



THE
PIPES
ARE
CALLING

Not from a performance hall, not from a cathedral,
but from the sales floor of a department store.

BY ROBERT KLARA PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICARDO BARROS



Twice every business day since 1911, something happens at Philadelphia's old Wanamaker department store the likes of which never happen anywhere else. To many shoppers, it's familiar and soothing. Others find it impossibly mysterious. It's enough to draw visitors from other states and countries. It has left some in tears.

And no, it's not a sale.

Rather, twice a day, a small switch is thrown behind an unmarked door on the second-level mezzanine, powering up the blowers and feeding pressurized air into the wind chests and allowing the keys on the nearby console to summon the celestial voices of thousands upon thousands of pipes. This is to say, it's showtime for the Wanamaker pipe organ.

You'd be hard pressed to find a pipe organ in any department store these days (although in the early 1900s, several stores used pipe organs to help draw shoppers). But its unique home isn't this organ's only claim to fame. Sure, Wanamaker's—which, since 1997, has been a Lord and Taylor—may be the only store that will fill your cars with Mendelssohn instead of Muzak. And its organ is also a National Historic Landmark. But the Wanamaker Grand Court Organ (so named because of its presence in the store's enclosed courtyard) also happens to be the largest operative pipe organ in the world.

For reference, consider: The organ in Paris's Notre Dame Cathedral boasts some 8,000 pipes; the Sydney

Opera House, around 10,000. The Mormon Tabernacle's pipe organ in Salt Lake City shakes it congregants with the power of 11,623 pipes. And the Wanamaker? It has no fewer than 28,482 pipes. Some of them are 32 feet long. Some are big enough for a child to crawl through. There are so many pipes that the deep, sugar-pine chambers that house them (concealed behind ornamental grilles in the court's south wall) stretch seven stories up to the roof.

Most pipe-organ consoles have two or three keyboards; the Wanamaker has six. And sweeping inward from the console's wings in sinuous, multi-colored rows are 729 brightly colored push tabs (known as "stops" or "stop tablets"), each of which activates a grouping of pipes (also known as a "stop") crafted to sound like a specific musical instrument. There are flutes, saxophones, tibias, and tubas. There are cello-, violin-, viol-, and harp-sounding pipes. Many have likened the Wanamaker organ's majestic sound to that of an orchestra—but technically, they are wrong. The organ harbors the voices of so many instruments that it packs the wallop of *three* orchestras.

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The care and feeding of this musical beast falls to curator Curt Mangel, a spry and sturdy man of 53 who, when not saving historic theaters from demolition or supervising the crafting of the 15-foot crystal chandeliers he sells on the side, devotes his time to caring for pipe organs. The Wanamaker instrument (which Lord and Taylor maintains for the sake of goodwill and good PR,

at a considerable expense) has been his charge for two years. If the sole responsibility for the largest playable musical instrument on planet Earth—one valued at \$57 million—weighs on him, he doesn't show it. In fact, Mangel reduces his burden to a standard line: "I hold the keys up," he says, "so Peter can push them down."

He's referring to Peter Richard Conte, the store's official organist, who visitors will find perched at the console in the organ loft, high above the main sales floor, putting the organ through its paces. Conte's fingers step purposefully across the keys, climbing up and down the different keyboards. At strategic intervals, his hand dives for a stop. Soft bulbs bathe the console in amber light, hiding scratch marks in the woodwork—signs of many missed swipes at the controls.

Below, shoppers pause to listen. Kids sit on the floor digging into bags of potato chips. Senior citizens recline in the chairs of the shoe department, eyes closed, breathing the sound in. The music luxuriates from the grillwork above, a misty river of strings and woodwinds, interwoven with delicate melodies and the sudden, bone-jarring growls of the monstrous bass pipes that Conte prods to life with the foot pedals. The music envelops the store. It curls around your ears like a velvet scarf.

Clad in his janitorial jumpsuit, Mangel sits off to the side of the console on a small chair, listening with a bowed head. An instrument this complex requires its caretaker to be a step away at all times. "I always sit in this chair," he whispers, "so Peter can reach out and slap me when something goes wrong."

Fortunately for Mangel, Conte isn't the slapping sort. But something does go wrong. As Conte's right hand lifts from a key, an F-sharp pipe won't shut off. Its distant, complaining voice is too soft to be heard by any of the shoppers. But Mangel can hear it, and that's enough. "When it's cold and dry like this..." he sighs, breaking off. His fingers thoughtfully massage his chin. "We'll fix it."

To understand how Mangel fixes anything requires an understanding of some organ basics. A pipe organ is essentially a huge box of whistles, fed by air, controlled by a keyboard. When a key is pressed, its relay triggers a switch in a pressurized chest to open beneath a pipe, allowing air into the pipe's throat so it can sing. A grouping of 61 pipes with a similar tonal quality forms a stop, and the organist can mix together as

many or as few as he chooses. Stops are in turn grouped into divisions (ten in the case of the Wanamaker), each of which has its own sound chamber in the wall. It's that simple—and that complicated, because between the pressing of a key and the sounding of a pipe are countless parts that must work flawlessly. What's more, in this case, many of those parts are nearly a century old. The Wanamakers bought the organ following

its debut at the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis, and even its newest additions date from the late 1920s.

