



SPRECKELS AT 100

BY CHRISTIAN LANE

CAROL WILLIAMS IS one of two remaining civic organists in the United States, and in spring 2011, she was fighting to keep her job. Faced with an unbalanced city budget, San Diego city councilors were looking for opportunities to trim fat—and one councilman set his sights on the small salary Williams receives as a city employee. In one sense, it was logical: how can a city leader justify expenditure on a civic musician in time of fiscal crisis when funds might instead be directed toward municipal necessities like police, fire, or ambulance workers?

But Carol Williams would have none of it. As San Diego's seventh civic organist, she had already occupied the post for a decade and found much more than her livelihood at stake. She had a long tradition to defend.

For nearly 100 years, San Diego's sprawling Balboa Park has provided home and hospitality to the Spreckels Organ Pavilion and its enormous Austin pipe organ. Hundreds of thousands of citizens and visitors have reveled in the instrument's sonority over the years, whether in weekly Sunday afternoon concerts or in more recent summer Monday-evening festival programs, a relatively young, 28-year-old tradition. During both world wars, the U.S. Navy occupied the organ's pavilion and grounds—yet the concerts continued, with soldiers finding both

enjoyment and solace in the smooth sounds that naturally attract passersby to its realm. Indeed, even if played in the middle of the night—as often it was if Virgil Fox was in town—the organ captivated a sizable audience of those living in the park: homeless, who upon hearing the organ's timbres wafting in the cool night air would emerge from the surrounding wood, find a place in the pavilion's broad seating area, and enjoy the opportunity for an exclusive moonlit concert.

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Williams is a firecracker performer and persona. Petite in stature but grandiose in personality, she inhabits a glamorous showcase colored by an enticing shade of badass fierceness. Having adeptly acclimated herself to a southern California demeanor and spirit, one is almost surprised to hear the Welsh accent of her upbringing upon first meeting. Her love for animals (horses in particular) is superseded only by her love of the organ and its music. Her passion for communicating with audiences, for creating inventive and attractive programs, and for reaching not only those who come to the Spreckels Pavilion but also those far beyond (via streaming Internet and her *Tour Bus* DVDs) is invigorating.

It is in this spirit that her city job was not to be tampered with. Marshaling forces both near and far, Williams embarked on a crusade to secure and maintain the long tradition she is privileged to curate. Letters were written, voices raised, and a movement galvanized. The citizens of San Diego spoke out in support of their cultural heritage and those, like Williams, who enabled its continuance. And, in the end, San Diego's city council voted unanimously to retain her post—and with it the continued, regular public offerings to the public that were envisioned with the organ's installation in 1914.

Left: Carol Williams at the New Year's Eve concert; *above:* celebratory fireworks (photos: Robert Lang/Spreckels Organ Society)

Presented at the New Year's Eve opening of the Panama-California Exposition of 1915, the Spreckels Organ Pavilion and its Austin organ, Opus 453, were the joint gift of the city's most prominent businessmen: brothers John D. and Adolph B. Spreckels. Adept tradesmen (also heirs to their father's immense, self-made fortune), they had found great commercial success in this burgeoning southern California city—so much so that, at the time, they paid fully ten percent of all taxes in San Diego County.

With the planned opening of the Panama Canal in summer 1914, John Spreckels was named vice chair of the ambitious Panama-California Exposition (which, coincidentally, was set to compete with a larger, similar world's fair in his childhood home, San Francisco). He approached his role in two ways: one deeply grounded in a Christian upbringing and one vigorously commercial. A successful exposition, in this first Pacific port north of Mexico, would be immensely lucrative for Spreckels' many business interests; yet, it would also give him the opportunity to leave a cultural legacy and fulfill what he saw to be a biblically obligated role as "good steward" to the community.

With the exposition located on the high mesa plateau in the yet-to-be-developed Balboa Park, two permanent structures were planned to anchor the fair: the California State Building and the organ pavilion. While most of the buildings were to feature architecture reminiscent of the Spanish colonial era, the organ pavilion, with its welcoming, wrapping colonnade, echoed an Italian Renaissance style. The central structure, which houses all of the instrument and its mechanism and acts as its

sounding board (the organ, for speaking into the open air, possesses more warmth and resonance than one expects), remains to this day an enticing visual attraction at the south end of the Plaza de Panama. Installed with 3,400 pipes and a state-of-the-art console and mechanism, the instrument cost \$33,500 (roughly \$800,000 today), while the pavilion, designed by Harrison Albright, accounted for expenditures twice as large.



Organ co-curator Lyle Blackinton tunes the mighty instrument (photo: Robert Lang/Spreckels Organ Society)

Dedicated on the eve of the New Year 1915, at the official opening of the grand exposition, the organ and its pavilion were ceremoniously gifted to the city of San Diego and its residents by the Spreckels brothers. In an eclectic program shepherded by the exposition's appointed organist, Humphrey Stewart, an assembled crowd numbering in the thousands was treated to a musical potpourri featuring everything from Rossini's *William Tell* Overture to great choral masterworks of Haydn.

