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Music Trades

DECEMBER 2019

THE GLOBAL ISSUE

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PIONEERING DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY LEADS TO MODERN-DAY ORGAN LINE AIMED AT DISCERNING CUSTOMERS

Allen Organ President Steve Markowitz with a portrait of his father, company founder Jerome Markowitz, and one of Jerome's historic instruments.

MAN NEVER WOULD HAVE walked on the moon without the invention of the integrated circuit, the mighty 1/16" computer chips that could direct a speeding spacecraft in real time. Developed for NASA's Apollo program by contractor North American Rockwell, the technology would go on to revolutionize countless other industries. The very first outsider to spot its potential, however, was Jerome Markowitz, founder of the Allen Organ Company. After investing more than $2 million into a joint venture with Rockwell—a huge sum for Allen Organ, where annual sales totaled less than $10 million at the time—the company emerged in 1971 with an organ built on the world's first sampling technology. The original Allen Digital Computer Organ, one of the earliest ever digital consumer products in any industry, now holds a place in the Smithsonian Institution. "This basic sampling technology laid the foundation for all digital sound production," says Aram Basmadjian, Allen Organ's vice president of sales.

Nearly 50 years later, Allen Organ technology is still being put to work in organs for the church, theater, home, and studio. The technology and feature set, however, has evolved almost beyond recognition. Allen's seventh-generation digital organ technology, GENISYS, now represents the company's gold standard in sound quality, voice selection, wireless connectivity, and a comprehensive menu of controls. The onboard user interface has been streamlined into an advanced color touchscreen with an intuitive layout. Alternatively, a wifi user interface for iOS and Android, known as GENISYS Remote, brings some functions—such as automatic playback of prerecorded soundtracks—to connected smartphone and tablet screens. A library of GENISYS Voices comprises dozens of high-definition organ and orchestral sounds for the player to select and change on the fly. "Today, the organ has taken on a much more versatile role in supporting music ministries worldwide," Basmadjian says. "This includes offering orchestral sounds to support more contemporary styles of worship."

With its tonal flexibility and its sharp technical specs, the contemporary Allen Organ is tailor-made for modern musicians and houses of worship—and trends show more are using them. Between the high cost of traditional pipe organs, the refinement of Allen's own digital voices, and the general profusion of technology through daily life, even traditional institutions are increasingly opting for digital organs: Just this past September, an Allen digital/pipe organ was installed in the Centre de congrès in Angers, France, becoming the first organ with digital voices in any concert hall in the country. The upshot is that the company is now serving larger institutional customers with more sophisticated needs, though its reputation for customized solutions goes back many years. It was one of the company's hallmarks under founder Jerome Markowitz, father of current Allen Organ President Steve Markowitz, who established the company more than 70 years ago.

Born in 1918, Jerome was a gifted inventor and ham radio enthusiast who came of age building televisions, radios, and other gadgets from scratch. The organ, however, was a special source of fascination. In 1937 Jerome left college to work on his Stable Audio Oscillator, patented in the late '30s, which became the basis for a "pipeless organ" employing electronic tone generation. His work was put on hold during World War II, but investments from family and friends brought in enough funding to found the Allen Organ Company after the war. By 1953 the company had moved into its current manufacturing base in Macungie, Pennsylvania, which would expand substantially over the years. Besides its advanced technology, Allen Organ became known for its tailored approach to organ building. While competitors focused on off-the-rack products and pushed for lower price points, Allen offered customized designs to suit individual customers. It also pursued a different market, faithfully capturing the tones of windblown pipe organs while other manufacturers geared their sounds toward popular music. By the late 1960s, Allen Organ Company had sold more than 30,000 organs on six continents.

As a technologist, however, Jerome understood he'd already pushed audio oscillator technology as far as it was ever going to go. "He yearned for the next jump in sound technology," says Basmadjian. His inquiries brought him to North American Rockwell, where the integrated circuits created for the lunar missions set the stage for the sampling concept music and audio pros take almost for granted today. At the time, however, it took a leap of ingenuity to recognize that sound could be recorded, converted into digital numbers, stored in computer memory, and played back as replicas. "Jerome realized this technology could more precisely reproduce complex pipe organ sounds," Basmadjian explains. Allen's digital organ became an instant success, earning the 1972 IR-100 Award as one of the most significant innovations of the year. The technology preceded competing digital products by at least 15 years.

Today, Allen organs can be found in prestigious churches and concert halls worldwide. Every organ, no matter its destination, is built to commercial-grade quality standards to give the instrument its longest possible lifespan. With that in mind, the company maintains a multimillion-dollar inventory of service parts, even for organs that went out of production decades ago—such as vintage models built on vacuum tube technology.

All Allen Organ production, from technical assembly to cabinetry, is carried out at the company's own factory in Macungie, Pennsylvania.

As for today's selection, Allen's GENISYS technology and features lay the foundation for a broad selection of organs. The use of convolution acoustics—i.e., genuine sampled acoustics—set Allen organs apart from instruments still using the older technology of digital reverberation. Proprietary DOVE voicing software contributes parametric equalization and other options for tailoring the sound of the organ to any room's natural acoustics. And Allen's SoundMatrix Library provides thousands of ranks, easily downloaded to an organ in the field, representing varied schools of organ building from respected pipe organ builders around the world.

"Allen Organ Company views its relationships with customers, dealers, and employees in terms of a larger family," says Basmadjian. "This is confirmed by its long-term association with employees, some of whom have more than 60 years of tenure; dealers that have represented Allen for decades; and customers that are using Allen Organs into their seventh decade. The company will continue to stay in the forefront of digital technology to increase the versatility and value supplied with its organs."

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