

# From Dr. John Scott LVO Organist and Director of Music

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remarks given during  
The Organ Replacement Project Presentation  
on Sunday, March 7, 2010  
to the parish of Saint Thomas Church

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When I first played the Arents organ on my arrival here in 2004, I was dismayed to find an instrument not in the best state of repair: dead notes on individual registers, unsteady winding, mechanical unreliability and noisy action. During the intervening years, there has been further deterioration, to the extent that one division, the Vorwerk, is now unplayable – completely silent, because it can no longer function without complete rebuilding.

In recent months, my colleagues and I have had to make drastic spur-of-the moment decisions to cope with the organ's parlous state. We have had to remove pipes that ciphred *during* a wedding. In another wedding, we had to shut down the chancel organ and retreat to the gallery because of a similar malfunction. We have been on the verge of the blower giving up entirely until it was temporarily repaired in early March. The fact that the Arents organ gives an appearance of such normality is a great credit to Larry Trupiano, our Curator who tunes and maintains the instrument. But much of his time is spent patching and fixing faults; in no way can this be a prudent fiscal policy. Indeed, one of the reports we commissioned on the organ in 2005 described this approach, quite rightly, as, 'crisis management'.

## 2. How we live with the organ's musical limitations

The current sound is certainly exciting, when the full resources are being used – what the Rector refers to as the 'blaze of sound', undoubtedly the signature Saint Thomas organ sound. However, when we break this sound down into its component parts, we hear a lot of high-pitched registers, coupled to a deep pedal rumbling underneath sounding out of sync with the rest of the instrument. We hear the snarling reed trumpets, ideal for so much French repertoire, but we hear surprisingly little of the rich fundamental sound of a good organ. In many parts of the church, and particularly in the back of the nave, the effect is of a jumbled mess of sound, lacking blend and integration, recessed, and unclear. It's not even a particularly beautiful sound, to my ears, but rather one that is jangly, spiky and angular — altogether the wrong aesthetic for the Anglican Choral tradition which is, after all, at the core of our mission here.

### 3. Saint Thomas needs

- i. Greater clarity, cohesion of the sound, and drive to accompany the hymns and congregational singing.
- ii. We need much more tonal flexibility, with more stops under expression for accompanying the choir and its literature belonging to the Anglican choral tradition. The current organ has six divisions spread out over four keyboards, yet only one, the Swell, is under expression, ie allowing crescendos and diminuendos by means of controlling the swell shades or shutters. Such flexible tone is critical to the best kind of choral accompaniment.
- iii. For much of the Anglican choral repertoire, solo orchestral voices are appropriate in the accompaniments. At the moment, we have just two – oboe and clarinet, the latter not under expression. There is no French Horn, Orchestral Oboe, English Horn, Bassoon, Tuba or other stops typically found in a setting such as ours. We miss these distinctive and colorful voices.
- iv. The Arents organ has very few string registers. Again these are essential components of so much organ literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, as well as providing color and clarity to the overall sound.
- v. Controlling all this sound, we need an action that is silent and fast, transmitting the player's intentions as faithfully as a Steinway grand piano.

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I have lived with the Arents organs now for six years, giving ample opportunity to understand its strengths and weaknesses, and to experience how it functions with the congregation and choir and in recitals. During this same period, and earlier in my career, I have been fortunate to play many of the world's great organs, in the process gaining some experience of what makes great organs truly great: their musicality, responsiveness, reliability and tonal glory.

What has become apparent in my time at St Thomas is the consistent striving for excellence in all that we do here in the liturgy. The current organ is undeniably thrilling when played flat out, but in almost every other respect, it is a disappointing instrument. Dozens of stops go unused every week because of their unsuitability to our music program. We accompany the choir with a restricted palette of registers, through which the organ's limitations will not be made apparent.

It needn't be so. In 1996 Saint Thomas made an astute musical choice in the acquisition of the Taylor & Boody gallery organ. It is a jewel of an instrument — colorful, lively and musical at every level. It leads hymns without forcing, is a visual joy to behold, and is a deeply satisfying instrument to play. It requires extremely little tuning and maintenance.

We should have nothing less in the chancel; a very different organ, to be sure, offering a spectrum of tonal colors unavailable on the gallery organ. This new organ should reflect the highest standards of craftsmanship and tonal artistry, not only suited to our musical

requirements but equal in quality to the rest of this beautiful space: its architecture, stone, carving, glass, liturgy and mission.

You've seen the plans and great sense of vision that the organ committee and the Dobson firm have brought to this project. Now it's up to us, as the custodians of this glorious musical tradition at St Thomas to bring the project to fruition. I hope that we can find the resources and commitment to ensure that future generations of worshippers will have their experience enhanced by an instrument fully worthy of the building and its unique choral heritage. As we approach the centenary of this building in 2013, let us build an instrument to last for the next 100 years, and in doing so, let us make strong the one weak link in what we hope to offer up to God in our worship at St Thomas.