

# Solange De Santis

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*All the Stops: The Glorious Pipe Organ and Its American Masters*  
By Craig R. Whitney

As published in the Anglican Journal

*All the Stops*, a history of the pipe organ's development in America in the last two centuries, brings back childhood memories. My grandfather, George H. Stevenson, played the "mighty Wurlitzers" in the silent movie theaters of New York and Brooklyn. Although he had stopped playing by the time I came along in 1954, my mother's stories of that time were wondrous. Perhaps because of this filial connection, I was such a nerd as a teenager in the 1960s that I was listening to E. Power Biggs, the great British organist who had an enormous popular following, rather than Jimi Hendrix.

It was a great time to be a fan of the pipe organ, those huge, breathing instruments that most of us first encounter in church. Biggs' rival at the time (they were almost like rock stars) was American Virgil Fox, the Liberace of the organ, who staged "Heavy Organ" concerts, complete with psychedelic light show, at the marijuana-saturated Fillmore East theatre in New York. I, firmly in the Biggs camp, thought Fox a vulgar showman.

Mr. Whitney, who works in his spare time as an assistant managing editor of the *New York Times* when he is not searching out, and playing, pipe organs around the world, vividly brings that era to life. He also writes engagingly about the American organ-builders, Ernest M. Skinner and G. Donald Harrison, who had completely opposing views – Skinner, aiming for a big, orchestral, romantic sound and Harrison the proponent of tonal clarity and a delicate sensibility friendlier to baroque music.

Although one doesn't have to be an organ dweeb to enjoy *All the Stops*, one's attention does flag a bit after the deaths of Biggs and Fox, perhaps inevitably. They were the proverbial tough act to follow and Mr. Whitney, in the following chapter, delves into the occasionally eye-glazing esoterica of organ tuning. However, in subsequent chapters, he does deliver the good news that, after a post-Biggs/Fox slump, the pipe organ as a concert instrument is poised for a comeback. What will take it to new audiences – and what we are still waiting for -- are forceful, dynamic advocates like those distinctive performers of the recent past.

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Solange De Santis  
318 McNabb Crescent  
Milton, Ontario L9T 3G2  
Canada

Phone 905-878-5548

Fax 905-878-2373

[solange@solangedesantis.com](mailto:solange@solangedesantis.com)