

## **Mapping San Diego Organs: Church, Theater, and Stadium**

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## Introduction

From church services to symphonies, ballparks to pavilions, the organ is an integral part of San Diego life. The American Guild of Organists San Diego Chapter recognizes 21 organs in the area, including Copley Symphony Hall, Spreckels Organ Pavilion, and St. Paul's Lutheran Church among others.<sup>1</sup> Organs can also be found in sports settings, such as Petco Park, home of the San Diego Padres. How did these organs find their way into churches, parks, and sports venues, and what impact do they have on the city of San Diego? In early January 2025, I set out to interview San Diego organists and visit the organs they play. The complete list was as follows: Tomás Acosta at First Unitarian Universalist Church, Guadalupe Rios at the Immaculata Church, Sarah Amos at First United Methodist Church, Rueben Valenzuela at All Souls Episcopal Church, Russ Peck at Trinity Presbyterian Church, Jenny Yun at La Jolla Presbyterian Church, and Bobby Cressey who is a stadium organist in San Diego. These specific organs were selected to include at least one of each type of organ (church/theater/stadium), and because they are installations I have personally played or visited before.

For each of the individual instrument, I met with the resident organist to visit the installation and speak with them in person. I used the following questions to guide my conversations:

1. How long have you been playing the organ?
2. Could you share any historical knowledge about this organ? Maintenance? Renovations?
3. What are the features of the console/specifications of the pipes? Action/depth of the manuals, electronics? Decorations?
4. How are the acoustics of the space?

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<sup>1</sup> American Guild of Organists San Diego Chapter, "Welcome to the AGO San Diego Chapter," <https://www.agosd.org/>.

5. What styles work best for the instrument? Do you have anything you prefer to play?

Audience preferences?

6. What events are hosted in the space?
7. Who does the space serve? What are the demographics of your audiences?
8. Any other considerations of the space such as noise interference?
9. Anything else noteworthy about the instrument or your position?

From my visits, I was left with several overarching themes for my investigation of organ music in San Diego, including: How many musicians who play the organ identify as organists? How do audiences differ across the three types of organs? How is the organ used as a tool to bring people of different backgrounds together? To what degree is organ music intertwined with the culture of San Diegans? What will the future of organs look like in San Diego?

I met organists from a wide variety of backgrounds who service diverse audiences, but one thing remained constant: organ is greatly appreciated by the San Diego community, yet it will take work to keep the pipes sounding. This paper will begin with my own background as an organist before examining inspiration for this project. Then, through a literature review and section on “Why San Diego?” I will explain prior related work and justify the choice of framing: San Diego. Next, I will provide an overview of the three types of organs before the majority of the work dives into individual instrument specifications and themes which appeared across the interviews. Lastly, the work will include future directions for organ in San Diego. I will argue that the future of the organ in San Diego will rely on organists advertising and audiences organizing to promote the instrument and keep the tradition alive in churches, stadiums, and theaters alike.

## **Context and Inspiration**

When I was first introduced to the organ, I was a passive listener, however today I would consider myself an active and engaged participant. Growing up, I have always appreciated music; I was introduced to many styles through the radio, my older sister, and the elementary school I attended, St. Paul's where I first encountered the organ. I began piano lessons in kindergarten and organ in third grade; in my mind, I was following in the footsteps of my older sister who also played the piano while paving my own way on a fancier piano: the organ.

Attending chapel, church, and other musical performances, I was inspired by my teacher and peers. In middle school and high school, I had opportunities to play a variety of different organ installations in recitals, church services, and competitions such as AGO scholarships and Junior Bach Festivals. Junior Bach Festival competitions consisted of piano as well as organ (mutually exclusive entries), but there were always many more pianists than there were organists. This made a profound impact on my view of the instrument, demonstrating just how many fewer organists there are than pianists due to access as well as exposure to the instrument.

At that point in my life, I enjoyed organ music, but I didn't understand the tradition and significance of the instrument. Organists typically come from a certain level of privilege as access to an instrument is limited, and there are educational barriers to entry. For example, many organists such as myself, were introduced to the instrument through a church or school as many organ installations are part of churches. Inevitably, any musician must have access to resources to either teach themselves or hire an instructor to learn how to play, and in the case of organ, one also needs a console and pedal board to play. Additionally, the organ is not a portable instrument. Fortunately, through my instructor's network of students, I was passed down an electronic organ that I could play in my own home.

After graduating from high school, I moved to Iowa. I currently attend Grinnell College, where in addition to Music, I study Computer Science, Statistics and compete on the tennis team. In Grinnell, there are still multiple churches with organs, but there are significantly fewer organists. There are many talented musicians, and the organ studio has a steady number of organists, however few have been exposed to the instrument before college. Friends, faculty and community members attend organ recitals, which serve to not only show off the hard work of the studio members, but get new people involved in the instrument to keep the tradition of organ playing alive. While at Grinnell, I've found great joy in sharing the instrument with others. Many have never heard or seen an organ in person, and they ask questions which inspire me to further my knowledge of the instrument.

Thinking ahead for life after undergrad, my goal was to design a project which builds on my knowledge, experiences, and connections in both music and technology I have made in Grinnell as well as San Diego. I hope to pursue a career in tech, while continuing to play music for church services, and perhaps break into theater and/or stadium organ. I recognize all the opportunities I have been given, and I hope this project will also be a way of giving back to the organ community, as well as to introduce the instrument to a wider audience.

### **Why San Diego?**

Over the years, I have had opportunities to study and play organs in multiple cities, which raises the question: why San Diego specifically? One of the initial reasons I chose to focus on San Diego is my upbringing and plan to return. I wanted to learn more about the installations I had grown up playing and make connections with the musicians in the city. It also made the scope of the project feasible, as I was able to visit each of the instruments in person within a short time frame.

Second, it is important to consider the distribution of churches, theaters, and stadiums with organ installations. Stadium organs are used for multiple sports in the United States including baseball, hockey, basketball, and soccer. Regardless of sport and league, most stadiums are located in urban areas. Additionally, even though a city may have a team, it doesn't necessarily mean they use an organ at their sporting events. San Diego is an ideal subject as it has major league baseball, minor league hockey, and major league indoor soccer, all of which San Diego organist Bobby Cressey has played for.

Lastly, the church and theater organs offer great insight into San Diego's history and culture. The Spreckels Organ was built for the 1915 World Fair and is currently the world's largest outdoor pipe organ. The organ and organist can be found on a grand stage in the middle of a semi-circular pavilion, while listeners sit on rows of benches. The pavilion itself is located at the heart of Balboa Park, a cultural area with museums and restaurants near the heart of downtown San Diego. The Spreckels Organ Society hosts weekly concerts on Sunday afternoons played by the civic organist as well as guest organists from around the world, including myself. The Spreckels organ has made a profound impact of the organ on the San Diego community; it has been a significant part of my experience as a San Diegan, as well as countless others. The instrument is more than one-hundred years old, and San Diegans still come back every week to hear it. This demonstrates to citizens as well as city officials that the pavilion is a valuable component to invest resources into and keep around for years to come. The civic organist and the Spreckels Organ Society also work hard to host other special events through the year including holiday concerts as well as children's concerts and educational events. As an outdoor amphitheater, the Spreckels organ is also a novel instrument to examine as it is subject to noise

pollution from cars as well as airplanes flying overhead. The music overflows from the pavilion into the whole park, luring in listeners from all over Balboa Park.