Mangel's job is demanding, if not exactly dramatic. It consists first of waiting for something to malfunction and then jury-rigging for endless hours to make sure the same thing won't malfunction for at least another week. A curator is part watchman, part engineer, and part nurse—with all the tedium and patience those titles suggest. Mangel himself calls his work "triage." "You have to keep up with what

breaks," he says. "That's the secret."

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By the racks of ladies' activewear, Mangel pushes open a door that leads to the pipe chambers behind the wall. It's a phantom world of stairs and ladders, redolent with the smells of dust and aged wood. The passages stretch endlessly up into the shadows, where there's little light, even less to grab hold of, and a potentially lethal fall at the ends of the catwalks. "It just goes on and on forever," Mangel says, almost apologetically. "You can't be afraid of heights when you do what I do. Watch your head, you have to be very careful."

With the deftness of a squirrel, he scampers up two levels and squeezes into the chamber of the Solo Division, where row after row of silvery pipes line up in ascending order. Some are no bigger than nails; others, the size of trees. "One thing to remember in a pipe chamber," Mangel cautions, "is stay away from the pipes. Your body temperature can throw them out of tune." Pipes are exceedingly fragile creatures, and they'll only sing when conditions are perfect. Thermometers and humidity gauges stud nearly every wall.

Mangel remembers from a few days ago that a D-sharp in one of the Solo's tuba stops isn't sounding. Facing a thicket of pipes, he reaches instinctively in and grabs one. Lifting it gently



IN HARMONY: Peter Conte and Curt Mangel



MASTER SLEUTH: Curt Mangel has a rare gift.

THE MUSIC ENVELOPS THE STORE. IT CURLS AROUND YOUR EARS LIKE A VELVET SCARF.

THE TICKET

Philadelphia's Lord & Taylor store is located at 13th and Market streets. For more info on the organ, visit wanamakerorgan.com.

from its wind chest, Mangel finesses its boot off, then lightly blows on the exposed reed. Will that alone fix the problem? Yes, because a single speck of dust lodged beneath the reed was enough to keep an eight-foot-long pipe from making a peep—and Mangel suspected as much on his way up the ladder.

“There are very few people in the world who can do what Curt does,” Conte says. “This organ is so much larger than any other, and it only functions because of his persistence because of his persistence. I can’t fathom what he does intuitively. It’s a gift.”

A renaissance man of all things mechanical (he knows how to fix clocks and steam engines, too), Mangel first became aware of his gift as a teenager when he joined a local youth group. The Freemason’s hall in which they met housed a long-dead Victorian pipe organ. “I couldn’t keep my hands off it,” Mangel remembers. He had it working in a few weeks. After decades of repairing organs in the Midwest, Mangel was invited to care for the Wanamaker. He sold his house, left his friends, and moved to Philly, where he now keeps an apartment just blocks from the store so he can reach his charge within minutes. “This is,” he explains, “the most important organ in America.”

Before long, Mangel is out to find the wayward F-sharp that malfunctioned during Conte’s recital. Climbing up into the Great Division, he scans the rows of pipes dimly gleaming under a fluorescent tube. “Rats!” he scolds, plucking a four-foot-long pipe from its wind chest.

If a pipe is malfunctioning, it’s a straight-

forward guess that there’s something wrong with that pipe or the valve mechanism beneath it. But Mangel, eyebrows in a crinkle, senses otherwise. Intuitively, he slides down beneath the wind chest and starts taking things apart—not beneath the problem pipe, but the one beside it. Minutes later, he pulls out a leather diaphragm with a nasty-looking tear through it. “The neighboring F-sharp of another rank had a leaky pneumatic,”

Mangel explains. “When the rank wasn’t on, it let the air through to our F-sharp. Had that rank been on, the pressure would have closed the valve.” Come again? Suffice it to say that an open window in one room can cause a draft in another. Mangel happily climbs down to pluck a new diaphragm from his supply cabinet. “Am I good,” he asks, “or what?”

Indeed, the Wanamaker organ is very fortunate that Mangel is that good, because much of the organ still isn’t working. Mangel has rebuilt two whole divisions, but the Orchestral is silent, and so is the Original String Division, which sits in pieces as of this writing. For Mangel, this will mean months, if not years, of work. “We can get the whole thing restored in my lifetime,” he says confidently.

If a lifetime spent in devotion to a dusty wooden contraption in the wall seems extreme, you will have a hard time convincing Mangel to see it that way. “I am about legacy,” he says. “This organ is going to be here after I’m gone and after you’re gone. It’s my job to keep it playing.” ★

ROB KLARA writes from his home in New York City.



A PIPE ORGAN IS ESSENTIALLY A HUGE BOX OF WHISTLES, FED BY AIR, CONTROLLED BY A KEYBOARD.

