

THE EXCESSIVE MACHINE: ON THE QUEER CONSTRUCTION OF THE ORGAN

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“I heard the sound of the organ; and then I began to understand [...] What I now heard was utterly different from what I had heard up to then. [It] seemed to me at first one long, awful, magnificent sob. But, little by little, it expressed every emotion, every suffering of which mankind is capable. It intoxicated me; and I opened the door that separated us.”

Christine, from Leroux’s *Phantom of the Opera* (1910)¹

THIS YEAR, THE 33-year-old virtuoso organist *extraordinaire* Cameron Carpenter released the inaugural recording of his so-called “virtual touring organ” by Marshall & Ogletree, a Massachusetts organbuilder specializing in digital instruments. Carpenter has come to be known as the very embodiment of camp in the classical music world, donning glitzy jewels, skin-tight pants, and a *chic* mohawk. His publicity photos tend toward overt sexualization, displaying him against a sparkling city night-scape ripping open his tuxedo shirt to reveal a chiseled, glistening torso (Figure 1). His glaring gaze at the camera carries an expression of *sérieux* smolder—a seductive image on par with the great millennial sex icons Lady Gaga, Beyoncé, or Justin Timberlake. The young star has cited his campy image as a vehicle of liberation for his instrument, claiming that “Each jewel that I’m putting on equates to another blow struck for artistic freedom with the organ.”²

Carpenter has claimed his digital instrument, which utilizes live recorded samples from the world’s great organs,³ will free him from problematic confines that hinder the audience’s sense of connection with organists. “What could be a bigger symbol of its monstrosity than it can’t move and the player has his back to the audience?”⁴ Carpenter illustrates two of the organ’s great limits in

1 Gaston Leroux, *The Phantom of the Opera*, trans. anon. (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1911), 169.

2 Vivien Schweitzer, “In Concert: Talent, Style and Sequins,” *New York Times*, November 11, 2009, under “Music,” <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/15/arts/music/15schw.html> (accessed November 22, 2014).

3 “The International Touring Organ: Vision,” *cameroncarpenter.com* (accessed November 22, 2014).

4 Michaela Boland, “Anxiously seeking virtual end to organ grind for Cameron Carpenter,” *The Australian*, October 9, 2009, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/anxiously-seeking-virtual-end-to-organ-grind-for-cameron-carpenter/story-e6frg6n6-1225784621530> (accessed November 22, 2014).