The All Souls Organ is modeled after 17<sup>th</sup> century North German organs and is one of the few installations in California which is tuned in unequal temperament. This is a special installation as the instrument was specifically built to play organ music from the era before Bach. 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century music can also work well, but the organ is not well suited for French repertoire. Being tuned in unequal temperament, the instrument is more colorful and expressive, with certain keys sounding darker, while others lighter. Locals also treasure the All Souls Organ for its decorative beauty: the organ case has sea creatures hidden throughout, and the church has a coloring book with the animals for children.

The Trinity Presbyterian Wurlitzer serves dual function as a church and theater organ. This showcases the overlap in tonality in the construction of church and theater organs, as well as the reliance on organizations to house organs. The Trinity Organ has foundational organ stops core to church organs such as diapasons, flutes, and more, but then adds an additional layer with orchestral stops and percussion instruments to serve as a theater organ. Organs have a large imprint: they require a home, continuous maintenance and community support. Churches have congregations and need instruments to accompany singing, which leads to a tradeoff: church communities offer their space and support to theater organists in exchange for an instrument to be used in worship. An urban location with access to stadium organs, intricacies of individual instruments, a wide range of audiences, and my own familiarity and access made San Diego an ideal location to focus this project around.



## Lit Review

### *History*

The AGO San Diego Organs webpage lists several notable pipe organs in the area, providing a brief history as well as physical specifications.<sup>2</sup> Many of the organs I visited for this project are included on this list, including First United Methodist Church (FUMC), Spreckels, All Souls, and La Jolla Presbyterian. This was a jumping off place used to prepare for interviews and further research. This source was geared towards specific San Diego organs, while the remainder of the historical sources focus on the instrument's specifications generally, the culture and journey of the instrument, and methods for preservation and restoration.

*Church Music in America*, by John Ogasapian, discusses several of the major milestones of the organ as a service instrument. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as immigrants brought their culture with them to the United States, they sought refuge in their own music and looked to the organ as it could accompany large groups. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, church musicians in New York organized and formed the American Guild of Organists. Ogasapian writes that the organization was formed with the intention to, “Advance the cause of worship church music; to elevate the status of church organists; to increase their appreciation of their responsibilities, duties and opportunities as conductors of worship and to obtain acknowledgement of their positions from the authorities of the church.”<sup>3</sup> For a long time, being a church musician was not a job in America as it was in Europe, with church musicians supplementing their income by teaching lessons, performing, and merchandising.

The *Cambridge Companion*, a source written by multiple authors and edited by Nicholas Thistlethwaite and Geoffrey Webber, also tells the story of the adoption of the organ in church

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<sup>2</sup> American Guild of Organists San Diego Chapter, "Area Organs," <https://www.agosd.org/resources/area-organs>.

<sup>3</sup> John Ogasapian, (2007), *Church Music in America, 1620-2000*, Mercer University Press, 230.

music, and how it was not exactly a viable career path without supplemental income for a long time. Adoption of the instrument occurred gradually, with certain religions such as Roman Catholicism pushing back on the organ but eventually adopting it as a tool to lead congregational singing.<sup>4</sup> Thistlethwaite and Webber's work separates itself from the other historical sources as it has a section which describes playing techniques on the organ compared to other keyboard instruments. Their work also has sections about the physical stops and how certain installations are designed to place music from specific time periods: "Repertoire must be related carefully to the type of instrument for which it was conceived: not because this determines how it must be played today but because it offers an opportunity to understand more fully the intentions of the composer and the experience of the original player," writes Nicholas Thistlethwaite in the first section.<sup>5</sup> Thistlethwaite and Webber's work also touches on restoration practices as many organs built in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century are still functional today. Thistlethwaite noted, "Nor is restoration necessarily a guarantee of authenticity. Old organs restored in the 1950s and 60s are now being restored again. Whether current restoration techniques will be regarded as adequate in another fifty years' time remains to be seen. Claims to historical correctness should always therefore be treated with some caution, although few old organs will fail to yield some valuable insights for the player."<sup>6</sup> As I will discuss, the organ at All Souls relates back to Thistlethwaite and Webber's ideas as it was built to replicate historic German organs, so it naturally is better suited for specific repertoire.

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<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Thistlethwaite and Geoffrey Webber, (1998), *The Cambridge Companion to the Organ*. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Thistlethwaite and Geoffrey Webber, (1998), *The Cambridge Companion to the Organ*. Cambridge University Press, 2.

<sup>6</sup> Nicholas Thistlethwaite and Geoffrey Webber, (1998), *The Cambridge Companion to the Organ*. Cambridge University Press, 3.

The organ community strives to keep organs around for future generations, but what does this entail? It involves a careful balance between preservation and restoration. The book *Artifacts in Use* by author John Watson discusses philosophical approaches to maintaining organs. If we preserve the instrument but it is no longer playable, then perhaps it is still valuable to historians, but not researchers who want to hear it played. Conversely, if we restore the instrument but alter it from its original state, is it really the same instrument?<sup>7</sup>

“The Numbers Speak: A Breakdown of San Diego’s Church Attendance” by Zach Dinsmore steps into the present. While the other articles speak about the past, Dinsmore speaks about the future of organ. This source pairs well with the interviews conducted to get a sense of the distribution of churchgoers and how many of them are exposed to organ music when worshipping.<sup>8</sup> If the younger generation tends towards contemporary worship, then the number of traditional churches with organs will gradually decrease.

It is valuable to understand how the first organs appeared in the US, and subsequently San Diego as it holds useful clues in understanding the development of organs more broadly. These sources help explain the evolution of the physical specifications as well as the uses and playing styles of the organ over the years, giving us a brief look into future directions of organ in San Diego.

### *Theater and Stadium Organ*

Researching theater organ, I realized most documented sources are shorter articles as opposed to books or manuals. Out of these sources, three (“Supreme Combo: Pizzas and Organs” by Kelly Bennett, “Pasadena Civic Auditorium Moller” by Don Feely, and “Reginald Foort Re-

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<sup>7</sup> John. R. Watson, (2010), *Artifacts in Use: The Paradox of Restoration and the Conservation of Organs*, Organ Historical Society Press.

