



**A History of the Organs at
The Episcopal Church of Bethesda-by-the-Sea**

Introduction

One of the glories of Anglican worship is the near-perfect wedding of liturgy and music. Diligent church musicians share the glories of a centuries-old musical heritage, as well as introducing the best of current-day composers. When an organist is provided an instrument which inspires him, he is in a position to produce the most uplifting music of which he is capable. The Episcopal Church of Bethesda-by-the-Sea historically has made an effort to ensure that its music is of the highest quality.

We at Bethesda-by-the-Sea consider the many concerts and services which take place beyond the scope of the regular Sunday morning worship to be a very real form of outreach to the community. A fine, flexible instrument—tonally capable of enlivening widely-varied styles of music, both choral and instrumental—makes such outreach possible.

The First Organ *E.M. Skinner Organ Company*

The first organ in the present building (the “third” Bethesda-by-the-Sea edifice) was built by the E.M. Skinner firm of Boston, Massachusetts, as their Opus 590 of 1927. To this instrument of 48 ranks¹ was added the C.E. Morey organ (Opus 273) of 1910, previously installed in the “second” church. The Morey was installed in the west gallery as an Antiphonal (or supportive) division of the main organ, which was located in a chamber high on the north side of the Chancel. The Skinner was fitted with two four-manual² consoles: one in the Chancel and the second in a semi-enclosed area overlooking the Garth. Shutters were provided which, when opened, allowed the organ to be heard in the Garth for services and other outdoor functions.

The Second Organ *Schlicker Organ Company*

The Skinner organ, rebuilt in 1957, served the church until 1970, when it was replaced by an instrument built by the Schlicker firm of Buffalo, New York. Meanwhile, the Skinner organ was reinstalled in St. Barnabas Church in Nassau, the Bahamas, where, we’re told, it continues to serve.

Influenced by a strong trend in organ circles at the time, the Schlicker organ was neo-Baroque in character: it featured a strong emphasis on clarity and brilliance, to the exclusion of the warmth, richness and color of the instruments that preceded and followed it. The selection of Schlicker as builder of the Bethesda instrument was met with considerable comment by a number of prominent organists of the day, many of whom felt that an organ with only one expressive division (the Swell) would severely limit the ability of an organist to accompany the Anglican service. While the instrument boasted 80 ranks of pipes, they were voiced in a decidedly Germanic manner, with the characteristics noted at the start of this paragraph. It is worth noting that the three organists who served the church during the time the Schlicker organ was in place—Adam Decker, William MacGowan and Harold Pysher—made beautiful music in spite of the challenges the instrument may have presented. With the advantage of hindsight, one could maintain that this type of instrument was indeed a surprising choice for a church steeped in the Anglican musical tradition!

The Schlicker organ began to develop mechanical problems in the 1980s which ultimately required replacement of the console. Its replacement, as well as digital additions to the pedal division, was made possible by The Episcopal Church Women (ECW) of Bethesda-by-the-Sea and several other generous donors.

Continuing problems pointed to a need for further evaluation of the organ and its worth to the church. A committee was appointed, consisting of Harold Pysher, *Associate for Music and Liturgy*, Thomas R. Thomas (*Assistant Organist* at Bethesda-by-the-Sea in the mid-1960s) and Hugh M. Pierce—the latter two being members of the parish who possessed considerable expertise in organ design. A careful and thorough study of the organ was conducted, along with a comprehensive analysis of the music requirements of the parish.

The committee concluded that, while it was possible to rebuild the Schlicker organ, thus ensuring mechanical reliability for the immediate future, the tonal inadequacies could not be corrected. Furthermore, the physical layout of the organ (with space limitations in the chambers preventing the possibility of rearranging it in the rebuilding process) meant that the same sort of mechanical restoration would likely have to take place again in another decade or two. Finally, the cost of this rebuilding project was likely to be as much as half the cost of a new instrument. This, it was suggested, was probably not good stewardship!

The recommendation to the Vestry was that consideration be given to selling the present organ, while it was still playing and had some value, and replacing it with a new instrument. After the appointment of an Organ Committee (chaired by E. Rodman Titcomb, Jr.) and intensive deliberation with the Rector, Wardens and Vestry, the recommendation was agreed upon: the best stewardship of funds would be to replace the organ with an entirely new instrument.

