A Note on the Reading
by Laura Sewell Matter

Long before he became a renowned organ builder, when he was still a few weeks shy of his eighteenth birthday, Charles Fisk was recruited to work on the Manhattan Project. He served as a technician, initially unaware that he was helping to create the world's first atomic bombs. Today's reading, from an essay entitled "Hell and Reason," begins with this story. But the piece is not only about Charlie. It is also about the reasons and means by which our country's leaders sought to develop these weapons, and decided to use them on two cities in Japan at the end of World War II. It is about some of the figures who had a significant hand in bringing this to pass. In addition to the famous names like Oppenheimer, Groves, and Truman, this includes Charlie's uncle, Joyce Stearns. Uncle Joyce was a physicist and an upper-level administrator on the Manhattan Project. Unlike Charlie, he knew from the outset what their work truly entailed, and what it could portend.

The title of the essay comes from a 1945 editorial by Albert Camus, published the day after the bombing of Hiroshima, in which he wrote, "Peace is the only fight worth engaging in. This isn't a plea any more, but an order that has to rise up from peoples to governments, the order to choose once and for all between hell and reason." My essay is written in the hope that reason may prevail. What I believe this piece offers, beyond a few more drops in the vast ocean of ink that has been expended on this subject over the last seven decades, is a new perspective on what it was like to be an uncertain figure in the midst of it all, turning the screws. The lives of Charlie and Uncle Joyce illuminate the questions that we still face, more than seventy years later, as the prospect of nuclear confrontation remains frighteningly real.

"Hell and Reason" was published in the Spring 2017 issue of the *Georgia Review*. It is a spin off of a book-length biography of Charles Fisk, on which I've been at work for the past three and half years. There are many interesting things that can be said about Charlie's years in Los Alamos that could not be included in this essay (things which, indeed, say more about his path to becoming an organ builder) but it felt necessary to deal first with the bomb, because that is where my own awareness of his story began; indeed, the fact that he worked on the Manhattan Project was the first thing I ever heard about Charles Fisk when I was an undergraduate taking organ lessons on his Opus 85 at Stanford University, in the mid 90s. By then, the story of Charlie's involvement in creating the bomb had become the dominant narrative about his life—even though, one could argue, it was hardly the most meaningful thing that he did. Perhaps our fascination with his connection to the weapon that changed the world as we know it, and his decision to later distance himself from it, says more about our human need for stories that have meaning and moral than it does about Charlie. In the end, he wanted only to be known and remembered for his organs. And so it is fitting that this story be told, today, in a building that contains one of the finest products of his true life's work. Opus 55 is one of Charlie's masterpieces, and by allowing it to speak, through Christa's performance, we give Charlie a voice in these proceedings, too.

A Note on the Music
by Christa Rakich

Charlie Fisk was famous as the premier American organ builder when I entered graduate school at NEC in 1977. A towering legend, he was not tall. He had a soft voice and a sweet demeanor. And he was completely lacking in the need to impress anyone. I remember introducing him to my then partner Ann Matter (no relation to Laura!), who was at the time undergoing the publish-or-perish struggle to earn tenure at the University of Pennsylvania. Ann suggested if tenure was denied she might be hirable to sweep floors in Charlie's shop. "Oh, no," Charlie said, "I could use a scholar. You could read Dom Bédos for me." Dom Bédos was an 18th century organ builder and monk who wrote THE treatise on organ building in France. My surprise overtook my mouth and I blurted out, "YOU haven't read Dom Bédos?" Charlie shrugged and said, "Well, not ALL of it."

Today's prelude, Nicolas de Grigny's beloved Tierce en Taille, also begins in an unassuming way, a simple, slow arpeggio defining a key. But it develops to express deep tenderness and aching dissonance.

The postlude is the brilliant Point d'Orgue that concludes Grigny's Livre d'Orgue. It is the piece that entered my mind when I read the part of Laura's essay that describes J. Robert Oppenheimer's response to the Trinity Test. "Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds." The music's dense power, and the glorious, incisive sound of Old West's Grands Jeux, seemed to parallel the force and decisiveness of the first atomic bomb. Opus 55, along with opus 68, the organ at the University of Vermont, were among the first in the U.S. to reproduce truly French sounding cornets and reeds. There is no denying the builder had read Dom Bédos.

Today's event is a reflection on the past, on the people who changed our lives, and Charlie's. Oppenheimer, Uncle Joyce, cousin Brenton. The Bach chorale prelude that floats in the middle of this program bridges this life and the next, earning the sobriquet "deathbed chorale." Johann Nikolaus Forkel, Bach's first biographer, asserts that Bach dictated the piece to his son-in-law J.C. Altnikol a few days before his death. The text Bach had in mind is "Vor deinen Thron."

Vor deinen Thron tret ich hiermit	*Before Thy throne I now appear,*
O Gott, und dich demütig bitt	*O God, and bid Thee humbly,*
wend dein genädig Angesicht	*Turn not Thy gracious face*
von mir, dem armen Sünder nicht.	*From me, a poor sinner.*

Special thanks to Old West Church and the Old West Organ Society
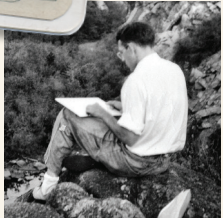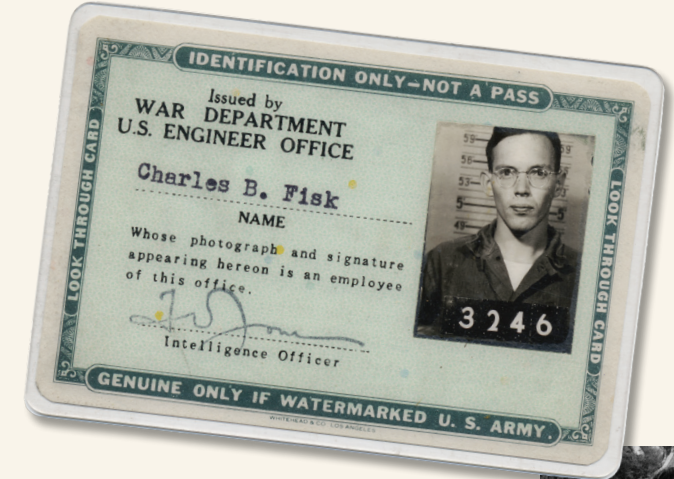
Program

Récit de Tierce en taille　　　-Nicolas de Grigny (1671-1703)

"Hell and Reason" Part I

Vor deinen Thron, BWV 668　　　-J.S. Bach (1685-1750)

"Hell and Reason" Part II

Point d'Orgue sur les Grands Jeux　　　-Nicolas de Grigny

YELLOW ROCK
SCRUB PINE
DEEP ERODED CANYONS
FINGER-LIKE MESAS
PINE COVERED MOUNTAINS

NEW MEXICO
AUGUST 1944 - ?