The Kent Organ

In St. Joseph's Chapel, after many years and many organs, a wonderful instrument was built. Organist Thomas Holcombe's account of the evolution of Kent's organs is a fascinating story.

Since the early days of the School, Father Sill as headmaster and priest had his boys singing hymns in daily chapel: as an Episcopalian brought up in the church by his father, also a priest, he inherited a strong liturgical tradition of congregational hymnody, and as an Anglo-Catholic monk of the Order of the Holy Cross he inherited an active tradition of Gregorian-chant psalmody as well. We all know how deeply committed to his Christian faith and practice of daily worship Father Sill was, but not many know that in addition to all the other things he obviously was, he was also a musician. He played the violin, and his contemporaries in the 1920s were astonished and delighted to see him come forward and play in the School dance orchestra—he was good enough to lead the violin section for a time. He obviously knew how to read music; whether he was able to get along on the piano or parlor organ well enough to accompany his students singing hymns as well, we don't know, but it seems likely. In any case, since he was trying to teach young boys to be self-reliant, to take charge and be responsible young men, and since as the celebrant he had his hands full already with non-musical concerns, he certainly wanted underlings to step forward and do

There is only one individual we know of for sure who played for the School during those early years, and that is Paul Squibb of the class of 1914—although it is hard to imagine that before him Roger Sessions of the class of 1911 did not play, as he was an able pianist who not long after this played all three movements of a Beethoven piano sonata in front of the assembled School—and of course, he went on to become a composer and the School's most famous musical alumnus.

Paul Squibb was the first student organist to play in the "new" St. Joseph's Chapel, the original wooden one, after it was finished in December 1913. When they moved the old harmonium or reed organ in, having carried it from the room adjoining the study hall where they had previously been using it, they found out right away that it really was too small for the new space. They had to make do; Father Sill, always the educator, probably excused its inadequacy by arguing that a little adversity is good for people—it brings out the spunk in those who have to grapple with it. As St. Paul wrote, "suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character." The School's reed organ lasted in gradually deteriorating condition for another five years or so: one can imagine what the original School Hymn—"O Saviour, precious Saviour" [#349 in the old 1940 Hymnal]—sounded like when played on it, with the

chords pulsating with the wobbly vibrato produced by an unstable wind system. These instruments were really designed to accompany hymns sung in private family devotions in Victorian parlors, not to support a student congregation singing in a full chapel service!

What finally precipitated a major change was the arrival in January 1918 of George Hodges Bartlett, who had just completed a Harvard education in 3 ½ years. The older brother of two current students at the School, Bartlett showed himself right away to be an exceptional person, one of those rare individuals who could do almost anything; not only would he teach English, German and history, and according to one source, Latin and French as well, but also, being a fair pianist, he could get by on the organ, too, so he would play for daily Chapel services. He was not of strong physical constitution, but for a while that didn't seem to matter, as he clearly had a lot of energy. He was also blessed with a kindly disposition and an infectious enthusiasm which inspired those around him, including, apparently, the headmaster: within months he had gotten Father Sill to investigate how to get a pipe organ for the Chapel and contact the nearest organ builder capable of doing the work, Harry Hall of West Haven. A suitable instrument would cost the School two thousand dollars.

What Father Sill did next was typical of him: with characteristic directness and steadfastness-of-purpose he established an organ fund, publicized it in the *Kent School News*, urged students and friends to donate to it, and had the *News* inform the School community weekly as to who, starting with George Bartlett himself, had given to the fund, how much they had given, what the total in the fund was—to the penny—and how much more was needed. This is how we know to this day that already by April 6 of that year, the fund was up to $379.13, and by the 25th of October it was up to $873.23. On December 6th readers were told that Father Sill had added the Thanksgiving collection to the fund, and that had brought it up to $1250. There was a good reason why the collection on that holiday was so large: the students were not allowed to go home in those days, so they were all present, as well as many parents who had come to visit. Even so, less than two-thirds of the needed funds had been raised—and yet Father Sill, always a man of extraordinary faith, signed the contract with the organ-builders anyway. By January 24th the fund was up to $1520, the organ men were due to arrive in another week, and posterity is left to wonder where the remaining $480 came from. It most assuredly did come, though; Father Sill seems to have had a way with money!

In any case, two men from the Hall Organ Company came on the first of February 1919, as contracted, and over the next few days installed their instrument upstairs in the back gallery of the Chapel. According to the bronze plaque affixed to the east wall of the present St. Joseph's Chapel near the stairs, George Bartlett was the first to play this organ, and served faithfully until his heart gave out and he died at home in May 1921. According to notices and articles in the *Kent School News* at the time, the community loved him and was deeply devastated by this incalculable loss.