Exactly 100 years later, on December 31, 2014, the citizens of San Diego once again gathered to celebrate their stunning instrument in Balboa Park. Sponsored and organized by the Spreckels Organ Society, the glitzy gala concert was a spectacle unlike any in recent memory: massed choir,

Lyle Blackinton, Organ Curator (1974–2014)

As a child, Lyle Blackinton and his family attended a concert at the Spreckels Organ Pavilion. Upon its conclusion, the intently curious young man and his parents toured the innards of the organ with then-curator Leonard Dowling—and a spark for what became a lifelong passion was ignited. In 1954, while still in high school, Blackinton embarked on a long working relationship with Dowling, and, in 1974, succeeded him in the demanding curatorial role.

The longest-serving curator of the Spreckels organ to date, Blackinton is largely responsible for the immaculate state of the instrument today. While always playable, the organ suffered mid-century from effects of age and underinvestment. Beginning in the late 1970s, a full-scale restoration commenced under his leadership, and the organ ultimately reclaimed its original majesty. Enlarged gradually over the ensuing decades, the instrument is in pristine condition both inside and out—so much so that intimate dinner parties have occasionally been hosted inside the organ's massive Austin universal wind chests!

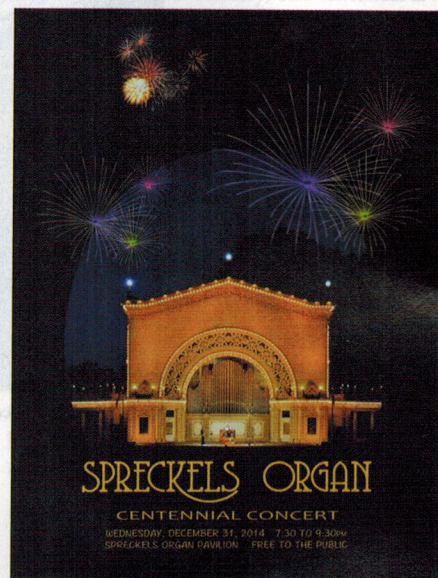
At this year's New Year's Eve Centennial Concert, Blackinton's retirement was announced and his remarkable career celebrated. The following day, at the annual New Year's Day program, his successor, Dale Sorenson, was on hand to fulfill the Spreckels curator's unofficial duty during concerts: turning pages and ensuring that music doesn't fly away in the wind!

Bravo, Lyle, and best wishes for a glorious retirement. —CL

harpist, *two* large bagpipe bands, *three* fanfares (and as many civic organists), a pair of new music commissions alongside a pair of brass quintets, repertoire ranging from Strauss to Irving Berlin to Haydn, and a restored, sparkling golden facade unveiled (with Williams in a shimmering, gold-sequined gown to match). And, to top it off, fireworks began rocketing skyward from the roof of the organ pavilion, beginning at "King of King's" in the "Hallelujah" chorus—a feat that not only assured the concert's memorable impression in the mind of this at-



Above: Harpist Karen Rokos and Carol Williams perform *Czardas, Die Fledermaus*; center: the gathering crowds (photos: Michael Cox); upper right: the organ pavillion in red; right: the Centennial Concert program cover (photos: Robert Lang/Spreckels Organ Society)



tendee visiting from relatively stodgy Boston, but also required several city permits and special authorization from the FAA, given the park's proximity to the city's busy airport.

Despite a strong threat of rain and uncharacteristically cold temperatures (at concert time, the organ spoke into damp air measuring just 38° Fahrenheit), a crowd exceeding 4,000 gathered on the plaza, huddled close together under cover of blankets and "winter" coats—a valiant if futile effort to fend off the inescapable chill brought by both slight breeze and hard metal bench.

Following remarks from a slate of dignitaries, a mammoth white drape concealing the new facade (cautiously) dropped to the stage floor, and Carol Williams, who, despite the cold, wore a sleeveless gown, launched into a rivet-

ing performance of her own composition *Centennial Spreckels Fanfare*—a work that showcased not only the instrument's full resources and the performer's skill, but also a new Centennial Tuba stop recently added to the instrument as part of the Spreckels Organ Society's drive to increase the organ's size to more than 5,000 pipes, once again making it the largest outdoor pipe organ in the world. (Hint: they're not quite there yet, and I'm sure they'd welcome further donations.)

What followed was a potpourri of musical fanfare and sentimentality. At the outset, two complete Scottish pipe bands joined Williams for a full-throated reading of Roever and Korb's *Highland Cathedral*. (Aside: if you've never experienced pipe organ with bagpipe band, be ready for an overwhelming thrill; it's likely the only time the or-

ganist will be asked for more volume and have nothing further to yield.)

Next to the stage were two former San Diego civic organists, returning to a platform and instrument known so well. Jared Jacobsen, purveyor of the post from 1978 to 1984, gave a colorful—and I dare say individual—performance of John Cook's famous *Fanfare*, incorporating many of the organ's different solo reeds and several of its percussion voices for good measure. Robert Plimpton, civic organist from 1984 to 2000, whose personality and tuxedo cummerbund exuded similar effervescent color, offered an imminently satisfying performance of Humphrey Stewart's "Processional



March” from *Montezuma*, a piece included on the dedicatory program 100 years prior and certainly one of the most assured, effective offerings of this centennial concert. His following performance of Pierre Camonin’s *Toccata and Theme on Auld Lang Syne*, while appropriate for the evening and occasion, was sadly one of the few moments in the concert this listener yearned for acoustics to hold the music together.

