

# Organists' Review



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## A NEW ORGAN FOR St Thomas Church, Fifth Avenue, New York City

The Miller-Scott Organ – Dobson Pipe Organ Builders, Opus 93

Erik Wm. Suter

Saint Thomas Church, Fifth Avenue, in New York City occupies a special place in the hearts and minds of countless clergymen, congregants, and church musicians. Like any other ecclesiastical institution, it is a place that strives to feed the soul through its daily offerings, be they outreach services to the less fortunate, study classes for deeper exploration of theology, or the ageless office of evensong. But among parishes in the Episcopal Church USA, Saint Thomas Church stands out. It is fair to say Saint Thomas Church has quite a lot going for it: prime New York City real estate; easily accessible to locals as well as visitors; resources to support lofty ambitions and projects; and a celebrated history of rectors and musicians. But what is clear to this church musician is that Saint Thomas Church's most valuable asset isn't something that can be attained by location, resources, or fame. It is its singular vision.

One can make the statement about any parish or cathedral that vision is fundamental to meaningful and healthy spiritual life. However, in today's transient and ever-self-absorbed world, it is becoming more and more difficult to find a parish in which there is steadfastness in upholding its long-held identity. The vision of Saint Thomas Church is one that embodies excellence in all things at the expense of trendiness or momentary experimentation. Whatever is endeavoured at Saint Thomas Church is done at the highest level. Does the parish wish to have choristers? Then let's build and maintain a school exclusively for the education and development of the best we can find. Does the parish wish to maintain the beautiful and



Original organ

irreplaceable church building? Then let's find ways to strengthen our endowment to guarantee the future of an inspiring and magnificent edifice for generations to come. Does the parish wish to inspire all who pass through its doors? Then let's maintain liturgical arts of the highest standards to ensure that congregants experience the mystical timelessness of the Christian journey as it unfolds in liturgy. This common vision and binding strength is bought into by all who share their efforts at Saint Thomas Church. It is an approach and mentality nurtured by clergy, musicians, staff members, volunteers, and parishioners alike. With all constituents pulling in the same direction, great things are

envisioned and accomplished.

The illustrious music programme of Saint Thomas Church is but one of several offerings made in the name of the fundamental tenets of Christianity. While the choir and musicians hold perhaps the highest-profile role at this particular parish, they are a microcosm – rather than pinnacle – of the parish's approach to its expression of faith. The music is representative of an ethos of excellence and devotion.

The above preface is necessary to understanding the momentous nature of building a new organ for Saint Thomas Church. It is with devotion to parish history and careful consideration of liturgical needs that the project has been undertaken. The current building opened in 1913 and, as it turned out, would be the final collaboration between architects Ralph Adams Cram and Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue. Its Gothic revival style, with a particularly stunning and imposing reredos, is well-known. It is a design which harmonises the big picture with the small. As with all great churches and cathedrals, one's eyes are immediately drawn upward upon entering the nave. Yet, for all its formidable presence, it is an inviting room. The challenge of building organ cases for such a space is not a small one. A designer must take into account the scale and detail of the room, and, in this case, particularly the reredos. This was done with great success by Goodhue in the form of the case mounted on the north wall of the quire. Built by the Boston firm of Irving and Casson, it is now an iconic mainstay of American organ design, supporting the visual grandeur of the reredos,



yet it refrains from engaging it in competition. The first organ to be housed in the building and behind this case was Ernest M. Skinner Company's Opus 205, installed in 1913, consisting of 4 manuals, 6 divisions, 77 ranks, and 91 stops. Presiding over the installation was Thomas Tertius Noble who had just begun his historic tenure as Organist and Choirmaster.

Because the occasional visitor or even devoted listener to Saint Thomas Church's well-known webcast may question the need for a new organ, it's worth taking a few moments to briefly revisit the history of this instrument. As organists and students of history, we know all-too-well how the complex and varied organbuilding trends of the 20<sup>th</sup> century affected pre-existing instruments. Saint Thomas Church's organ was not spared the turbulence found during this period. While relatively minor voicing changes were made to some of the Great reeds in 1927, more extensive alterations took place in 1945. By this time, Thomas Frederick Handel Candlyn had succeeded T. Tertius Noble as Organist and Choirmaster and his