<sup>8</sup> Zach Dinsmore, (2024, April 17), “The Numbers Speak: A Breakdown of San Diego’s Church Attendance,” *The Point*.

united with His 1938 5/27 ‘Portativ’” by Stu Green) discuss different adventures of the same instrument: Reginald Foort’s traveling organ. “The First Six Decades: Spreckels Organ Pavillion” by Douglas Duncan and “Consoles are up in Richmond” by Mac Murrill are articles written to highlight specific theater organs, while the *Mighty Wurlitzer* by John Landon is the only book out of all the sources, and moreover one of the only books written about the theater organ. It documents the physical specifications of the instrument, inventions, manufacturers, and the overall rise and fall of the instrument. Similarly to theater organs, there is not much coverage on stadium organs. There are general manufacturers which are popular choices for consoles, but stadium organs differ wildly depending on where they are located. These three texts cover the original stadium organ, the Chicago Barton, which is no longer in operation.

Comparing the articles on the traveling organ, Bennett’s article is more of a casual journal article while the other two sources are more formal historical reports. Feely’s work provides the entire timeline of Foort’s traveling organ from broadcasting during wartimes, to life on the road, to settling down in Pasadena. As Feely explains, “Its resume includes two trips across the Atlantic, installations in three different countries, and recordings by some of the world’s greatest organists.”<sup>9</sup> Bennett and Feely’s works both focus on the instrument’s stint at Organ Pizza Power in Pacific Beach; Bennett’s article also provides us with a look into the history of the Theater Organ Society of San Diego (TOSSD). When the traveling Moller left San Diego, the TOSSD was determined to keep theater organ in the city. “Work began immediately to search for a replacement and within a few months the TOSSD had arranged to purchase a 4-manual, 20-rank Wurlitzer theater pipe organ located in Sacramento.”<sup>10</sup> These three sources

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<sup>9</sup> Don, Feely, “Pasadena Civic Auditorium Moller”, *American Theatre Organ Society*.

<sup>10</sup> Kelly Bennett, (2011, June 7), “Supreme Combo: Pizzas and Organs”, *Voice of San Diego*.

complement each other well as they include the complete timeline and contain scholarly as well as casual perspectives all while connecting to the project through San Diego.

The works by Duncan and Murrill function very similarly to the past three sources, simply examining other installations. In his work, Mac Murrill remarks that there weren't many theater organ installations to begin with in 1960, yet Richmond still had three in operation.<sup>11</sup> Duncan's entry, centered on the Spreckels Organ, is more strongly tied to this project as the instrument is in San Diego. Not only does Duncan talk about the organ but also its location, Balboa Park.<sup>12</sup> All the other articles related to theater and stadium organs describe context, but they do not comment on the history of the place first. In contrast, Duncan's article first describes the significance of Balboa Park, and then how the organ was introduced and filled the space. The idea behind building the Spreckels organ was to attract riders to the trolley line and populate the city of San Diego, and it did just that. The organ was built for the opening of a world fair, which brought major attention to the city. "The dedication of the organ and pavilion took place on New Year's Eve 1914 at nine o'clock before the formal opening of the Panama-California Exposition at midnight. Many thousands were in attendance and filled the open area reaching up the mall."<sup>13</sup> And since the dedication, weekly Sunday afternoon concerts have been hosted for the past hundred and eleven years, two of which I have had the opportunity to play in.<sup>14</sup> The Spreckels Organ Society as well as AGO San Diego work to promote the future of organ through inspiring young organists as well as community members who may have no prior connection to the organ or music in general. On occasion after concerts or during tours, visitors are welcome inside the

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<sup>11</sup> Mac Murrill, (1960, December 1), "Consoles are up in Richmond", *Journal of ATOS*, 2(4), Winter.

<sup>12</sup> Douglas Duncan, (2015, January), "The First Six Decades: Spreckels Organ Pavillion", *The Diapason*.

<sup>13</sup> Douglas Duncan, (2015, January), "The First Six Decades: Spreckels Organ Pavillion", *The Diapason*.

<sup>14</sup> Doris, F, (2022, January 14), The Spreckels Organ: a Historic Musical Treasure, *Copper Magazine*, (154–155).

pavilion to see behind the scenes. A green room can be found on level one while stairs lead up to the pipe room on the second story. In the hallways and inside the green room, visitors can find historical photographs on the walls, while upstairs they are treated to a view of several of the instrument's largest pipes. The Civic Organist and Spreckels Organ Foundation also work hard to host other special events throughout the year including holiday concerts as well as children's concerts and educational events. The Spreckels Organ is constantly evolving with new organists, new listeners, and continuous care.

Theater organs do not receive an overwhelming amount of attention, but every installation is special. This is demonstrated as each article praises its respective theater organ, but there simply is not much content about each. The *Mighty Wurlitzer*, written by John Landon, is a very comprehensive book on the history of the theater organ. "No one knows who first got the idea of putting a piano into his storefront theatre, but it proved profitable. Somehow, live music helped to set the mood and convey emotion more effectively than the silent film alone."<sup>15</sup> The book opens describing why theater organs were created, before diving into some of the key inventions. Robert Hope-Jones was a key figure in the (theater) organ world, having invented a great number of revolutionary features for the instrument. "It was he who first designed the 'horseshoe' console to put all stops within easy reach of the organist," said Landon. "He also pioneered the use of a stop tablet rather than a draw knob. He slightly tilted the keyboards toward the organist to make the instrument easier to play. He invented the 'Double Touch,' which allowed the organist to bring a second set of organ voices into play by applying a little extra pressure to the keys," writes Landon.<sup>16</sup> In relation to the other authors, Landon describes the underlying functions of these other stadium organs and explains how the church or concert organ

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<sup>15</sup> John Landon, (1938), *Behold the Mighty Wurlitzer: The History of the Theatre Pipe Organ*. Greenwood Press, 3.

<sup>16</sup> John Landon, (1938), *Behold the Mighty Wurlitzer: The History of the Theatre Pipe Organ*. Greenwood Press, 25.

evolved into the theater organ. The only downside to Landon's work is the fact that it is relatively dated. Published in 1938, there is room to share new developments in the field.

The two sources on stadium organ, "Al Melgard and the Biggest Barton" by Dan Barton and "The Chicago Stadium Organ 'Remember the Roar'", by Rollin Smith work to document past lives of instruments and people. The articles preserve the memory of the Chicago Stadium Barton and its resident organist, Al Melgard. Barton's work, written in 1985, briefly describes the stadium owner's relationship with the Barton Organ Company and the instrument's construction before diving into describing Melgard's training and career as an organist. Smith's article, written in 2022, focuses on the Chicago Stadium Organ, mentioning Melgard only once. These perspectives complement each other well; the information on the organ from Barton is repeated and further expanded by Smith. Inspired by Madison Square Garden in New York, Chicago sports promoter Patrick Harmon was responsible for organizing investors to build the Chicago stadium, and along with it, an organ.<sup>17</sup> "Paddy envisioned an organ for his stadium to entertain and stimulate the crowds, insisting that he did not want a church, concert, or theater organ, but one that had sufficient volume to fill a 25,000-seat arena and could follow the action of sporting events."<sup>18</sup> With great praise for Melgard, Barton writes, "When the stadium organ was completed in 1929, who would preside at the huge console with its six manuals and over 800 stops? There was not even a second thought-Al Melgard."<sup>19</sup>

The lack of documentation for theater and stadium organ demonstrates that they are both part of oral traditions. These articles give us a view into the past, while the interviews I have

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<sup>17</sup> Rollin Smith, (2022), "The Chicago Stadium Organ 'Remember the Roar'", *Organ Historical Society*.