Harpist Karen Rokos, great-granddaughter of the organ’s first curator, Anton Rokos, traveled from Nova Scotia to perform just a single work on the program. Having boxed and shipped her priceless harp across the continent (a nerve-racking and expensive ordeal), Rokos joined Williams in an arrangement of Johann Strauss’s *Czárdaš* from *Die Fledermaus*, aptly showcasing many of the organ’s orchestral colors and softer string tones. Harp and organ sounded glorious together.

Following a short, jaunty organ-and-brass take on the Sousa-esque *San Diego March*, composed in the 1920s by Thomas Rollinson, the audience was treated to two further solo-organ works with Williams at the console. *Freedom*, another of the evening’s offerings composed by the resident organist, is perfectly suited to the out-of-doors organ: its expansive legato

themes and fully textured, quickly repeated chords provide elasticity and energy while also providing ambiance and a sense of acoustic in an environment in which true reverberance is only imaginary.

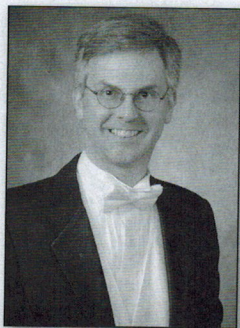
And, if showcasing this instrument in all its richness and dimension was the yardstick for a program such as this, the first-act finale offered the evening’s unequivocal highlight: Williams’s arrangement of California’s unofficial state song *California, Here I Come*. Using the instrument’s full percussive and sonorous resources to great effect—sirens included—this 1920s-era showstopper, more than any other on the program, felt at one with the instrument at hand; a special moment indeed.

After intermission, during which an almost-inaudible melody wafted from the nearby California Tower carillon, the program continued with a brass-and-organ arrangement of a 16th-century *Suite* of Tylman Susato. Easily the most forgettable component of the program, the double-brass quintet suffered from both ensemble and tuning issues (likely due to the cold), and I, for one, was happy to subsequently welcome the arrival of the Spreckels Centennial Choir, a massed choir comprising singers from the San Diego Master Chorale and various local

churches. Ably directed by John Russell, newly appointed conductor of the Master Chorale, the choral selections—Parry’s *I Was Glad* and Haydn’s “Awake the Harp” from *The Creation*, both with Williams at the organ—received vigorous performances from the 160 volunteer singers. Also offered was a new work by local composer Stephen Sturk, commissioned by the Spreckels Organ Society and titled *Wondrous Machine* (with a nod to Purcell’s *Ode to St. Cecilia* of 1692). This curious piece, while remarkably suited to the occasion (a creative text by Glen Vecchione managed to incorporate the names of all seven civic organists and many of the instrument’s stops, for instance), suffers from a degree of specificity that will undoubtedly preclude its hearing in any other venue.

Ever since America’s 1917 entry into World War I, the custom at regular organ concerts in Balboa Park has been to begin each program with “America the Beautiful” and end with “The Star-Spangled Banner.” For this gala concert, “God Bless America” made an appearance, with a fine-voiced John Russell as soloist, before the aforementioned rousing rendition of Handel’s “Hallelujah” chorus to close this monumental and celebratory event.

Time has passed, and with the Centennial Gala and its multisensory expe-



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rience now in memory, one begins to wonder: if John D. Spreckels had lived to see this centennial program, what might he have thought? It's hard to imagine he wouldn't have been impressed by the sheer spectacle of the occasion, the massed participants and considerable gathered audience, and simply the grand exuberance of it all.

Certainly, Mr. Spreckels was a businessman at heart, and it would be hard to argue that, one hundred years on, this instrument hasn't proved a worthy investment with healthy return. Whether through the free Sunday organ concerts each week at 2:00 P.M., the well-attended Monday evening programs in summer, or the various and creative outreach initiatives shepherded by Carol Williams and the Spreckels Organ Society year-round, this instrument, one of our country's most publicly accessible and visible, continues to serve as a gathering place, concert venue, and community treasure in the heart of one of our grandest urban parks.

Now that's worthy of a New Year's toast.

Christian Lane is vice president of the AGO. Winner of the 2011 Canadian International Organ Competition, he lives in Boston and teaches one of the country's largest private organ studios.

Visit San Diego This Summer

The Spreckels Organ features prominently in the AGO West Region Convention, June 28–July 2. Visit AGOSanDiego2015.org for more information.

Carol Williams performs a twelve-hour Organ Marathon Concert on Sunday, May 24, to raise funds for Operation Rebound, supporting men and women of our armed forces returning home with serious injuries.

The 28th annual Summer International Organ Festival commences June 22 and continues on Monday evenings through August 31. Playing this year are artists Olivier Latry, Paul Jacobs, Isabelle Demers, Gordon Turk, and many others.

In case you can't get to San Diego, all Spreckels concerts are streamed live online. Simply click on "Webcast" at Spreckelsorgan.org.