

NO PIPE

DREAM

The Master Organist Saving New York's Historic 19th-Century Erben Organ

Of all the art forms, music alone requires no sophistication, as the untrained ear listens with the heart. Music is felt in the body. And when it surrounds us, as in the presence of a pipe organ, it is like the explosion of nearby fireworks. What better feeling of harmony than to be enveloped by music? Pre-occupied with these thoughts, as I walked from the subway to St. Patrick's Old Cathedral, left me unprepared for the winding staircase up to the choir loft, to an instrument half the size of my apartment—and for Jared Lamenzo.

On that frigid January afternoon in the Lower Manhattan basilica, I looked on as he took his place at the pipe organ. Suddenly, his hands began to sweep across the organ's three keyboards or "manuals," twice pausing to pull on round knobs above and beside the keys, at the same time that his feet danced across the instrument's 30 pedals.

Lamenzo is Music Director at the Nolita church, and among his many responsibilities are choosing the music for all of the church's services, conducting the choir, and caring for the 20-ton pipe organ built by master craftsman

Henry Erben (1800-1884). The Erben, Lamenzo explains, is sensitive to the chilly air, its wooden parts expanding in winter. No matter. The sound is sublime.

Listening to him speak about the Erben's quirks, it is hard to imagine it as inanimate. "The moment I got here, I knew this organ was different and beautiful," the accomplished Italian American musician recalls. He has performed on dozens of historic pipe organs in Latin America and across Europe. "When you hear this organ," Lamenzo says, "you are listening to the past."

Unlike other pipe organs built in the 1860s, the Erben has nearly all its original components. "That's a curse and a blessing," Lamenzo says. "The Erben has a unique sound because it possesses its original acoustics base."

When describing an organ, musicians refer to the instrument's "voicing," the sound of each pipe but also the instrument's overall resonance. "The builder regulates the pipes to produce particular sounds in the room," Lamenzo says. "This was done 150 years ago and that's what we're hearing now. Very few

Jared Lamenzo practices on the 1868 pipe organ in its original acoustic space at the Basilica of St. Patrick's Old Cathedral.

Courtesy of Jared Lamenzo



Jared Lamenzo hosts pipe organ visitors from the Manhattan School of Music: Andrew Henderson, Organ Department Chair, and Raymond Nagem, Instructor of Organ Improvisation/Literature/Service Playing (College), with students Shannon Murphy and Hannah Lingen Chen.



The original three-manual console of the 1868 pipe organ with ivory covered stops.

Background: Inside New York City's first cathedral, the Basilica of St. Patrick's Old Cathedral.

instruments survive from that century, and this is the only intact Erben organ of its size."

That afternoon, a European musician arrives to rehearse his Baroque trumpet to the accompaniment of the Erben. Asked why, Lamenzo says the blending of that longer trumpet and the Erben produces a sound that is difficult to duplicate. "I can play Baroque music on this organ because Henry Erben's design was conservative for the time," Lamenzo says. "There was something in him that told him you can't have an organ without a full plenum, a full complement of stops. Stops are the principal chorus of the organ, and the Erben's is warm, vocal and grand."

Stops are the knobs and levers that allow the organist to control the "ranks," or sets of pipes, each possessing a different timbre. Pulling on a stop closes or opens pipes to pressurized air (like blowing into a whistle); some stops let the organist mimic the sound of orchestral instruments, and others control where the sound will be heard or felt in the room. Lamenzo often uses stops for large pipes in the facade of the organ because they are best heard in the church's nave where worshipers are seated.

Originally a mechanical organ, the Erben has about 2,500 pipes, many coated in dust. Its "windchest," on which the pipes are arrayed, is cracked. Not all of the Erben's other parts are in working condition, and some have temporary repairs made by Lamenzo, who holds an engineering degree from Harvard.

"My degree helps a little bit, but mostly it was tinkering on cars with my dad when I was a boy," says Lamenzo, who has played piano from the age of 4. He first became enamored of the organ at the Connecticut church his family attended.

As for the Erben's dusty interior, and its needed repairs, both exceed Lamenzo's talents, which is the reason he co-founded Friends of the Erben Organ. The non-profit's goal is to raise \$2 million to clean and repair the instrument that, despite its condition, rings through the lovely cathedral on Mulberry Street, as it has since the 1860s.

At a recent fundraiser, Martin Scorsese recalled listening to the Erben as a boy in the late 1940s, when St. Patrick's Old Cathedral was his family's parish. The basilica and its grounds ➤



Austrian recitalist Stefan Donner performs on the Erben organ on his 2019 U.S. tour while Jared Lamenzo pulls the stops.



Joshua South/Sidewalk Productions

View from the church floor: The three-story-high pipe organ, its 2,500 hand-crafted wood and metal pipes signed by the immigrant craftsmen who made them.

served as settings in three of his films. Celebrated for his film preservation work, Scorsese serves as honorary chair of Friends of the Erben Organ.

Cleaning and mending a pipe organ are tasks not easily undertaken. While all of these instruments have components in common, in terms of sound design, no two are alike. “We want to conserve the organ, so first we need to do forensics when it is taken apart to learn how the builders did what they did,” Lamenzo says.

Altogether, Lamenzo estimates that the Erben has 100,000 components. “A restoration like this means that the organ gets moved to a facility outside the city,” he says. “After specialists do the cleaning, the organ is reassembled. It’s all very expensive.”

For Lamenzo, who has played the Erben for the past 17 years, the instrument possesses a particular character. “The beautiful thing about this organ is the way it’s voiced, and it was voiced for this space,” he says.

The Erben was built shortly after the Civil War, and Henry’s two sons, Henry and Charles, the latter an organ builder, fought in that war. “They were saying something with their craft,” Lamenzo explains. “Charles

was at Antietam, and probably was a different man afterward.” Charles’ signature is visible on some of the Erben’s pipes. “There is a magnificence to this instrument, a triumphalism and sophistication, and then there is its unmistakable melancholy sound.”

No visit to the Erben is complete without inspecting its pipes that are housed in a space of about 500 square feet behind the facade. Fifty thousand visitors have peered inside the organ in the last year. Lamenzo climbs up several steps in the dimly lit interior and points to a spot on one of the taller pipes. “That is wax from the people who used to go up there to tune it by candlelight,” he says. “Just like listening to the past when I play, I encounter it every time I have to adjust something.”

Just then, there is a fleeting glimpse inside this husband and father of two of the boy who was first captivated by the beauty and symmetry of pipe organs—and classic cars.

As he brushes off dust from the pipes, Lamenzo talks about his favorite pieces of classical music. “It’s hard to get started because, for me, this goes back to my dad,” he says of his beloved father, who died recently. “We used to listen to Bach’s Magnificat in the car. We listened to a lot of Bach, but



Lana Krakovskiy/Friends of the Erben Organ

Jared Lamenzo with summer music campers.

I love the Mendelssohn and Brahms symphonies. I just love early music,” says Lamenzo. “As a child, music was connected for me to the voice of the divine. That has remained—I think music itself is divine.” ▲

To donate to Friends of the Erben Organ, please visit <https://erbenorgan.org/>.

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Lana Krakovskiy/Friends of the Erben Organ

Jared Lamenzo speaks to children from St. Brigid’s School about the Erben organ.