<sup>18</sup> Rollin Smith, (2022), "The Chicago Stadium Organ 'Remember the Roar'", *Organ Historical Society*.

<sup>19</sup> Dan Barton, (1962, October), "Al Melgard and the Biggest Barton", *Posthorn*, Reprinted in *Journal of ATOS*.

conducted tell the current and future of theater and stadium organs. If tradition is not passed down or documented, then future generations will lose pieces of history.

### *Sound*

These sources, which are centered around sound, describe differences in the tonality of organs, explain acoustics, and discuss environmental factors which cannot be entirely prevented. The *Temple of Tone*, by Ashdown Audsley and Scott Buhrman, focuses on organs specifically, while the other three sources speak to general music and sound. *Concert Halls and Opera Houses* by Leo Beranek and *Worship Sound Spaces* by Christine Guillebaud and Catherine Lavandier both examine acoustics and the experience for audiences, with the former focusing on concert halls and opera houses and the latter examining religious spaces. *Environmental Noise* by Enda Murphy and Eoin King examines the interference of sounds such as animals and road noise which effect open air venues. By considering sources which focus on both organs and general noise, we can capture different insights from professionals across a variety of fields. It is also beneficial to compare the acoustics across different settings as the organ installations in this project are housed in churches, stadiums, and pavilions each of which have different acoustics.

Published in 1925, Audsley and Buhrman's work claims that no writer since 1886 has attempted to distinguish the difference in tonality across church, concert room, and chamber organs apart from size or number of stops. The authors assert the following roles of chamber, church and concert organs: "A Chamber Organ has at the most, to meet very reasonable calls both in solo and accompaniment playing; while a Church Organ has, in its legitimate office, only to accompany the voices of the choir and congregation, and to lend itself to a limited range of dignified solo music. The concert-room instrument should be a perfect organ and a full orchestra



combined.”<sup>20</sup> While this source was written for church organs as opposed to theater and stadium organs, the concert-room organ is adjacent to the theater organ. The theater organ, while not the perfect organ being described here, has pipes which are quintessential to any organ-the diapason tones, as well as the orchestral sounds and percussion of an orchestra. As we investigate the Trinity Presbyterian organ, we see an example of an organ which serves dual function as a church and theater organ. There are enough stops which are geared towards the tones of a church organ, yet the instrument was primarily constructed for theater organ. By studying the Trinity Presbyterian organ’s stop list, we can compare Audsley and Burhman’s criteria for what a church and concert organ should be against currently operating organs. Perhaps to promote organs and keep them around longer, organ builders should strive to build organs which combine all the stops in the first place.

The sound of an organ is subject to its environment. Two organs which are otherwise identical apart from their location may sound drastically different. This idea ties Audsley and Buhrman’s work in with the two articles on the science of acoustics. Beranek states, “One should always remember that composers often wrote music for a particular concert hall or opera house. Consequently, a given composition usually sounds best when performed in its intended acoustics. For instance, Gregorian chants were written for performance in large churches with high reverberance; a small, quiet church never comes close to doing it justice”.<sup>21</sup> To build an organ, it is important to consider the acoustics of the space and how the listeners will experience the sound. In this project, we see examples of organs which were built for their homes, as well as

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<sup>20</sup> Ashdown Audsley and Scott Buhrman (Thomas Scott), (1925), *The Temple of Tone: A Disquisition on the Scientific and Artistic Tonal Appointment and Control of Concert-room, Church, and Theater Organs*, New York and Birmingham, Eng.: J. Fischer & Bro., 7.

<sup>21</sup> Leo Beranek, (2004), *Concert Halls and Opera Houses: Music, Acoustics, and Architecture*, Springer, <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-0-387-21636-2>, vii.

those who were transplants. While parts can be traded out and used in different installations such as the Trinity Presbyterian instrument, an organ such as the Rudolph Von Beckareth at the Immaculata demonstrates how organs are tied to their spaces and cannot always be easily relocated. We will also examine the difference between indoor and outdoor organs. Indoor organs, such as the instrument at All Souls, are protected from external noise and have more consistent acoustics, whereas the organs at Spreckels or Petco Park are subject to noises from the environment, such as traffic and airplanes.

As we consider church organs, Guillebaud and Lavandier point out another aspect architects must consider: based on the function of the place, which sounds should be prioritized? While both Beranek as well as Guillebaud and Lavandier explain reverberation and how it is calculated, Guillebaud and Lavandier explain how to determine the proper amount of reverberation with a church service in mind. Churches services usually include solo music, spoken word, and congregational singing, and the amount of reverberation effects these activities. “Well, reverberation conditions often hint at the relative importance given either to speech, where a high level of intelligibility will usually require a rather low reverberation time, or to music, where a long reverberation time will often ensure strength and reflective walls will provide envelopment. Envelopment is the listener’s feeling of being immersed in the sound field, with acoustic reflections coming from various directions”.<sup>22</sup> As I will discuss in more detail, there is a cultural and religious component to the use of acoustics. At the Immaculata, a Catholic church which emphasizes worship and the spoken word, the floors are marble and the ceilings

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<sup>22</sup> Christine Guillebaud and Catherine Lavandier, (2020), *Worship Sound Spaces: Architecture, Acoustics and Anthropology*, Routledge, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/edit/10.4324/9780429279782/worship-sound-spaces-christine-guillebaud-catherine-lavandier>, 17.

are high and rounded, creating a very live room ideal for music. A balance is struck though, as the organ isn't as grandiose or overpowering as it should be to fill the space.

When studying instruments such as the Spreckels Organ, an outdoor organ, environmental noises enter the equation. Murphy and King's work examines sources of noise from the surroundings-cars, planes, and so on to discuss the effects they have on humans. Located near the airport, Spreckels organ listeners may have their experience interrupted by planes. While Murphy and King's work focuses on the impact on humans, the Spreckels organ is also an opportunity to comment on the effect of noise and stimuli on animals. Located near the zoo, the rumbles from the instrument have been known to disturb the animals. Their work is also applicable to stadium organ atmospheres, as well as indoor organs without proper soundproofing to keep road noises out.

Audsley and Buhrman have explained the similarities and differences in tonality between church, theater and stadium organ. Leo Beranek, Christine Guillebaud and Catherine Lavandier have provided explanations of acoustics and considerations for designing spaces for musical performance. Lastly, Murphy and King's work has set the scene for discussing the impact of noise interference on organs, especially considering two of the organs I examined are outdoor instruments. These sources help explain where the organs of San Diego are similar and where they are unique, specifically in terms of which sounds are used and how the environment shapes the experience of the player and audience alike.

