

WHY THIS?

The Silent Organ

BY PENELOPE HUNTER-STIEBEL PHOTOGRAPHS BY ADDISON DOTY

A dark, wooden presence looms to the left of the stage in the New Mexico Museum of Art's St. Francis Auditorium. Its lower register shares the auditorium's Santa Fe style, with its flat balusters and painted bullet carvings, but above is a screen of columns in the Beaux Arts style. A crowning pyramid of metal pipes reveals that this is a pipe organ, what Mozart called "The King of Instruments." The console, usually protected by a canvas covering, is tucked away to the right of the stage.

I discovered the long history of this organ in the files kept by Martha Landry, who was in loving charge of the auditorium

until 2016. Rebecca Potance has since archived the files for the museum's library. It seems that Museum of New Mexico founder, Edgar Lee Hewett, imagined the Museum of Art as "a temple of the muses," but he would have to wait two decades after its 1917 opening before he would hail the arrival of music in the form of the organ.

Before coming to Santa Fe, Hewett was director of the Las Vegas Normal School, where he hired James G. McNary (1877–1962) as a language and music teacher. A love of music drew McNary toward the local church organist, Ruth Reynolds, whose wealthy father had installed a pipe organ in their Las Vegas home. During a Hewett-led, exploratory trip through western New Mexico, McNary proposed to Reynolds.

The newlyweds then moved to El Paso, where McNary prospered as a banker and businessman. There, he built an Italianate mansion for his family, which boasted a swimming pool, tennis court, and of course, a music room. Accompanying her husband on a trip to California in 1916, Ruth worked with experts from the California Pipe Organ Company to design the crown jewel of their new residence: a magnificent pipe organ. After its installation a year later, leading organists would travel to El Paso to give recitals in the McNarys' home.

James wrote, "We arranged that a very expert woodworking artist in Los Angeles carve the grille for the organ. He was named Reynolds. He spent many months hand-carving the beautiful walnut polychrome grille."

James McNary's increasing involvement with an Arizona lumber operation led to moving his family to the company town that was named after him. Although he sold the El Paso mansion, he insisted on retaining title to the organ and its grille. Several years of discussion with Hewett resulted in an agreement by which McNary would donate the organ to the Museum of Art and, in turn, the museum would cover the considerable cost of its removal and reconstruction in Santa Fe. John Gaw Meem was enlisted to design the Santa Fe-style housing for the imposing instrument. The McNary Organ was dedicated in 1937.

Looking carefully at that grille today, Reynolds' skill emerges. What seem to be C-shaped enclosures for lyres and a central tablet are actually dolphins. On the base of ornate columns, leafy ornament gives way to pairs of satyrs, facing each other as if in a dance. Traces of paint hint at



The organ in the New Mexico Museum of Art's St. Francis Auditorium.

the colorful effect which was darkened to accord with the auditorium's woodwork.

Dominic Martinez, the museum's security captain, escorted me to the basement to find the organ's lungs, the blower for the air that pumps through the organ pipes. There, on the side of the great machine, were the original labels of the Kinetic Engineering Co., with instructions for its care.

Little did I know the amount of upkeep an organ requires. The archival files are filled with decades of fundraising campaigns to cover its needs. Given his position on Hewett's board of directors, James McNary was ever its guardian, and regularly corresponded with specialists. Tastes in music changed, and McNary agreed in 1954 to modernize the instrument, converting it from a Romantic to a Baroque organ with a new console from the Reuter Organ Company. To lessen wear and tear, Fray Angelico Chavez restricted its use to "recognized organists." In 1971, a new museum director, Robert Ewing,



Left: Carved satyrs embellish the organ's columns.

Above: The organ's inner workings.

championed its relevance, reporting, "people love to hear it while looking at paintings." Recitals to benefit the organ culminated in all-Bach programs performed from 1997–2002 by a theoretical physicist, Dr. Bruce Sawhill. The instrument was last played in concert in 2013 by Maxine Thevenot, who told me that, despite its mid-century modernization, "it hadn't lost its Romantic color palette." As estimates for crucial repairs soared to seven figures, the decision was made in 2015 to retire the instrument.

Today, while artists of the Chamber Music Festival occupy the St. Francis stage, the McNary Organ remains a quiet presence, a testament to an earlier chapter in Santa Fe's love affair with classical music. It brings to mind the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson: "The silent organ loudest chants." ■

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