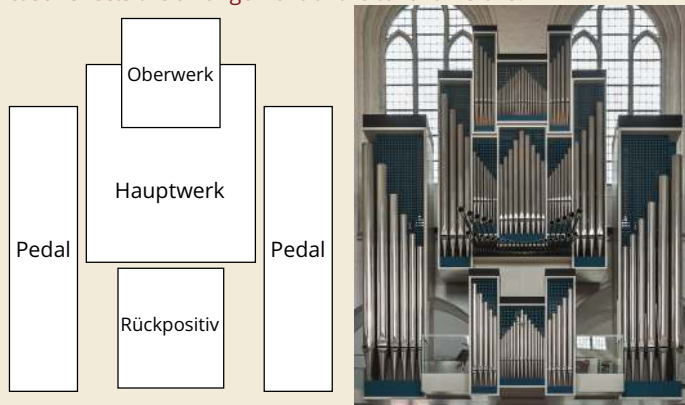
The architecture of the organ: tonal divisions.

In the previous issue, we discussed the organ case, the visible part of the instrument. Behind this façade, the organ is not arranged at random. Its internal layout depends on many factors: the space available in width, depth and height, the shape of the gallery, the size of the instrument and, consequently, the number of tonal divisions it contains.

A tonal division may be understood as a part of the organ with its own character. To put it simply, each keyboard controls a tonal division: one may be powerful and majestic, another clearer, more direct or more distant. The organist therefore has several ensembles at his disposal, which he can make converse, contrast or combine.

At different periods and in different countries, these tonal

illustration of the *Werkprinzip*, in which the façade of the organ case reflects the arrangement of the tonal divisions.



divisions were not always conceived in the same way. In Northern Germany, for example, the *Werkprinzip* made the architecture of the case correspond very clearly to the tonal organisation of the instrument. The different parts of the organ were visible in the façade: the main body, the *Rückpositiv*, sometimes an upper division or a division placed closer to the organist. Even when this principle later became less apparent, some German names preserve its memory: *Hauptwerk* (the main division), *Oberwerk* (the upper division), *Brustwerk* (the division placed at breast height), and so on.

In France, the Classical organ was organised differently, but according to an equally clear logic. The *Grand-Orgue* formed the heart of the instrument. The *Positif de dos*, placed in a

small case at the front of the gallery, responded to the main case. Large instruments could also include a *Récit*, intended for solo colours, or an *Écho*, placed lower in the case and creating an effect of distance. The Pedal division, played with the feet, was generally placed on either side of the *Grand-Orgue*. In the 19th century, this organisation became less directly visible. The case no longer always reflected the organ's internal arrangement. Organ builders sought rather to make the best possible use of the available space and to organise the instrument according to mechanical constraints. The *Récit* developed and became "expressive", able to vary in intensity. Later, pneumatic and then electric actions would offer even greater freedom in the placement of the different parts of the organ.

The position of the tonal divisions is essential. Depending on whether a group of pipes is placed in the façade, at the top of the case, at the rear, in the lower part of the instrument or inside an expressive box, it will not produce the same effect in the building. Some divisions project directly towards the nave; others create an impression of depth, mystery or distance. The internal architecture of the organ therefore plays a full part in the way its sound is perceived.

In Bordeaux, the new organ will have seven tonal divisions. An important feature is that these will be freely assignable to the keyboard chosen by the musician. Some divisions will themselves be subdivided into several sections (fifteen in all), offering great flexibility in tonal combinations.

The proposed internal architecture for Bordeaux.



Cathedral brief

The celebrations around Easter had a particular flavour this year, partly because of the absence of the great organ, and partly because the cathedral is preparing to host the major restoration works in the nave. It was therefore the last time worshippers could celebrate the Easter feasts in the cathedral in its current configuration.

April also saw the arrival of the first new benches in the cathedral, made on the model of those at Saint-Eustache. The replacement of the chairs was required by the regulations applicable to buildings open to the public.

A major moment for the organ project took place on 9 April: the launch meeting, attended by the Prefect, the Director of the DRAC and representatives of the partner foundations. On this occasion, we were able to open the book of honour of the new organ and symbolically write the first page of this new chapter in the history of Bordeaux Cathedral.



As for musical activity, Cathedra returned to the cathedral in March with Vivaldi's Stabat Mater, followed in April by an original concert bringing together gusli and organ. A new organ concert format was also inaugurated: the Organ Hours, genuine educational concerts centred on the great liturgical feasts. They are given by Jean-Baptiste Dupont, organist of the cathedral, and presented and commented with the support of Brother Jean-Clément Guez, rector of the cathedral.

Our partners

Ministère de la Culture
Direction régionale des affaires culturelles Nouvelle-Aquitaine
Ville de Bordeaux
Fondation du patrimoine
Fondation Clément Fayat
Fondation Etrillard
Fondation la Sauvegarde de l'art français
Église catholique en Gironde



Did you know?

The organ record book: the oldest organs.

The oldest known remains take us back to Antiquity: the hydraulic organ of Aquincum, discovered in Budapest, is dated to the year 228. It is no longer a playable instrument, but it is an exceptional testimony to the very ancient history of the organ.

To hear an ancient organ still in sound today, one must look to Sion, in Switzerland. The organ of the Basilica of Valère, built in the 15th century (around 1431–37), is generally considered the oldest playable organ in the world.

A recent discovery caused a sensation: pipes from an 11th-century medieval organ, linked to Bethlehem and the Crusades, were able to sound again in Jerusalem after several centuries of silence.



The medieval organ displayed in Jerusalem.

Frequently asked questions

Each quarter, we answer your questions.

- Does my donation entitle me to a tax receipt? What are the tax benefits for sponsors?
- Thanks to the French Law of 1 August 2003 on cultural sponsorship, companies benefit from a tax reduction equal to 60% of the amount of their donation, within the limit of 0.5% of their annual turnover excluding tax; for individuals, the reduction is 66%.
- Is it possible to sponsor parts of the organ other than the pipes?
- Yes. This may apply, for example, to the window console, the expressive boxes, elements of the wind system, the actions or the windchests. Please contact us: this type of sponsorship will be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

In the next issue...

- Interview with Gwennin L'Haridon.
- The history of the cathedral's organs (part IV).
- What is an organ? Part five: the console.
- ...and more news, updates and articles...