

The American Organist

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UNITED CHURCH

CANANDAIGUA, NEW YORK

HISTORY

Located in Upstate New York's picturesque Finger Lakes region, United Church is situated in the heart of Canandaigua's downtown historic district. United Church was built in 1871 and dedicated in 1872 to house the newly formed First Presbyterian Church of Canandaigua. Constructed in the eclectic style of religious architecture common to the latter part of the 19th Century, the edifice features a charming blend of Romanesque and Gothic Revival influences. On December 13, 1942, the neighboring First Baptist Church of Canandaigua was totally destroyed by fire. In 1947, First Presbyterian suggested that the two churches worship jointly using the Presbyterians' facilities, and their offer was accepted. In 1961 the church's official name changed to become The United Church (Presbyterian-American Baptist) of Canandaigua. While unique in terms of its governance structures, the arrangement at United Church works well, and is among several factors responsible for a growing and vibrant congregation.

THE DISCERNMENT PROCESS

The new three-manual and pedal Parsons pipe organ at United Church replaces M.P. Möller Opus 3107, a three-manual and pedal 18 rank duplexed organ built in 1923 as a practice instrument for the Eastman School of Music. After the organ's installation in the church in 1950, attempts were made to adapt the organ to perform successfully as a liturgical instrument. While marginally serviceable in its new role, the specification posed difficulties with registration and with issues related to balance and choral accompaniment. In fact, use of the organ to accompany the choir was, for the most part, abandoned. As is generally the case, organists faced with this or other similar situations commit themselves to overcoming the deficiencies of their respective instruments and to support the musical requirements of their congregations regardless of the peculiarities of the instruments they play. It is only when the organs begin to fail, that the opportunity is taken to explore underlying deficiencies.



Beginning in 2010, Trustees at the United Church were made aware that the Möller was becoming increasingly unreliable and that consideration should be given to finding a solution. Because governing bodies are so rarely called upon to deal with major pipe-organ-related issues, they tend to find themselves in a difficult and somewhat uncomfortable position. While they hope to find the best solution, they don't typically possess the body of knowledge that allows them to formulate the requisite questions. In this situation, the Trustees initially assumed that, like any other church fixture, the organ should simply be repaired. Not unlike repairing a roof or boiler, once "fixed", the organ could continue to serve the church as it had for the past 65 years.

To their credit, the Trustees also recognized that there were other, perhaps more important issues that needed further exploration. Specifically: not only had musical requirements changed, but, more importantly, in years past, the Möller had been altered and poorly rebuilt by inexperienced technicians, making a standard restoration impossible. Given this situation, the Trustees assembled a small group of highly committed individuals to study the issues. One of the first actions taken by this group was to hire a competent organ consultant, Robert Kerner, because they recognized that without his expertise, there was little framework on which to base their discernment process.

Kerner was able to pinpoint key considerations that participants hoped would eventually lead to the best and most appropriate decision. This is not to say that the process was without difficulty. The question of repairing the organ "as-is" versus attempting to augment or replace the organ altogether engendered moments of creative tension that eventually led to the formation of a larger and more formal



committee. Once assembled, the committee moved quickly to identify the underlying issues as defined by the following questions: What do we want to achieve musically? If repaired, will the organ (in its existing configuration) meet our needs? Is it possible, and does it make sense to expand the existing organ, or are we better off considering a new organ? Should we purchase an electronic organ? Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, what do we want to put in place for the future? It should be said that the success of this particular committee was not based on the participants' desire to reach consensus quickly, but in the corporate sense to keep an open mind, to consider all the possibilities, and to eventually suggest the option that would best meet the needs of the congregation.

Given the limitations of the Möller, the committee rejected the idea of simply repairing the organ. The input of the organist and choir director was indispensable in helping the committee understand the machinations required to produce even moderately acceptable combinations of stops. After rejecting the idea of an as-is repair, the consultant worked in tandem with the committee to write a Request for Proposal designed to channel builders' proposals in the direction of a new or rebuilt mechanism, and to include a modest restructuring and augmentation of the existing tonal resources. Site visits followed to evaluate each of the builders' installations, including opportunities to hear electronic instruments. For the purposes of the United Church project, electronic instruments were judged to be inappropriate, both in terms of tone quality and stewardship of church resources. In consultation with consultant and builders alike, it was determined that the vision for United Church should be expanded to include a larger, more comprehensive pipe organ. Following this decision, the committee recommended that the contract to build the new organ be awarded to Parsons Pipe Organ Builders.