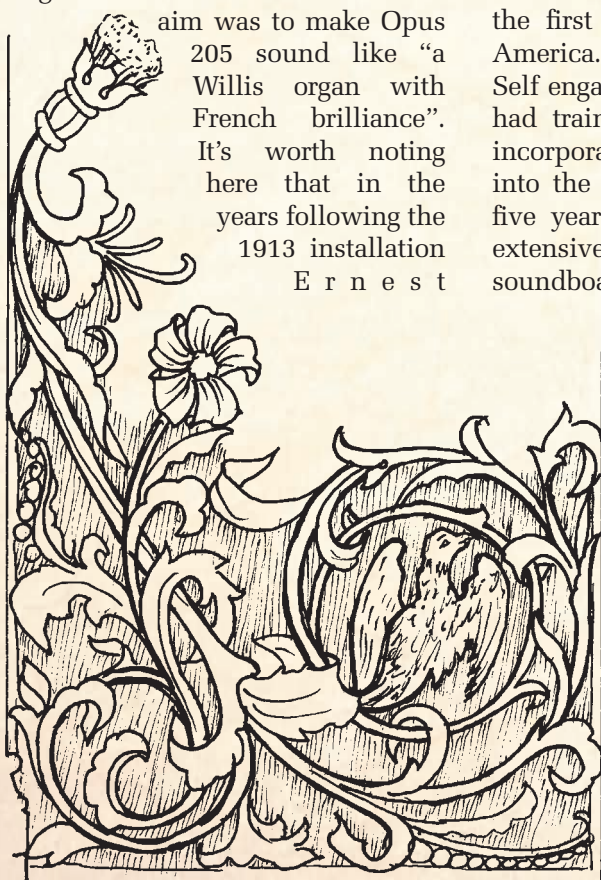
aim was to make Opus 205 sound like "a Willis organ with French brilliance". It's worth noting here that in the years following the 1913 installation  
E r n e s t

Skinner broke with his then-merged Aeolian-Skinner Organ Company and set out once again on his own. T. Frederick H. Candlyn engaged this new Ernest M. Skinner and Son Organ Company for these revisions, but accounts indicate that he was disappointed with the results. In 1948, further changes were made by the M.P. Möller Pipe Organ Company.

In 1954, William Self was named Organist and Choirmaster and immediately set upon a complete revision of already-changed Opus 205. G. Donald Harrison and the Aeolian-Skinner Organ Company were called upon for this work and the project was completed in 1956. While many of the organ's windchests along with console shell and case were retained in the new instrument, fewer than 600 of the new organ's 8,905 pipes hailed from the 1913 organ. This new instrument, the Arents organ, revealed the unmistakably French influence with which William Self was so enamoured. Among other innovations, the manuals were arranged in French order (Great on the bottom), and the organ contained the first *Grand Chœur* manual in America. A decade later, William Self engaged Gilbert F. Adams, who had trained at Aeolian-Skinner, to incorporate further French flavour into the instrument. Over the next five years, the organ saw its most extensive revisions. New slider soundboards were introduced to the

Swell, *Positiv*, *Vorwerk*, and *Grand Chœur*. Many reeds were rebuilt and others were added. Various ranks were moved to different divisions and pipework from other instruments was introduced. The number of expression chambers was reduced to one. In all, the organ grew to include 112 stops. While this was perhaps the time in the Arents organ's history that brought about the least amount of stylistic cohesion and mechanical reliability, it was also this work that gave the organ the sound that listeners will always identify as the unmistakable "Saint Thomas sound". The character of this has been debated at length. Fans touted its fierce sound, rough-around-the-edges with engaging reeds, while detractors noted the lack of subtlety and the difficulty with which choral repertoire was accompanied. Whatever one's opinions, technical problems plagued the Arents organ and made the long-term viability of the instrument questionable, at best.

In 1971, Gerre Hancock was named Organist and Master of the Choristers. His legendary imagination made best use of the Arents organ's strengths. Rather than fight with various shortcomings of the instrument, he embraced that which was good, simultaneously exposing an entire generation of musicians to the gifts of his genius. However, as the



Preparatory drawings for the carvings on the case work.





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quality of the choral singing and breadth of repertoire grew during his tenure, so grew the need for an instrument more capable of matching the choir's nuanced abilities. From 1979 until 1982, Lawrence Trupiano undertook revisions to shore up many mechanical faults. Windchests and associated actions were rebuilt, the console was refurbished and new Swell chorus reeds were installed; in 1994 the console was once again updated and refurbished. That the instrument was as reliable as it was until its removal last year is a testament to Mr Trupiano's dedication, expertise and skill.

With the appointment of John Scott as Organist and Director of Music in 2004 came the need for a thorough assessment of the Arents organ. The following year, the services of two independent consultants were secured to advise Saint Thomas Church on the viability of the Arents organ. Joseph Dzeda of the A. Thompson-Allen Company and historian Jonathan Ambrosino were charged with delivering reports on the status of the organ and with making recommendations for a path forward. It was clear that building a new organ was the wisest course of action to ensure a reliable and inspiring instrument for future generations. In 2007 the decision was made to contract for a new instrument to meet the needs of a multi-faceted and ever-demanding music programme. The following year, Dobson Pipe Organ Builders of

Lake City, Iowa, was selected for the project. With the generous support of many donors, led by parishioners Bill and Irene Miller, the dream of acquiring a new organ for Saint Thomas Church would become a reality. Throughout the organ builder search process and exhaustive design period which followed, Mr Ambrosino continued to serve as consultant to the parish and organ committee.