The Schlicker organ was sold to Normandale Lutheran Church in Edina, Minnesota³. Sunday afternoon February 7, 1999 marked its last service at Bethesda-by-the-Sea: a hymn festival with the combined choirs and musical leaders of Bethesda and Normandale Lutheran. Beginning the next day, the choir members of Normandale Lutheran,

under the direction of the technician who would rebuild the organ for them, dismantled the organ piece by piece and loaded it on a truck to be shipped to its new home.

The Third Organ *Austin Organs, Inc.*

From the time Bethesda’s “third” church was built, critical observations had been made regarding the acoustical qualities of the building. It is built in the architectural style of English churches, cathedrals and collegiate chapels, where the sound of the organ and choir is meant to be enhanced and refined by the room itself. Hearing the spoken word was difficult, and the lack of reverberation removed “sparkle” from the music. It has often been said that the most important stop on any organ is the building, so it was indeed fortunate that a generous gift from an anonymous parishioner permitted two acoustical studies to be done in preparation for the new organ. Following the directives of those studies, renovation and improvements were accomplished in 1998.

Meanwhile a specification (or stop list) was prepared and shared with a number of qualified organists for their comments and recommendations. This refined specification was submitted to three organ builders deemed capable of constructing an instrument to the exacting requirements of Bethesda-by-the-Sea. Ultimately, the firm of Austin Organs, Inc. of Hartford, Connecticut, at the time one of America’s oldest and most distinguished builders, was selected as the builder. They designated our new instrument as their Opus 2777.

The Gallery portion of the organ was installed in the fall of 1999 and was ready just in time for Christmas celebrations that year. For the next 3½ months, the choirs sang from the Nave floor in the back of the church (with the organist playing and

conducting from the Gallery console). During this time, the Chancel divisions of the organ were being installed. A portion of the Chancel organ was playing for Palm Sunday, and the choirs and organist returned to the front of the church for the first time on Maundy Thursday. A bit more of the organ was playing for Easter Day, and the instrument was completed in May 2000. At a national conference of The Association of Anglican Musicians held in June 2000, with Bethesda as the host church, the organ was hailed by professional musicians as a “world class” instrument. The reaction of the parish and of the community at large has been just as rewarding!

Due to careful design and planning—and the generosity of many—Bethesda-by-the-Sea is the home of a magnificent instrument which may be numbered among the largest and finest in the south. The instrument comprises 109 ranks, with over 6,000 pipes.

A study of the specification reveals that the Austin organ is, in reality, three instruments. The main division is the CHANCEL ORGAN of 64 ranks, located in a chamber high on the north wall of the Chancel (*photo 1, opposite*). The Chancel Organ provides most of the sound in the front of the church and nearly all the sounds which accompany the choir. On the south wall of the Chancel, directly above the console, is found the CHANT ORGAN of 3 ranks (*photo 2*). This division, located in close proximity to the choir, offers a presence of organ sound to aid the singers and also functions as a “continuo” organ for English verse-anthems and for Baroque music. The third division is the GALLERY ORGAN, located in the west tower of the church (*photo 3*). Speaking directly down the Nave, these 42 ranks provide support for congregational singing, as well as variety and an additional palette of colors for organ repertoire.

There are two identical four-manual consoles. The one in the Chancel (*photo on front cover*) is placed on a hydraulic lift, enabling it to be lowered to

improve sight lines of communication between the organist and the choir and, at the same time, preventing this large piece of furniture from obscuring the sight lines to the High Altar. This console is moveable, allowing it to be rolled into the center of the Chancel for recitals and demonstrations. The second console is located in the Gallery. Each console is capable of playing just its own divisions or the entire organ; thus, it makes it possible to perform music written for two separate instruments and performed by two organists. Each console is equipped with an abundance of mechanical facilities which aid the organist, including 80 levels of combination memory and a device by which the performer can record registrations to computer disk for storage with the printed score. Additionally, the consoles have record-playback capability, enabling the organist to play a piece and then listen to his playing in various locations in the building; this feature has proven invaluable in aiding artists to provide more subtle selections of stops.

While our organ, from a tonal point of view, is decidedly English in character, it plays the vast expanse of organ literature superbly. It also is an outstanding accompanimental instrument for both choral and instrumental ensembles. Perhaps most important of all, the organ—with its very real sensation of “surround sound”—encourages vigorous singing, as the congregation lifts its voice in praise to the Almighty!

July 2006

NOTES

- 1 A rank is one complete set of pipes, generally one pipe for each of the 61 keys on the manuals or each of the 32 pedals on the pedalboard.
- 2 A manual is one of the keyboards upon which the hands play.
- 3 The reader should understand that (1) the Schlicker's clarity and brilliance were much more in the Lutheran tradition stylistically than the Anglican one, and (2) the space considerations in its new home permitted reworking the layout of the instrument in a way that Bethesda's space constraints did not permit.