### **Organ Case Studies: Descriptions**

*La Jolla Presbyterian Church: 7715 Draper Ave, La Jolla, California*

Just down the road from the high school I attended, a powerful organ can be found at La Jolla Presbyterian Church. The campus has a main church with a sanctuary as well as spaces for

fellowship, offices, classrooms, and contemporary services. The sanctuary, where the organ is located, is in the shape of a cross with a triangular arched ceiling. The majority of the pipes are located on the front wall such that the pipes speak directly towards the congregation, while the antiphonal pipes are located on the back wall behind the pews. The console is located at the front and can be moved around to accommodate the occasion. In 1957, La Jolla Presbyterian installed a three manual Möller pipe organ, which later was replaced with a four manual console in 1976.<sup>23</sup> In 1998, facing air as well as mechanical issues, L.W. Blackington Associates developed a plan for the future of the instrument. The current installation has 64 ranks and 3651 individual pipes.

La Jolla Presbyterian's current organist is Jenny Yun. She has 20 years of experience as an organist playing for Lutheran as well as Episcopal churches and has been at La Jolla Presbyterian for one year.<sup>24</sup> Her musical background is classical, but she has also been exposed to contemporary styles having attended a church with contemporary music growing up. The instrument at La Jolla Presbyterian is very powerful and dynamic, providing Jenny with a wide range of sounds to bring her creative visions to life.

*First Unitarian Universalist Church: 298 W Arbor Dr., San Diego, California.*

First Unitarian Universalist (FUU) is in San Diego's Hillcrest neighborhood, an LGBTQ+ hub home to the annual pride parade and the largest concentration of LGBTQ-owned businesses in the city. This is key to the identity of the staff and congregation at FUU, as they

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<sup>23</sup> "About the La Jolla Pres Pipe Organ," La Jolla Presbyterian Church, November 6, 2018, <https://ljpres.org/organ/#:~:text=Currently%20the%20organ%20has%2064,greatest%20of%20our%20church%20music.>

<sup>24</sup> Jenny Yun (Church Organist at La Jolla Presbyterian), In discussion with Sam Rudenberg, January 13, 2025, Interview.

pride themselves on inclusivity, supporting people of various beliefs, ages, backgrounds, and identities.<sup>25</sup>

The organ at FUU is located at the front right of the sanctuary. The organist sits with their back to a wall of floor to ceiling windows while the pipes are positioned to their right. The sanctuary is a semi-circle and slopes downwards, positioned on the crest of a hill. The organ at FUU was originally installed by Abbott and Sieker in 1969. In 2002, resident organist Ken Herman contacted Marceau & Associates to update the instrument. The project included a new console, façade, and tonal additions while attempting to preserve the tonal and mechanical designs of the original builders.<sup>26</sup> The organ at FUU is in need of care. The large glass window to the organ's right lets sunlight in and warms up the pipes, causing them to tend sharp. The stops at the console need new emblems as some of them have begun to fade. Stepping back from the organ and thinking about the entire church building, FUU is located next to UCSD Hillcrest Medical Campus, and as UCSD continues to grow their property, it is uncertain how this will affect the future of FUU.

Ken was succeeded by the current organist at FUU, Tomás Acosta. Acosta serves as the choral director as well as pianist for the church and occasionally plays hymns on the organ.<sup>27</sup> My interview with Tomás demonstrates that organists come from many different backgrounds and the instrument supports people from a range of cultures and demographics, as FUU is a very welcoming community.

*First United Methodist Church: 2111 Camino del Rio S, San Diego, California.*

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<sup>25</sup> "City of San Diego Official Website," Hillcrest | City of San Diego Official Website, n.d., <https://www.sandiego.gov/citycouncil/cd3/communities/hillcrest>.

<sup>26</sup> "New Organs," *The Diapason*, n.d., <https://www.thediapason.com/new-organs-77>.

<sup>27</sup> Tomás Acosta (Organist at First Unitarian Universalist Church), In discussion with Sam Rudenberg, January 5, 2025, Interview.

Tucked up in the hills above the freeway, a white exterior sets First United Methodist Church (FUMC) apart from its surroundings. FUMC's main sanctuary is in the shape of a cross with tall, rounded ceilings. The floor is completely carpeted apart from the sanctuary, yet the height and depth of the building as well as the placement of the pipes lead to very live acoustics. The organ console at FUMC is located at the front right of the building next to benches for the choir. The instrument is the largest organ in San Diego County. Built by L.W. Blackington and Associates in 1988, the organ boasts 9 divisions, 108 ranks, and 6,092 pipes.<sup>28</sup> The pipes are grouped into two areas: the chancel near the altar and the gallery in the rear. From the console, the organist can pull stops from one set or both at the same time, effectively creating directed or surround sound in the church.

The current organist is Sarah Amos, who just recently started at FUMC in November 2024. Before FUMC she had been the organist for San Dieguito United Methodist Church.<sup>29</sup> *All Souls Episcopal Church*: 1475 Catalina Boulevard, San Diego, California.

A standout for its decorative sea creatures on the chambers above the keys, the organ at All Souls is a one of a kind instrument. The space at All Souls is used for church services, organ masterclasses, and San Diego Bach Collegium among other events. The organ at All Souls was Fritts & Richard organ builder's Opus #5.<sup>30</sup> Inspired by 17<sup>th</sup> century Northern German organs, the installation was designed for clarity, strength and richness of tone. The decorative aspects, which were inspired by the ocean nearby, include seahorses, fish, and a starfish. The instrument was dedicated April 6<sup>th</sup>, 1986. I visited with Ruben Valenzuela at All Souls on Tuesday, January 7<sup>th</sup>, 2025 to learn more about the instrument as well as his connection and role All Souls.

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<sup>28</sup> American Guild of Organists San Diego Chapter, "Area Organs," <https://www.agosd.org/resources/area-organs>.

<sup>29</sup> Sarah Amos (Church Organist at First United Methodist Church), In discussion with Sam Rudenberg. January 7, 2025, Interview.

<sup>30</sup> "Music," All Souls Point Loma, n.d. <https://www.allsoulspointloma.org/music>.

Before the Fritts & Richard organ, the previous installation was positioned in the back balcony, and the pipes lined where in the shutters of the walls.<sup>31</sup> Currently, the organ console is found on the right wall when facing the sanctuary. Most of the pipes are housed behind or above the console, with a few pedal pipes to the console's immediate left. Notable features at the console are a lack of expression boxes and pistons, smaller keyboards and short keys, straight (as opposed to curved) pedals, and a very decorative façade with sea creatures. Every pipe above the console is speaking except for the middle pipe, which is home to a sea star shaped zimbelstern. The All Souls' organ is mechanical action and is the only organ with unequal temperament in San Diego.