While the installation of any organ is a monumental undertaking, the scope of the Miller-Scott organ project is particularly broad and challenging. A successful new instrument in this particular space isn't expected merely to improve upon the prior instrument's capabilities. It is expected to successfully accomplish new goals not necessarily anticipated by previous builders. One of these goals is effective projection of sound into the rear of the nave. To accomplish this, a second case positioned on the south wall in the quire was proposed. However, this major development in the tonal scheme introduced a variety of complexities to the project. From adding new architecture to this beloved and historic building to the planning and execution of the structural support required, the new case added a host of challenging design, technical, and financial complexities. Structural support for the case added significant expense to the project. In addition, the new case needed to rise to the considerable

design detail found elsewhere in the church, yet not overwhelm and detract from the reredos and other adornments. It must also complement and work in visual harmony with its partner on the other side of the quire. These challenges were seen as opportunities to enhance the already inspirational nature of the room. In support of this, a large number of new carvings will adorn the new case. Existing motifs have inspired many of the new carvings and some have been set aside to commemorate past musicians as well as those instrumental to the success of the organ project. The words "Soli Deo Gloria" will appear at the base of the central tower of the new case. The shop of master wood carvers Dennis Collier, Senior, and Dennis Collier, Junior, of Bangor, Pennsylvania, has been commissioned to provide these carvings, the price of which account for roughly twenty percent of the complete project budget.

As with every organ, optimal placement of divisions within the instrument is critical to its success. Having determined where the organ will reside, arranging the divisions within the instrument was the next step. Clearly, the Great should reside in the unenclosed new case on the south wall. The windchests will be placed at impost level with reeds and various offset pipes placed on top of the case. The whole point of the new case is to have the sound generated within take advantage of the solid north nave wall, rather than get

Tribute carvings which will decorate the new installation





## New Dobson specification

[illegible]

lost in the complex catacomb of the side chapel and gallery in the south nave. All manual departments but the Swell will now live on the south side. The Choir will continue to

reside in the southeast chamber with the Solo next to it in the southwest chamber. Previously, in each of the chambers, considerable space existed between the top of the arch

and the top of the chamber, trapping sound instead of letting it out. New, dense ceilings have been introduced much lower down and angled outward, effectively eliminating the



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The planned cases



soundtrap. The Swell will continue to reside in the north case, but the soundboards will extend forward of the chamber arch. Unlike in the Arents organ, this new arrangement allows the entire Swell to be on one level, improving tuning stability.

A Positive will be installed at the base of the new north case, speaking intimately and directly to the choir immediately below. John Scott expressed a particular interest in the development of this division, citing its traditional use as a foil to the Great, but also drawing upon the more delicately voiced flutes to provide choral accompaniment in Renaissance and Baroque music. The division will include an Italian Voce Umana, adding further versatility.

The Pedal will now primarily be located in the northwest chamber. Because of the need for maximum height and the fact that that chamber extends into the triforium above, a new ceiling was not installed in this chamber. The Pedal 32' Contrabass, whose lowest 12 pipes are made

in Haskell construction, will lie horizontally in the small galleries in front of the Solo and Pedal chambers and speak upward. Pedal upperwork will stand on top of the part of the Swell box that projects forward of the arch, in the upper part of the 1913 case, in a position straight across from the Great reeds. To the maximum extent possible, the out-in-the-open placement of each of these divisions combines to deliver as much line-of-sight sound as has ever been heard in this room.

There is no question that the essence of the new organ at Saint Thomas Church was conceived in the mind of John Scott. The excerpt below, written by Mr Scott, is from a May 2015 update to the parish regarding the project. In it, he eloquently and creatively describes in greater detail the relationship between the divisions.

*The Great department of any organ is like its high altar; it is the cornerstone upon which everything else rests. From a*

*proper Great organ, we expect the sounds with the greatest breadth, boldness and brilliance. In the new organ, the Great will take pride of place high up in the new case, placing it in the body of the church, not tucked away in the chambers. The backbone of this department is that strong and timeless sound that leads hymns – the diapasons and their bright mixture stops. But also in this department we aim to recapture something that everyone loves about the current organ: the grand French reeds that cap a searing tutti. This is the current organ's signature sound, and the new organ will most decidedly have this character too, and nowhere more tellingly than in the Great division.*

*With this advantageous location, central and high in the new case, the Great will have the advantage of reflecting tone against the right hand, north stone wall and from*



there more solidly down the nave. I have every expectation that hymn accompaniment will be clearer and stronger, without any trace of the forced gritty sound that is an unsatisfactory feature of the current organ. The boldness of the Great is matched by similar bass timbres in the Pedal, and they will live together with the new Great division, or in the present case, opposite and high up.

