

# The Aeolian Organ Opus 1559

## The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art

America's incredible industrial growth in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was creating dozens of new millionaires every year. Many of them were building trophy mansions, and thanks to their paper-roll player mechanism, Aeolian organs soon became must-have status symbols, providing permanent virtual symphony orchestras in the living rooms of the wealthy.

John and Mable Ringling wanted a massive pipe organ to be part of Ca' d'Zan and such an instrument was so large that the house had to be designed around it. The original order was submitted to the New York Aeolian Organ offices by John Ringling on July 19, 1924. It was later revised, upgrading the instrument from a two-manual organ to a three-manual organ that included the mechanism that allowed the organ to be played automatically. The contract was finally signed by John Ringling on August 24, 1924 at a cost of \$25,000. The cost did not include the necessary electrical wiring throughout the mansion and the carved oak gothic-style console casement. There were very specific requirements regarding the wiring, motor and generators to assure the organ functioned properly.

The final design for the organ included three manuals (keyboards) each with a compass (range) of five full octaves (61 notes each), and a pedal board with a compass of 2 ½ octaves (32 notes). Originally the organ had a total of 2,288 pipes in 35 ranks with 43 speaking stops (voices) spread across six divisions. Each rank was a graduated series of 32, 61, or 73 matched pipes. Twenty-four selectable couplers allowed various combinations of pipes to be played on each of the manuals.

Divisions were "Great" (main), "Swell" (chorus), "Choir" (harmony), "Solo" (melody), "Echo" (antiphonal), and "Pedal" (bass accompaniment). The Swell, Great, and Choir were played from the upper, middle, and lower manuals respectively. The pedal division was played with the feet, and the Echo and Solo divisions floated between manuals according to settings of the couplers. A patented Compound Aeolian Windchest System maintained complete synchronization between the Great and Choir divisions. The organ included percussion voices with a twenty note Chime and sixty-one note Harp and High Harp (Celesta).

One division, the five Echo voices with its 365 pipes, was housed in a louvered chamber at the northeast corner of mezzanine. The louvers could be opened and closed to control the dynamic level of the sound. The remaining divisions and percussion devices were located in the main chamber at southern wall of the mezzanine which extended upwards into the third floor. A portion of this chamber was louvered, and the remainder was open to the court. The electric blower that supplied air pressure to the pipes was in a cork-lined room in the basement so its sound would not be heard by the listeners. Pipes ranged in size from 10 feet high and 12 inches in diameter, to pipes as small as a pencil. Mable had both chambers covered with tapestries to hide the pipes and louvers.

Labels on the stops of this, and most other Aeolian organs, was written in a simplified nomenclature adopted in 1907 when the company began printing registration on its player rolls. To make the names of stops as straightforward as possible for laymen who would be operating the player mechanism, identification was reduced to tone quality (i.e. String, Flute, Clarinet, Trumpet, etc.), pitch (either "High" or "Deep") and intensity. The addition of the letter "F" indicates *Forte*, and that the stop will be louder than the natural tone; while the letters "P" (*Piano*) and "PP" (*Pianissimo*) indicate that the stops are

softer or much softer than the natural tones. Assuming a violinist's vibrato would be more familiar than the church organist's "Vox Celeste", Aeolian called its celeste stop a Vibrato String F or P.

The instrument could be played manually from the keyboards, completely automatically with Aeolian Duo-Art records (176 note rolls), or semi-automatically with Aeolian Solo 116 note rolls. Neither Mable nor John played the organ, so they depended on guest performers or the automatic features of the organ.

Lawrence Cram, May 2019