*The Immaculata Church: 5998 Alcala Park Way, San Diego, California*

While my first visit to the Immaculata wasn't until the beginning of 2025, it had been in the back of my mind since the late 2000s. Growing up, my home tennis courts had a clear view of the church's towers on the distant hill, and I visited the campus on occasion, but had never been inside the church. While the Immaculata is located on University of San Diego's campus, it is not owned by the college but does serve both students and community members.<sup>32</sup>

The Immaculata is home to a 1973 Rudolf von Beckerath tracker organ, originally built for Mission San Luis Rey Church before being moved to the Immaculata.<sup>33</sup> The first thing one notices is that while it is large, it is still too small for the Immaculata. The church forms the shape of a cross, with the sanctuary at the intersection point and pews extending in all four directions. Lupe estimated that the organ is about a third of the size it should be to fill the space.

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<sup>31</sup> Rueben Valenzuela (Church Organist at All Souls Episcopal Church), In discussion with Sam Rudenberg, January 7, 2025, Interview.

<sup>32</sup> Guadalupe Rios (Church Organist at the Immaculata), In discussion with Sam Rudenberg, January 7, 2025, Interview.

<sup>33</sup> John Granger, (1998, April 9), "Secrets Behind San Diego Pipe Organs – Spreckels, First Methodist, St. Brigid's", San Diego Reader.

As I walked to the sanctuary, the sound was weak even on full organ. The organ is a two manual, mechanical action with no pistons. As the church is deep and tall with marble floors, the reverberation was very long. It became very apparent listening to the organ how crucial it was to time registration changes precisely while the sound decayed.

*Trinity Presbyterian Church (Theater Organ): 3902 Kenwood Dr., Spring Valley, California*

Off the beaten path and away from the business of the city, Trinity Presbyterian can be found in the hills of Spring Valley. Trinity Presbyterian is home to a church and school, and they share an organ with the Theater Organ Society of San Diego. The organ at Trinity Presbyterian is used both as a classical service instrument and theater organ for film screenings and concerts. The original installation at the church was a combination of Wurlitzer's Opus #0562 and #1520, which came from Chicago and Madison respectively.<sup>34</sup> The two organs were bought in 1955, combined and were housed in Canada and then Sacramento before moving to Trinity Presbyterian in 1996. Unfortunately, shortly after the organ was installed an arson fire destroyed the console and a considerable amount of the pipes.<sup>35</sup> The organ was rebuilt over two years by members from the ATOS San Diego chapter and is maintained to this day.<sup>36</sup>

Trinity Presbyterian is an A-frame church. Two columns of pews make up the main body of the building, while the front center consists of tiered rows for the choir and worship leaders. Entering from the back of the building, the Wurlitzer organ is immediately on display at the front left. All the pipes and systems are in the center back wall, with two access points: one at the back wall, and another in a room to the left of the console. Russ told me that this organ may be one of

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<sup>34</sup> "Trinity Church", Los Angeles Theatre Organ Society - Trinity Church, <https://www.latos.org/trinity-church>.

<sup>35</sup> "New California Theatre - San Diego History Center: San Diego, CA: Our City, Our Story", San Diego History Center | San Diego, CA | Our City, Our Story, July 19, 2016, <https://sandiegohistory.org/collection/photographs/california/>.

<sup>36</sup> Russ Peck and Mike Williams (House Organist at Balboa Theater and TOSSD Member), In discussion with Sam Rudenberg, January 9, 2025, Interview.



the only organs in San Diego which has temperature and humidity control not only for the building, but specifically for the pipes/percussion room (the temperature is kept at 70, with 40% humidity). The actual pipes and percussion are a mixture between Wurlitzer brand and the Robert Morton brand. It is apparent the great amount of care that goes into preserving the instrument. The church proudly displays the organ at the front, and they are enthralled to play for as well as show off the inner mechanisms to visitors.

The organ is booted up from a back room to the left of the console, where a Uniflex 3000 system is housed. The system allows for the organ to save ‘infinite’ memory levels, where each user can make a profile and save their own pistons. This is quite different than typical church organs, which have changeable memory levels directly on the console. Russ also directed my attention to the expression shutters. On many theater organs, this one included, the shutters open gradually as opposed to all at once. This allows for a gradual flutter, or a slamming effect. Other features unique to theater organs include double touch, a unique horseshoe console shape, colored tabs, tilted keyboards, and sound effects. It’s important to note that the theater organ mixes physical pipes and percussion with digital sound effects such as a boat horn or doorbell. At the intersection of theater and stadium, there were instruments such as the Chicago Barton which brought pipes and digital sounds to the ball parks; however, the stadium organs of today are set in the digital world.<sup>37</sup>

*Petco Park (Stadium Organ):* 100 Park Boulevard, San Diego, California

Built in 2004, this 42,000-seat stadium home to Padres baseball as well as various concerts and events was designed to embody the San Diego lifestyle.<sup>38</sup> As opposed to east coast

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<sup>37</sup> Rollin Smith, (2022), *The Chicago Stadium Organ “Remember the Roar”*, Organ Historical Society.

<sup>38</sup> “Petco Park: A Ballpark, San Diego Style - San Diego History Center: San Diego, CA: Our City, Our Story.” San Diego History Center | San Diego, CA | Our City, Our Story, October 2, 2020. <https://sandiegohistory.org/journal/2020/october/petco-park-a-ballpark-san-diego-style/>.

brick ball parks, the designers used stucco and sandstone to mimic the land and blue seats to mirror the sea. Until 2010, the team did not have a live organist, but presently fans can find the portable organ right alongside them in the stands.

I connected with San Diego musician Bobby Cressey to learn about stadium organ at Petco Park and generally across the country.<sup>39</sup> Bobby's music journey began with classical music as well as jazz, playing the keys. He had no church organ experience, yet in his mid 20s he was introduced to the Hammond. In 2010, the Padres were looking for a stadium organist; Bobby pitched himself and landed the job.

### **Organ Case Studies: Stories**

#### *Where Do San Diegans Encounter the Organ?*

Attending a church and school, I was exposed to the organ on a weekly basis, but what about the rest of San Diego's population? One of the initial themes which surfaced from my interviews was the idea of where San Diegans encounter the organ. The organ is not a portable instrument, so listeners must go out of their way to places where organs are housed. In San Diego, that means attending a church, theater or stadium.

The most common place San Diegans encounter the organ is in churches, such as La Jolla Presbyterian. Speaking with Jenny Yun, I learned that the congregation at La Jolla Presbyterian is generally older and prefers more traditional music.<sup>40</sup> There are many retired professional musicians in the congregation who value the organ's use in their worship experience. Jenny shared with me that she has been experimenting with adding more contemporary music to services while respecting the congregation's preferences. In comparison, churches in San Diego

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<sup>39</sup> Bobby Cressey (Stadium Organist at Petco Park), In discussion with Sam Rudenberg, January 22, 2025, Interview.