Photo 1: The CHANCEL ORGAN, located on the north wall in the front of the church

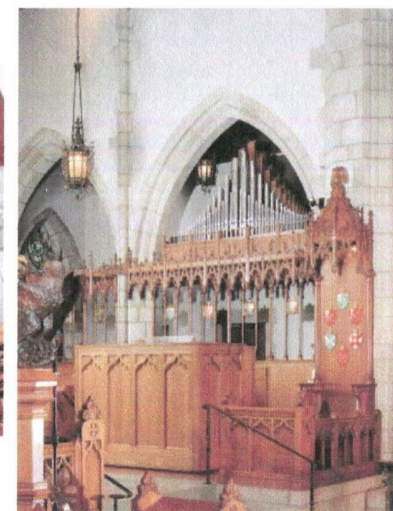


Photo 2: The CHANT ORGAN, located above the console on the south side in the front of the church

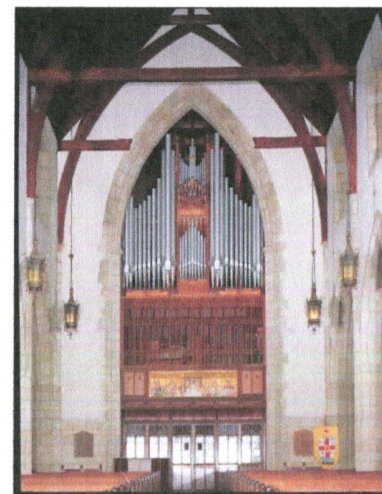


Photo 3: The GALLERY ORGAN, located in the west tower of the church

Austin Organs, Inc. • Opus 2777 • 109 ranks • 1999/2000

Chancel GREAT

16 Violone
8 Diapason
8 Violone
8 Bourdon
4 Octave
4 Nachthorn
2 Fifteenth
IV Fourniture (2½')
III Cymbal (1') †
16 Double Trumpet †
8 Trumpet †
4 Clarion †
8 Cor Séraphique (SOLO)
Tremolo
Chant Organ
Unison Off
Tower Bells
MIDI (prepared for)

† enclosed with Chancel Choir

Chancel SWELL

16 Lieblich Gedeckt
8 Diapason
8 Flûte à Cheminée
8 Viola
8 Viola Céleste
8 Flauto Dolce
8 Flute Céleste (T.C.)
4 Principal
4 Flûte Octavante
4 Viola
4 Viola Céleste
2 Flautino
III Plein Jeu (2')
III Cymbal (1')
16 Waldhorn
8 Cornopean
8 French Trumpet
8 Oboe
8 Vox Humana (in a box)
4 Clarion
8 Cor Séraphique (SOLO)
Tremolo
Vox Humana Tremolo
MIDI (prepared for)
Swell 16
Unison Off
Swell 4
Chant Organ

Chancel CHOIR

16 Dulciana
8 Geigen Diapason
8 Hohlflute
8 Dulciana
8 Unda Maris (T.C.)
4 Octave Geigen
4 Koppel Flute
2½ Nasard
2 Piccolo
1½ Tierce
1½ Larigot
16 Clarinet
8 Clarinet
8 Cor Séraphique (SOLO)
Tremolo
Harp
Celesta
MIDI (prepared for)
Choir 16
Unison Off
Choir 4
Chant Organ

Chancel CHANT ORGAN

8 Gedeckt
4 Suave Flute
2 Spitzflute

Chancel SOLO

8 Gamba
8 Gamba Céleste
8 Harmonic Flute
4 Orchestral Flute
8 English Horn
8 French Horn
8 Tuba Mirabilis
4 Tuba Clarion
16 Cor Séraphique (T.C.)
8 Cor Séraphique
4 Cor Séraphique
MIDI (prepared for)
Tremolo
Chant Organ
Harp
Celesta
Tower Bells
Chimes (GALLERY)
Solo 16
Unison Off
Solo 4

