

## The organs of the Baron Albert de l'Espée

Albert de l'Espée was born in Metz in 1852, a descendant of the de Wendel family, one of the most powerful in Lorraine, controlling the greatest iron and steel empire of the mid-nineteenth century. He learned the piano, harmonium and organ in Metz and with the Paris World Exhibition of 1867 discovered more about the wider world, without leaving the banks of the Seine. In Paris he visited his cousins regularly in the Rue Las Cases, near the Church of Sainte Clotilde, where he may well have heard César Franck improvising on the instrument installed there by the great Cavaillé-Coll. It seems that his ambition to own such an organ for himself dates from this time. From 1870 he spent several periods in Paris, exploring the organ lofts, visiting the Conservatoire where César Franck taught and Aristide Cavaillé-Coll in the Avenue du Maine. His desire was to possess a cathedral organ and from 1875 he continuously compared the qualities of various instruments. Very rich, weak in health, protecting himself from any pollution and always searching for the ideal climate, clever and a great builder, Albert de l'Espée came to own, among the estates he inherited, his acquisitions and the places he had built, some ten properties throughout France, seven of them with organs.

In 1880 Albert de l'Espée installed a Cavaillé-Coll instrument with ten stops, identical to that of Eugène Gigout, in the family château at Antibes.

For the World Exhibition of 1878 Cavaillé-Coll installed a powerful instrument in the great hall of the Trocadéro. Essentially a concert instrument, this was exactly what he hoped one day to have for himself. The acoustic of the hall was appalling. He would have his own room with a faultless acoustic. In 1890 Cavaillé-Coll was given a commission for an instrument around which the Baron would have a house built. For this he settled on Biarritz, on the place called Ilbarritz. The château was completed in 1897 and the great organ installed, an instrument with 72 stops, four manuals, three swell boxes, 16', 8' and 4' chamades, and three 32' pedal stops. Soon the darkness of the night was disturbed by the sounds of *Parsifal* and *Tannhäuser*. After a disappointment in love, in 1898 the Baron decided to sell the château, but found no buyer. He played the instrument for the last time in 1902 and the following year Charles Mutin, Cavaillé-Coll's successor, bought it back and installed it in the company workshops in the Avenue du Maine. It stayed there until 1913, when a place was found for it at the Sacré-Coeur in Montmartre, with a new organ case but keeping the magnificent console, an instrument that was the third of its kind, together with those of Saint Sulpice and Notre Dame.

In 1905 Albert de l'Espée decided not to sell Ilbarritz and ordered a new organ from Charles Mutin, an eccentric plan, with 62 stops and three manuals. Part of this instrument was later re-used in the organ at Uzurbil, near Bilbao.

During this period Albert de l'Espée had bought in 1892 an enormous private mansion, No. 50, Avenue du Bois de Boulogne (the modern Avenue Foch). Cavaillé-Coll was again asked to build an organ of three manuals and 42 stops that was soon to bring objections from the whole district. Tired of the late-night noise that the Baron made, his neighbours joined together to make a complaint. He decided to sell the organ and it was bought in 1907 by Count Berthier de Sauvigny, who had in his own house in the Rue Legendre a 28-stop organ by Merklin. The Count presented the instrument he had bought to the new Church of Saint Antoine des Quinze-Vingts and it was installed there by Merklin in 1909 with a new organ case, keeping the original console. Count Berthier was the first to be appointed organist and was followed by successors that included Jean Langlais, Gaston Litaize and others. Since its installation the organ has been restored three times, in 1956 by Pierre Chéron, in 1982 by Jacques Barbéris, and in 1993 by Yves Fossaert, who has since maintained the instrument.

A remarkable man for building, Albert de l'Espée had started on a new site in 1893 at Belle-Ile, the château of Taillefer. Cavaillé-Coll installed there an organ with three manuals and 46 stops, similar to that in the Avenue du Bois de Boulogne. The instrument and the château were completely destroyed by fire when the Germans left Paris in 1945.

Travelling thousands of miles by railway, the Baron was elusive. About 1897 he succeeded in having another mansion built, on the banks of Lake Montrion. Here he had Merklin install an orchestrion, a curious mixture of mechanical piano and barrel organ with music rolls.

Passing over the order for the last of the Alexandre harmoniums for his property at Saint Vallier de Thiey, near Cannes, we find the final instrument built by Mutin for the Villa Henriette, between Monaco and Menton. Having learned from his experiences in Paris and the legal action with which he had been threatened, the Baron modified his ambitions, commissioning an instrument of a mere score of stops. When the villa was sold, in about 1913, the greater part of this instrument was re-used for the organ in Monaco Cathedral.

*Yves Rousseau*

*Based on Christophe Luraschi's book Albert de l'Espée, Genie – Démesure, Edition Atlantica, Biarritz, 1998*

English versions by Keith Anderson and Wil Gowans

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See also : <https://www.abandonedspaces.com/mansion/chateau-ilbarritz.html?firefox=1&fbclid=IwAR3t5OXbScA1R-joOW5bkWrUZxMOLiMQtrLZO6aHlfd58CFd-WQKmq5rJek&chrome=1>