<sup>40</sup> Jenny Yun (Church Organist at La Jolla Presbyterian), In discussion with Sam Rudenberg, January 13, 2025, Interview.

which service a congregation with a wider age range may choose to play contemporary music more regularly. On a single Sunday, Guadalupe Rios at the Immaculata plays several masses, with the demographic getting younger as the day goes on.<sup>41</sup> He told me that the older generation tends to prefer traditional organ music, while the younger crowds prefer more contemporary music. For the later services, he plays keyboard while a percussionist and other instrumentalists join in. An even more extreme example of contemporary music at churches in San Diego: mega churches such as the rock which use full bands for their services.

Organists such as Lupe Rios are in a unique position, balancing tradition with the future. To preserve the tradition of the organ, today's organists must introduce the instrument to the next generation. Perhaps this is through church services, but in the Catholic church, this can be challenging as the community balances reverence for God with recognition and appreciation for the music. Furthermore, if younger churchgoers prefer more contemporary settings leaning away from the organ, perhaps our goal as organists should be to lean more heavily on theater and stadium organ to introduce the next generation.

I spoke with stadium organist Bobby Cressey to learn more about the material he plays at games. Ball parks and arenas service a wide age range, where longtime fans bring their children, indoctrinating them into supporting the same team or creating rivalries. Each sport has its own set of iconic songs such as "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" during the 7<sup>th</sup> inning stretch at a ball game, or the band Blur's "Song 2" which often accompanies goals in hockey rinks. Other music played includes charges, which are short jingles designed for the crowd to chant or sing along with, as well as arrangements or improvisations of rock and pop tunes from the 1900s to today. Of course, many of these songs or charges can be pre-recorded or produced entirely without an

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<sup>41</sup> Guadalupe Rios (Church Organist at the Immaculata), In discussion with Sam Rudenberg, January 7, 2025, Interview.

organ, but the point is these stadium sounds' roots with the organ. Season-ticket holders and repeat fans typically know if their team has an organist, but one-time attendees often don't even realize the music they are hearing in between the action is live organ music. The greatest advantage of the stadium organ is the ability to reach diverse audiences in masse, connecting people through familiar tunes which are not found in church organ.

### *Congregational Support*

The organ is a communal instrument: it is used to lead congregational singing, accompany movies for audiences, and encourage fan engagement in stadiums. While it only takes one person to play an organ, it takes a crowd to rally behind it. Visiting the organ installations and speaking with organists, it became very apparent that congregations and communities who take pride in their organ and music programs show off their instruments and support in whatever way possible. This was especially apparent at La Jolla Presbyterian as well as First United Methodist. At La Jolla Presbyterian, many of the congregation members are retired professional musicians, and they are ready to act with any feedback or ideas Jenny has. They also make suggestions of their own, arrange pieces, and invite her to play in small groups outside of church. At First United Methodist, not only does the congregation take pride in their organ, but they also have three adult choirs which perform in services and at events, as well as multiple guest performances hosted in the space each year. The congregation is very engaged and eager to help with any musical initiatives Sarah and the other church directors bring up.<sup>42</sup>

On the reverse end, organs like the Immaculata and Trinity Presbyterian still receive love and attention, just on a smaller scale. As Catholics, those who attend the Immaculata should focus their attention on the message. This doesn't mean that the music isn't important, as it helps

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<sup>42</sup> Sarah Amos (Church Organist at First United Methodist Church), In discussion with Sam Rudenberg. January 7, 2025, Interview.

progress the service, but a congregation member's attention should be on worshipping God. This is demonstrated by the physical layout of the church: Lupe is hidden from view in the balcony at the back of the church along with the pipes and organ console. When at the console, his view is completely blocked by the pipes, and he must make use of screens to time his entrances. In a sense, this further emphasizes the feeling and symbolism of separating music from worship. Despite this, his congregations will turn around and applaud him as they greatly appreciate the work he does to serve the church. The Trinity Wurlitzer is a story of community engagement. The instrument is maintained by members of the Theater Organ Society of San Diego and serves both the church and theater organ society. Mike Williams is a perfect example of community engagement: he wasn't a trained organist at the time but lived in the area when the organ was first being installed and quickly gained interest.<sup>43</sup> Today he enjoys attending events as well as learning to play the organ himself. The TOSSD is a very uplifting and encouraging organization, and their work to preserve the instrument and introduce others to the organ is true community building.

### *What Does It Mean to Be an Organist?*

One of the questions which guided my conversations was "How long have you been playing the organ?" to which I received a wide range of responses. Every person I interviewed had background with keyboard instruments growing up, but there were stark differences when it came to starting to play the organ. Sarah Amos, Rueben Valenzuela, Russ Peck, and Jenny Yun had more traditional organ training and experience playing organ concerts and church services, whereas Tomás Acosta, Guadalupe Rios, and Bobby Cressey weren't explicitly organists but rather pianists who fell into playing the organ and adapted their skills.

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<sup>43</sup> Russ Peck and Mike Williams (House Organist at Balboa Theater and TOSSD Member). In discussion with Sam Rudenberg. January 9, 2025. Interview.

Tómas serves as the choral director as well as pianist for First Unitarian Universalist (FUU), and he occasionally plays hymns on the organ.<sup>44</sup> Tómas told me that when he came to FUU he did not play the organ, but the congregation treasured their organ and wished so badly to hear it played that they started a fund to pay for him to take lessons, which he began with the previous FUU organist, Ken Herman, a year ago. Lupe told me he does not identify as a traditional organist, but he has certainly adapted his skills and has learned to play the organ very well.<sup>45</sup> In fact, I would argue that Lupe's background (jazz, Latin, Spanish, and more) plays to his advantage in his role at the Immaculata. On occasion when guest organists have come to play, his congregation has told him they prefer his arrangements and style even though they may veer from the techniques of a classically trained organist. Lastly, we have Bobby Cressey. Bobby grew up attending a Methodist Church and he came from a background in piano, with an emphasis on jazz and pop music.<sup>46</sup> When the Padres were considering the idea of bringing back the organ for Throw Back Thursdays in 2010, Bobby pitched himself and landed the role. He told me how his love for the sport and experience on the keys made him an ideal candidate. He was familiar with the organ as his grandmother had a Hammond but had never really done formal gigs on the instrument. Fortunately, in comparison to church organ, the voicing of stadium organ music is thinner. Many of the tunes played feature clear bass lines with off beats in the left hand and melody in the right, comparable to the style of some theater organ pieces.

So, what does it mean to be an organist? In my own conversations with people who are unfamiliar with the instrument, the organ can come off as intimidating as there is a whole other

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<sup>44</sup> Tómas Acosta (Organist at First Unitarian Universalist Church). In discussion with Sam Rudenberg. January 5, 2025. Interview.

<sup>45</sup> Guadalupe Rios (Church Organist at the Immaculata), In discussion with Sam Rudenberg, January 7, 2025, Interview.