The Positive section will occupy the lower section of the new case just above the Cantoris choir stalls. If the Great is the organ's high altar, the Positive is its side chapel; smaller in output, closer to the choir, more intimate in nature. Its sound is both leaner and more piquant than that of the Great. In addition to its diapasons and mixtures, it will have charming flutes of a clear and transparent quality.

The three other departments, Swell, Choir and Solo, are all enclosed so that the volume of their stops can swell louder and softer. The Swell department will reside in the present case and the chamber behind but further forward than the present Swell. We ask everything and more of the Swell: it is the flour, yeast and water behind the bread of accompaniment. It has the softest stops, including the beautiful *Flute Celeste* of our present organ; it will have something of the present Swell organ's fire, for dramatic crescendi. But the qualities we most eagerly await are all the mezzo voices; dark trumpets as well as bright ones; clear but quiet principal and strings, all essential sonorities to add a backdrop to the choir in choral accompaniment.

Similar qualities will be present in the Choir section, which will reside in the chamber behind the new South case. Here, the tone is more gentle and restrained, for variety's sake; more calm colour



and variety with which to paint the texts of the psalms during chant. There are also trumpets, fitting in between the Swell's dark and bright ones, and flutes of many pitches. Finally, the Solo organ is, you might say, the diva of the instrument. It has those orchestral colours that everyone loves and yet are so absent in the current instrument: the English and French horns, the Oboe, the soaring flutes, the vibrant imitative strings. But it will also have yet more trumpets, dark and Wagnerian ones alongside more blazing French ones. Finally, we are eager to hear our gallery horizontal trumpet put into first-class condition and just as excited that it will be joined by a new stentorian Tuba Mirabilis of imperial strength. These two

stops will allow majestic fanfares to dialogue east and west.

Better sound projection into the full depth of the nave is only the first of several key goals. Close examination of the Miller-Scott organ stoplist clearly indicates a broad tonal palette to include foundation and solo stops that did not exist in the Arents organ. 15 existing ranks are being incorporated into the new organ in some fashion. The new organ has three expression pedals for Choir, Swell, and Solo respectively. The original 1913 installation had two expression pedals, with Choir and Solo sharing a single expression chamber. An entirely new chassis will bring reliability together with uniformity and promptness of speech. Finally, recognising that multiple in-house musicians, as well as weekly recitalists, will play the



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Console

new organ, ease of use at the console was a design priority. An electrically adjustable bench and pedalboard system with preset positions will quickly allow for the interchange of various-sized organists within moments. The beautifully-carved console shell and the manual keys have been retained, but all other components of the console are new. The new organ's control system boasts 10,000 levels of memory and is controlled by SSOS's Organist Palette system.

At the time of writing, the organ is being delivered and installed over a 4-month period. The first of many semi-trailer trucks arrived on the morning of Wednesday 3 May 2017 with the remaining deliveries arriving approximately every two weeks late into the summer. Tonal finishing will begin thereafter and continue into mid-2018. Inaugural events will shape much of the 2018–2019 season.

As I have gone about the research for this article, John Scott has very much been in my mind at every stage. It is impossible to admire the careful preparation of the specification, the skilled craftsmanship of the windchests and action, the brilliant sheen of the pipes, or the exquisite artistry

of the carvings without recognising his imagination and guiding hand throughout the process. My first conversations with him regarding the new organ took place in 2010. As even-mannered as he always was in discussing professional matters, his voice betrayed a tone of particular enthusiasm and his eyes gave away a special glint whenever the topic of this organ arose. It is an understatement to say that the culmination of this project will be bittersweet without having John among us to savour its coming to fruition. The ethos of this project is so much a representation of the man and musician that he was. The spirit

of this instrument will be one of the many lasting gifts he shared with Saint Thomas Church.

Saint Thomas Church has represented the pinnacle of Anglican church music in America for over 100 years now. The work of the parish and Saint Thomas Choir School has risen to new heights over the past 40 years, and the new Dobson organ, Opus 93, will undoubtedly usher in the next chapter of an already illustrious history. With the arrival of Daniel Hyde as Organist and Director of Music, Saint Thomas Church's longstanding commitment to excellence is renewed and sustained. For generations of church musicians, visiting Saint Thomas Church has been seen as undertaking a pilgrimage. Many have come from all parts of the world to experience the extraordinary daily work of this parish amidst the hubbub of New York City. Countless musicians have passed through the doors of Saint Thomas Church and have immediately been greeted by the words of the parish motto, "O God my heart is ready". Now, there will be one more reason to be inspired by the parish's approach to excellence in all things.

*For the somewhat unusual circumstance of writing about an organ that is not yet installed, special research was required. The author wishes to thank John Panning, Tonal Director of Dobson Pipe Organ Builders, for his essential assistance.*

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