Beyond the process of defining the project and selecting the builder, the Official Board at United Church determined that separate committees should be formed to deal with the upcoming capital campaign and ancillary construction issues. By separating the responsibilities, the Board felt that each committee could focus their efforts more successfully, and in doing so ensure a superior result. Communication between the three committees took place on a regular basis, allowing the overall project to come together in flawless fashion.

THE ORGAN

From the onset of this project, Parsons was concerned that, although the sanctuary possesses a sympathetic acoustic, the existing organ chambers and sound-absorbing chancel carpeting would prove to be barriers to a successful installation. Fortunately, the various committees and the church membership responded in an entirely positive fashion, and it was determined that, under the builder's direction, new and larger chambers would be built providing hard, sound-reflective surfaces with larger front and side openings consistent with the height, length and width of each chamber. In addition, easy access through a separate "winding" room spanning the full width of the sanctuary was constructed behind the chambers allowing ample space for blowers and twin wedge-bellows. "Micro-climate" systems were installed in both chambers to continuously circulate air throughout the organ and to optimize tuning stability. Stationary choir risers and chancel carpeting were

OPUS 41'S ECLECTIC DESIGN

The challenge for any pipe organ project is to provide the congregation with an instrument that is well-balanced, musically enticing, and reliable in its tuning and mechanical stability. This becomes all the more important when uniting pipework from many diverse decades with newly constructed pipework. The result at United Church is an organ with principal choruses that are bold yet blending, flutes that are varied in construction and colorful, strings that are evocative and rich, and reeds that are powerful when needed, yet distinctive. This is an eclectic instrument that is meant to play "church" first, but an instrument that can also easily render literature from many musical periods with convincing results.

Two expressive departments hold the "workhorse" divisions: a Swell that is grounded and accompanimental in character, and a Choir that has all the distinctive color stops needed without foregoing 8' foundation tone. All the reed stops are enclosed within these two divisions so that their use can be greatly expanded. Any organist who sits at this beautiful new console will quickly find these two divisions to be invaluable resources for much of their practice and music-making.

The Great and Pedal divisions are unapologetically located in front of the Choir and Swell, respectively, and are clearly "in the room". Their foundation tone and power is meant to accompany robust congregational singing and to provide the gravitas needed to achieve room-filling sound when full organ is evoked. The soft Great Gemshorn and Spire Flute are useful foils to the softer Swell and Choir stops, while the Great Harmonic Flute offers a solo flute voice not found elsewhere in the instrument. We are most appreciative of the time and effort put forth by Mr. Jonathan Ambrosino for his invaluable assistance in the tonal finishing process.

This congregation has come a great distance from its previous instrument, and we trust that they will glean great satisfaction from this new organ for many generations to come.

— Duane A Prill, Tonal Director

replaced in favor of open space and hardwood flooring. Given the extent of modifications required in the organ chambers and the church's desire to improve the acoustical and visual nature of the worship space, the church elected to engage Bero Architecture – a firm that specializes in historic buildings and is sympathetic to acoustical issues and the importance of music in worship – to work in collaboration with Parsons. Bero's specifications for engineering, electrical, HVAC and architectural designs proved invaluable to the success of the project.

Parsons Opus 41 consists of 35 registers, 51 stops and 40 ranks for a total of 2,467 pipes distributed over Great, Swell, Choir and Pedal divisions. The organ utilizes electric slider and tone channel windchests with unit stops placed on direct-pallet windchests. While a small number of registers from the original Möller were

refurbished and revoiced, the majority of the organ's voices were painstakingly selected from vintage sources, or are of new construction. New wood pipes were built by Parsons of Douglas fir. Reeds were rebuilt by Broome and Co.