One of the things the untimely death of George Bartlett meant was that students had to step forward again and assume responsibility for accompanying the congregational singing in Chapel. It is amazing that there were individuals who were capable of doing this and one can't help wonder how well they played.

As far as the 1919 instrument itself is concerned little information survives. There is one tantalizing picture, however, which shows the two keyboards and pedals built right into the center front of the paneled case, with a side-to-side display of open diapason pipes standing on the impost molding just above the music rack, in three wide flats. One can deduce something about this organ if one assumes that it was basically similar to organs the Hall Organ Company installed elsewhere, a few of which are remembered by old-timers in the organ maintenance business in this region. Posterity has not been kind to their legacy: most of their instruments have long since been replaced. One can deduce a lot about the Kent organ if one assumes that it was basically the same as the instrument the Hall people later installed in the new stone St. Joseph's in 1931—which based on evidence is highly likely. After all, the organ was only a dozen years old at that time. The instrument as it was

1931 survived until 1956, so there are people still living today who remember it from their youth, and they can give a pretty good idea of what it was like.

This much is clear: in accordance with the taste of the time the original St. Joseph's organ was not designed to play any of the great organ repertoire properly, as any experienced organist today would insist that it be able to do, but rather just to accompany hymns and sacred solos of a type that are no longer heard nowadays, being considered dated and mediocre in quality. What preludes and postludes the student organists played on this organ is not clear, but it is probably safe to assume that they played selections from a few tattered old collections of topical period pieces, over and over, as best as they were able. The instrument can only have produced the sort of tubby, muddy ensemble sound which a modern professional organist would consider very unattractive.

Who were these student organists? One may glean the following from the yearbooks of that era: Frederick Portmas Wegner 1922, William Brewster 1923-24, Garrett Coerte Voorhees 1925-26, Robert John Kinney 1927, Charles Price Britton 1928, Herbert William Smith 1929, George Warren Hayes 1930, Peter Kimball Page 1931-32.

As suggested, one assumes that in 1931 the Hall Organ Co. people removed this organ from the gallery of the old St. Joseph's, took it to their shop in West Haven, worked it over, provided a new "Organ-Supply" type console for it, and brought it back. The new console was necessary because in the new Chapel the organ's main case, containing the swell-box, wind-chests, pipes and reservoir, would be in a special loft or balcony upstairs above the north aisle, while the console accommodating the player would be located elsewhere, downstairs on the north side of the chancel, around the corner of the chancel arch. The blower would be in the basement, with its wind-duct passing up inside the wall for two stories, opening into the balcony, and connecting to the reservoir there standing on the floor of the loft with the rest of the organ immediately above it. In fact, in the chapel basement to this day one can see the lower end of this duct, which still has the old canvas skirt on it that connected the duct to the blower itself, until the instrument was discarded in 1956.

From a discriminating organist's perspective this installation must have been very unsatisfactory since for the player the heavy masonry of the chancel arch was in the way, blocking the direct passage of sound from the pipes; he of all people must have been the one least able to hear what he was playing! No reputable organ-builder today would arrange an installation like this, with the pipes so remote from the organist.

The students who played this organ proudly claimed the title of "School organist" in their respective yearbooks, so we know who they were:

John Holbrook Park, 1942–44
John Robert Miller, 1944–47
Horace Gray Lunt II, 1935–37
John Knott Maxwell, 1947–50
Richard Morehouse Booth, 1937–38
Alan Osborn Dann, 1948–51
Edward Bradford Walker, 1940–41
Stephen Squires Garmey, 1950–52
Douglas Graham Smythe, 1941
David Price Jenkins, 1951-54
Robert Charles Derr, 1941–43
Donald Leonard Robinson, 1952–54
David Page Harris, 1942–44
John Leverett Davenport, 1954
Charles Gomph Newbery, 1943–46
George Henry Wehmeyer, 1951–55

By the 1950s the Kent organ was suffering from a variety of mechanical problems, and it would soon need a major rebuilding. This would be expensive, and when it was completed the School would still have the mediocre instrument it started with. The alternative, even more expensive, was to replace the organ altogether. This was the time of the so-called "Organ reform," and taste in both what sort of musical literature one wanted to play and what sort of instrument was going to be suitable for it had changed dramatically. An up-to-date church musician in 1955 would have strongly preferred to start over with a completely new instrument, and such was Father William Penfield: Father Penfield had

just come to the School as a young man in 1955, and being an organist as well as a priest, he would be the one responsible for the Chapel music from then on.