Chancel PEDAL

32 Open Wood
32 Untersatz
16 Principal
16 Bourdon
16 Violone (GREAT)
16 Lieblich Gedeckt (SWELL)
16 Dulciana (CHOIR)
8 Octave Bass
8 Gedeckt
8 Flûte à Cheminée (SWELL)
4 Choral Bass
III Mixture (2')
64 Ophicleide
32 Grand Cornet VI
32 Ophicleide
16 Trombone
16 Double Trumpet (GREAT)
16 Waldhorn (SWELL)
8 Trumpet
4 Clarion
4 Clarinet (CHOIR)
8 Cor Séraphique (SOLO)
Tower Bells
Chant Organ
MIDI (prepared for)

Great/Pedal 8
Swell/Pedal 8, 4
Choir/Pedal 8, 4
Solo/Pedal 8, 4

Swell/Great 16, 8, 4
Choir/Great 16, 8, 4
Solo/Great 16, 8, 4

Swell/Choir 16, 8, 4
Solo/Choir 16, 8, 4
Great/Choir 8

Great/Solo 8
Swell/Solo 8
Choir/Solo 8
Choir/Swell 8
Solo/Swell 8

Chancel – 64 ranks • Chant – 3 ranks • Gallery – 42 ranks

Gallery GREAT

16 Bourdon
8 Principal
8 Bourdon
8 Bois Céleste II
4 Octave
4 Rohrflute
2 Principal
II Sesquialtera (T.C.)
IV Mixture (1½')
16 Kontra Trompete
8 Trompete
8 Cromorne
8 Cor Séraphique (SOLO)
Tremolo
Chimes
Zymbelstern
Unison Off
MIDI (prepared for)

Gallery SWELL

16 Contra Gamba
8 Geigen Principal
8 Flûte Oüverte
8 Viole de Gambe
8 Voix Céleste
8 Nitsua
8 Nitsua Céleste
4 Principal
4 Flûte Harmonique
4 Viole de Gambe
4 Voix Céleste
2 Blockflute
1½ Larigot
III Mixture (2')
16 Bassoon
8 Trompette
8 Hautbois
8 Vox Humana (in a box)
4 Clairon
8 Cor Séraphique (SOLO)
Tremolo
Vox Humana Tremolo
MIDI (prepared for)
Swell 16
Unison Off
Swell 4

Gallery PEDAL

32 Contra Violone
16 Open Wood
16 Principal
16 Subbass
16 Bourdon (GREAT)
16 Gamba (SWELL)
8 Octave
8 Bourdon (GREAT)
4 Choral Bass
III Mixture (2')
32 Contra Posaune
16 Posaune
16 Kontra Trompette (GREAT)
16 Bassoon (SWELL)
8 Trompette
4 Clarion
4 Cromorne (GREAT)
8 Cor Séraphique (SOLO)
Chimes
MIDI (prepared for)

Great/Pedal 8
Swell/Pedal 8, 4

Swell/Great 16, 8, 4
Swell/Choir 16, 8, 4
Great/Choir 8

Swell/Solo 16, 8, 4
Great/Solo 8

Pedal Divide

Chancel Swell/Pedal ACC
Chancel Choir/Pedal ACC
Gallery Swell/Pedal ACC
Gallery Great/Pedal ACC

Selecting pedal divide prohibits
Manual to Pedal coupling to
bottom 12 Pedal keys; selecting
any of the ACCompaniment
couplers (Chancel or Gallery)
allows selected division to couple
only to bottom 12 keys; all
"regular" pedal couplers work in
the top 1½ octaves

Reversibles

Open Wood 32
Contra Bourdon 32
Ophicleide 32
Untersatz 32
Contra Posaune 32
Ophicleide 64
Chancel Swell/Pedal
Gallery Swell/Pedal
Chancel Great/Pedal
Gallery Great/Pedal
Solo/Pedal
Choir/Pedal
Chant on Pedal
Chancel Swell/Great
Gallery Swell/Great
Choir/Great
Solo/Great
All Swells to Swell
Narthex call light
Chancel Tutti (adjustable)
Gallery Tutti (adjustable)
Full Organ (adjustable)

Accessories

Piston sequencer
All Swells to Swell
Great/Choir transfer
Chancel Organ off
Gallery Organ off
MIDI sequencer
80 levels of memory
(individually lockable)
Duplicate 4-manual consoles
Transposer
Melody Solo: couples Solo to
Great on top note only
Pedal Pizzicato: momentarily
brings on Chancel Pedal Bourdon 16'
Auto Pedal: when playing on
Great, plays pedal division on
bottom note only
General Cancel
Chancel Cancel
Gallery Cancel
Division cancellers
Adjustable Crescendo Pedal
Adjustable Tutti
Recordable memory set-up
Adjustable music rack

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