

# Saint John pipe organ faces uncertain future after church goes up for sale

## Organ may be played in its last public concert on Sunday

[Steven Webb](#) · CBC News · Posted: May 05, 2018 9:00 AM AT | Last Updated: May 5, 2018



The Casavant organ was installed in the Church of St. Andrew and St. David in Saint John in 1927. (Steven Webb/CBC)

When you step into the Church of Saint Andrew and Saint David, your eyes are immediately drawn to it. It towers over the sanctuary, 30 feet or more of dark wood and metal pipes.

Hidden behind this grand facade is a complicated collection of almost 2,400 pipes, stops and bellows that provide the voice of this incredible instrument.

It's a Casavant, the creation of two brothers from St. Hyacinthe, Que., with a reputation for producing some of the finest pipe organs in the world. And this one has an uncertain future.

Last month, the congregation of the Saint John church made the difficult decision to put the 140-year-old building up for sale, organ included. Terre Hunter, the chair of the board of trustees for the church, said the building is becoming too much for the small congregation.

*"On a given Sunday, we'd probably be 40 or 50 people," Hunter said. "It is old and in need of some tender loving care and it's money we don't have."*



The Church of St. Andrew and St. David in Saint John is for sale because the congregation can no longer afford to keep the building.  
(Steven Webb/CBC)

And Hunter said selling the organ separately and moving it would be an expensive proposition.

*"It could be a possibility if someone or some organization said, 'Look, we'd like to buy the organ on its own', but, right now, it goes with the building."*

### **World famous**

Casavant pipe organs are world famous. The company was formed in 1879 by brothers Joseph-Claver and Samuel-Marie Casavant. Their father was a blacksmith who began making pipe organs for local parishes, and they built their factory on the site of his St. Hyacinthe workshop.

In 1891, they rose to fame when they built a massive instrument for the Notre Dame de Montreal Basilica. Since then, they've produced more than 4,000 pipe organs in North America, Europe and Asia.

The organ at the Church of St. Andrews and St. David was built in 1927. It would have been a big job. To illustrate just how big, that same year, Casavant Freres installed a pipe organ in the Detroit Institute of Arts. More than twice the size of the Saint John organ, it weighed more than 16 metric tonnes and arrived in four railway boxcars.





Michael Molloy sits at the console of the Casavant organ. He will play the organ for what may be the last time on Sunday.  
(Steven Webb/CBC)

Michael Molloy is a former school music teacher who plays many of the church organs in the Saint John area. Sitting at the console, with its three rows of keys and dozens of knobs to control the 2,359 pipes, he said this one has a dynamic tone... from soft, nuanced, intimate flutes and strings to its full, chest-rattling orchestral power.

### **Organs future unknown**

*"What we refer to as the full swell... it doesn't just get louder, it gets much more brilliant and you can sense the power under your fingers... it's almost like sitting on a Harley with all kinds of horsepower under your seat,"* Molloy said.

He is trying to remain optimistic about the organ's future, but he is concerned about what might happen to it.

*"Everybody knows the church is for sale and what happens in the next year or so we really don't know. So, the organ may still be here, the church may sell, the church may take a while to sell. We don't know, when it does sell, what the intent of the new buyer might be...if the organ might be dealt with as a separate matter? That would depend upon the buyer."*

Molloy pointed out the organ is custom built to fit the church, making it tougher to move elsewhere.

*"To put it in another setting is possible but depending on what that setting is could be very expensive."*



Michael Molloy at the console of the Casavant Organ at The Church of St. Andrew and St. David. The organ was built by the famous Quebec pipe organ manufacturer in 1927. (Steven Webb/CBC)

### **Last concert**

He pointed to the recent purchase and move of a much smaller pipe organ from a church in Antigonish, N.S. He said that cost more than \$30,000. He said moving this organ would take a large crew a few months to dismantle and reassemble elsewhere. Molloy said he wouldn't be surprised if it would cost \$100,000.

On Sunday, Molloy will sit down at the console for what could be his last public concert with the Casavant. He said it will be a bittersweet moment.

*"I'm hoping that there's a way that we can keep this instrument in this area, but at this point I don't know what that possibility is. If I had pots of money then I could make it happen, but I don't,"* the retired teacher said with a laugh.