<sup>46</sup> Bobby Cressey (Stadium Organist at Petco Park), In discussion with Sam Rudenberg, January 22, 2025, Interview.

keyboard you play with your feet. While I understand this perspective, I firmly believe that the instrument is more welcoming than people realize, and I would argue that musicians such as Tomás Acosta, Guadalupe Rios, and Bobby Cressey are all examples of this. The organ is an instrument with rich history and tradition, but it is still evolving to this day. Furthermore, the tradition and culture of organ is not only defined by the church, but by all types: church, theater and stadium organ. An organist is someone who appreciates and plays the organ regardless of purpose or setting.

### *Diversity and Culture*

Two organs stand out when it comes to showcasing the diversity of San Diegans: the communities at First Unitarian Universalist and the Immaculata. The congregation at FUU is welcoming to people of all identities. They are mostly older, but there are many young children at the services as well. In addition to solo music from Tomás, FUU is home to four different choirs: Chalice Choir-a mixed community choir, Women's choir, JUUL Tones-an acapella group, and South Bay Singers-a multicultural, multigenerational group who performs more eccentric, modern tunes.<sup>47</sup> It is also key to note that when singing hymns and other worship songs, FUU alternates versus of English and Spanish. Similarly, at the Immaculata, they sing pieces in English, Latin, and Spanish regardless of the service.<sup>48</sup> Between the range of instrumentation and the cultural elements, Lupe's musical background shines as he brings in his culture to perform his own arrangements and improvisations.

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<sup>47</sup> "Music," First UU Church of San Diego, n.d, <https://www.firstuusandiego.org/music.html>.

<sup>48</sup> Guadalupe Rios (Church Organist at the Immaculata), In discussion with Sam Rudenberg, January 7, 2025, Interview.

### *Noise Interference*

The last story I wish to tell through these organ case studies is the impact of sound on San Diego organs, in particular the organs at All Souls, Spreckels, and Petco Park. In most settings, organs are located indoors to protect the instrument from the elements and to have greater control over the acoustics of the space. These three locations are subject to the elements as well as noise interference from crowds, traffic, airplanes, and the natural environment.

All Souls is located on the corner of an intersection and the anterior doors are glass. During services or events, there is often noise interference from the street, but Reuben told me that the church installed a new set of glass doors at the end of 2024 which helps greatly<sup>49</sup>. Church services and classical concerts are settings where road noises can be very distracting for the listeners as well as those leading worship or events such as the preachers and musicians. At All Souls, the organ is located inside so the noise reverberates within the space, however at Petco Park, the organ is attached to speaker systems projected from all angles into the open air. This acoustical change greatly affects the way the organist and listeners experience the music. Additionally, the game and crowd noises can distract the organist or interrupt their cues to play. For these reasons, many stadium organists wear headphones to combat effects such as delay and ensure they hear their cues as they coordinate with the other members of the sound team.

Lastly, we have the world's largest outdoor pipe organ. When not actively being played in concert, the Spreckels organ is protected by a giant door similar to that of a storage unit. During practice sessions with the door closed, it is wise for an organist to wear ear protection as the instrument is very powerful. Even with the door closed, the sound escapes, but it is nothing compared to when the organ is on display in concert, where the instrument can be heard

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<sup>49</sup> Rueben Valenzuela (Church Organist at All Souls Episcopal Church), In discussion with Sam Rudenberg, January 7, 2025, Interview.



throughout Balboa Park. Similarly to All Souls and Petco Park, there is noise interference from passing cars on the freeway and in the park as well as from people passing by, however the greatest disturbance are airplanes overhead. Balboa Park is under the flight path as planes fly west towards the airport or depart into the east. While no longer in operation, the Starlight Theater nearby used to hold outdoor plays. Noise from the airplanes drowned out dialogue completely, so actors at the Starlight were known for their famous freeze. Fortunately, the Spreckels Organ is loud enough to overpower all the competing noises and establish itself as the dominant sound in the park.

It is crucial to assess the environment and consider not only how the organ will sound in the space, but any other noises it may be competing with. For a church or concert venue like All Souls, controlling outside noise is typically crucial, but in the case of Petco Park and Spreckels, the atmosphere can enhance the experience. After all, the ball stadium and park are more casual settings, and they are both settings which service more than just the organ and its music.

### **Future Directions**

Through these San Diego organs, we have explored where people encounter the instrument, how congregations and groups support their organs, what it means to be an organist, how organs support diversity and culture, and how the instrument plays a role in the city's soundscape. By understanding where San Diegans are exposed to and interact with the instrument as well as the current level of support, we can assess what organists can do to continue to share the organ with others. We see how organs bring people together and encourage others to take up the instrument. If churches decide to move towards music which does not need the organ or discontinue support for financial reasons, many San Diego organs may gradually

disappear. The future of organ in San Diego will rely on organists and audiences organizing to keep the organ alive and well for years to come.

## **Conclusion**

As I envision life after college, I look forward to furthering my knowledge and skills as an organist. Organs are special instruments as they are influenced just as much by the spaces and people around them as their physical properties. From supporting church choirs and congregations, to entertaining locals and tourists at the theater, to providing a soundtrack for sporting events, organ music permeates the city of San Diego whether residents and visitors realize it.

The most significant takeaway from working on this project has been recognizing the opportunities I've had to study the organ, especially considering it is not an accessible instrument and the study of organ itself is an academic pursuit. I've been very fortunate to study organ in college, and just last year I played my first full church service as an organist.

Living in small town Iowa for college, I've come to realize there are a great number of churches which have organs, yet there are not enough organists to fill all the positions while having a reliable list of substitutes on deck. In San Diego, there are more organists, or at least I thought so before beginning this project. Although musicians such as Guadalupe Rios play the organ in their respective churches, it seems like they may more closely identify as people who play the organ as opposed to organists. Yet at the same time, I would argue musicians like Rios are adding to the culture and development of organ as an instrument by introducing their own compositions and techniques which may deviate from strict tradition and technique.

Before this project, my knowledge of theater organ was very limited. Connecting with Mike Williams and Russ Peck from the TOSSD emphasized the importance of active

engagement. If younger churchgoers move away from traditional church services, the next generation won't be as exposed to organs considering the church is one of the primary locations where people are exposed to the instrument. My conversation with Bobby also built upon this theme; stadium organ exposes large crowds from diverse backgrounds to organ music. Further, it allows the instrument to be viewed under a different lens. Organ playing and building is an art that requires passing on. If the tradition of church organ fades in San Diego and doesn't reach the next generation, I hope and do believe it can live through its other styles, stadium and theater.

Organs are built by communities, for communities. All these instruments discussed can be used for solos, but most events they serve—church services, silent movies, sports—are centered around community. As we consider the future of organ, outreach is crucial to get anyone and everyone engaged to teach the next generation of organists, organ builders, and inspire backers who will appreciate, support and fund the art.

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