Designed by Peter Geise in collaboration with Russell Barr, the twin pipe facades provide a striking addition to the visual components of the sanctuary. The facades incorporate architectural elements (brackets, rosettes, finials, and egg-and-dart moldings) that are featured prominently throughout the room. The stenciling incorporated within the case-work mimics the stenciled sanctuary ceiling, both in design and color. During the design process, every effort was made to respect the visual character of the sanctuary while creating a visual statement proclaiming the existence of the organ. The polished zinc façade pipes speak, and were constructed in Germany by Aug Laukhuff.

The three-manual and pedal console features the Parsons company's distinctive, low-profile, terraced drawknob design. The console exterior is constructed of black walnut. The console interior and accents are constructed of bloodwood. Custom designed keyboards imported from P & S organ supply company in England feature unbleached bone naturals and ebony sharps. The music rack is a book-matched walnut burl with bloodwood accents. The highly specialized Virtuoso solid-state switching system provides unlimited levels of memory, an integrated record / playback system and a plethora of advanced features too numerous to mention. The Virtuoso control panel is conveniently located directly beneath the lower right-hand terrace. The console also features a built-in custom designed steel dolly with casters for ease of mobility. The console communicates with the mechanism of the organ via fiber optic cables.

This pipe organ was built to lead and inspire the congregation through all facets of worship. When we step back and consider all that God has accomplished through us, we remember that it is for His glory and honor that we seek to build these instruments of praise.



FROM THE ORGAN COMMITTEE

Today, as we participate in worship, we know that we have arrived at our vision's goal, a place where the sight and sound of this new, magnificent pipe organ impressively enhances our worship experience.

Stopping for a moment to reflect on this five-year project, we who served on the various committees were afforded wonderful learning experiences and found the process as a whole to be extremely gratifying. Committee members worked in cooperative fashion and helped each other to learn and to make good decisions as we moved towards our shared goal. Early on, we agonized over issues such as the selection of a builder, whether resources should be devoted to improve acoustics, and whether it was really necessary to provide the means to control humidity and air circulation. In due course and with the help of the consultant and organbuilder, these issues proved to be less daunting than initially imagined. In fact, we came to realize that *trust*, where it concerns the ethics and capabilities of the builder is paramount to tackling any issue that might arise. Once we selected the builder, making decisions became much easier. We listened and learned and placed our trust in Parsons Pipe Organ Builders and are delighted with the results. With *trust*, everything else followed. Isn't that also the way of our faith?

— Ronald Fulle, Organ Committee Member

Opus 41 (2015) ♦ Canandaigua, New York

GREAT (II) (unenclosed)

16' Prestant
8' Principal
8' Harmonic Flute
8' Gemshorn
4' Octave
4' Spire Flute
2 3/4' Quinte
2' Super Octave
Mixture IV
8' Trumpet
Tremulant (GR/PD)
Chimes

SWELL (III) (enclosed)

16' Lieblich Gedeckt
8' Geigen Principal
8' Chimney Flute
8' Salicional
8' Voix Celeste T.C.
4' Principal
4' Harmonic Flute
2' Octavin
Mixture III
16' Bassoon (ext. Trumpet)
8' Trumpet
8' Oboe
4' Clarion (ext. Trumpet)
Tremulant (SW/CH)

ACCESSORIES

Flexible Wind
Pedal Stops on Manual
Combinations
Cymbelstern
Nightingale

CHOIR (I) (enclosed)

16' Quintaton
8' Viola
8' Gedeckt
8' Dolce
8' Dolce Celeste T.C.
4' Spitz Principal
4' Spindle Flute
2 3/4' Nasard
2' Block Flute
1 3/8' Tierce
1 1/2' Quint Flute
8' Clarinet
16' Trombone (ext.)
8' Trumpet (Gr.)
Tremulant (SW/CH)

PEDAL

32' Resultant (derived)
16' Prestant (Gr.)
16' Bourdon
16' Lieblich Gedeckt (Sw.)
16' Quintaton (Ch.)
8' Octave
8' Bass Flute
8' Gedeckt (Sw.)
8' Quintaton (Ch.)
4' Choral Bass
4' Gedeckt (Sw.)
16' Trombone (Gr.)
16' Bassoon (Sw.)
8' Trumpet (Gr.)
4' Clarion (Sw.)