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THE WORLD'S OLDEST ORGAN

Lee Eugster writes on Valère (Valais)

"It is certainly a unique experience to sit in one's home in America and listen to the tones of an organ which came into being in 1390" wrote an organist who lives on the Pacific Coast.

I had seen this organ in the Cathedral of Valère overlooking Sion in the Valais. Later I learnt that Mr. Maurice Wenger, curator of the Museum of Valère, made two recordings, which can be ordered at his address: Musée de Valère, 1950 Sion, Valais, Switzerland. A small record with music composed between the 9th and 18th centuries costs 10 Swiss francs. A large one, which has on its backside music played on the organ of the church of Vouvry, costs 29 francs.

These records, supplied in solid light-weight folders which also contain the organ's history and technical details translated into several languages, make unusual and highly appreciated gifts for music lovers. By declaring them at the P.O. as "commercial gramophone records", they can be mailed as "small package" with a green customs label instead of "phonoposte" at a much higher rate.

The Cathedral of Valère, dedicated to Saint Catherine of Alexandria who, after Saint Théodule, is the second patron saint of the Valais, was started in the Romanesque style in the 12th century, while part of its inside was finished in the Gothic style in the 13th century.

The organ, installed in 1390 in the so-called Burgundy style, shows the characteristics of Gothic altars with wide-open wings (triptych). The casing of the pipes is adorned with slightly gilded tracery in purest Gothic style. Today, the instrument rests on a swallow-nest corbel high on the rear wall of the central nave.

According to the archives of the Cathedral Chapter, a certain Peter Maggenberg painted in 1437 the wings of the triptych. They are historically and artistically as precious as the instrument itself. The "Annonciation" on the outer side of the wing doors resembles works by Fra Angelico. Inside the left door is shown the spiritual "Marriage of Saint Catherine" to the Bishopric of Sion. On the right side, we admire the resurrected Christ appearing to Mary-Magdalene.

In 1718, Mathias Carlen (1691-1749) from Reckingen in the Upper Valais, who was the founder of a famous dynasty of organ builders, partly enlarged the instrument of Valère.

The organ was restored in 1954, but utmost care was taken not to alter its sound or technical structure. Therefore, we can still enjoy this small organ's great variety of colour and splendour of tone. With only eight stops, it is capable of filling the big church with its beautiful music. And thanks to the two gramophone records, music lovers the world over can now admire tunes played on an instrument built nearly six centuries ago.

By courtesy of "Treize Etoiles".

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