Ever since the German philosopher Hegel identified the phenomenon a couple of centuries ago, historians of cultural evolution have noticed the way people's tastes change with the passing of time, how people often come to reject what came immediately before them and go to the opposite extreme—which Hegel called the "antithesis." So it was back in the '50s and '60s in the organ business: there was a very different spirit in the air, and in the interests of raising the standards of the music they performed, professionals rejected the mediocre, dated repertoire of their immediate past, and the tubby-sounding organs designed to play it. Instead they wanted to play the newly-rediscovered organ literature of the Baroque era, and demanded organs whose thin and bright, even 'screechy' ensemble sound seemed appropriate for this music.

So it was that in 1956 the Kent School authorities, doubtless considering themselves very up-to-date, entered into a contract with Walter Holtkamp of the Cleveland-based Holtkamp Organ Company for them to provide a radically new instrument for St. Joseph's Chapel. In the first place, its pipes had to be out in the open where they could be readily heard, and the organist had to be in close proximity so he could hear best of all. Furthermore, there had to be adequate seating space nearby to accommodate the Choir, who years before had been bumped out of their original place in the chancel stalls. The only place in the building where all these needs could be met was at the west end, so that was where the team from Cleveland placed the new organ, hanging it on the back wall under and partly in front of Len Howard's beautiful rose window. This took place during the week following their arrival on the 28th of May, 1956.

As for their choice of organ-builder, one should realize that this was the time when the Holtkamp firm was at the 'cutting edge' of the great reform, and they were installing new instruments in a number of prominent places. One need only mention the Chapel at General Theological Seminary in New York, Saarinen's stunning Chapel at M.I.T (where a Holtkamp or almost identical to the 1956 Kent instrument hangs the wall to this day), also the modern Auditorium M.I.T., and even more impressively, the Battell Cha at Yale, where a large instrument in the north trans incorporates a small chancel division which is also m like the Kent organ.

In trade journals for organists the Holtka people used to advertise the "limitations" of their org as if limitations in an organ were a virtue, and the I organ at Kent had plenty of them: without much b and no 8' principal, it supported congregational sing poorly. Without a swell division it didn't accompar choir very well either. It also lacked 'reed' and 'str stops, so a lot of the more recent organ literature coul be registered properly. It did have a clean and br sound, however, and seemed to be pretty well-m Word has it that people were disappointed with new Kent organ after it was installed, but for the mc the School could afford to pay for it, the Holtk people couldn't have been fairly expected to do m more. In any case, the little 1956 organ served reli for over 30 years, and successive adult organists J Hinners, Franklin Coleman, and Tom Holcombe pl a great deal of fine music on it, including much f the Romantic and modern eras, most of which was n going to sound right on it because the instrument la the appropriate tonal resources. The practice of stu organists continued for a while after 1956, but gradu petered out; part of the reason for this may have l the clear and bright voicing of the new organ, w inevitably made student wrong notes painfully obv to the listener. The following should be named: Clif Chapin Conway 1953-57; Louis Parker Buck III I Aims Chamberlain McGuinness1954-58; Stuart Chamberlain, Jr. 1961. As far as the adult orga of that era were concerned, Father Penfield staye Kent until 1964, John Hinners served as organist f 1965 to 1971, Franklin Coleman from 1971 to I George Dampe briefly during the fall of 1976, an present incumbent (and writer) from the fall of 197 the present time.

I beg the reader's forbearance if I continue

history in the first person, because it really is my story as much as anyone else's. The long and convoluted process of getting the new large organ in St. Joseph's began sometime back in the early '80s, when I wistfully observed to my old friend from college days, the organ-builder Jeremy Cooper, that the Holtkamp organ was woefully inadequate, and wouldn't it be nice to get a substantial instrument in the lovely Kent School Chapel, so I could perform a wide variety of great organ music there and actually have it sound right. What could be more appropriate, considering that the students had frequent required services to attend, and I felt I had an educational responsibility to expose them to great church-music? Besides, the Episcopal Church has long had a tradition of distinguished music which is well worth perpetuating. As far as a new large organ was concerned, it would be nice to combine something of the fullness and bass of the 1919/1931 organ with the brilliance and clarity of the 1956 Holtkamp, and arrive at a Hegelian "synthesis," an instrument which would be much more flexible and accommodating for a wide variety of musical demands.

Not so long after that Mr. Cooper learned of an old organ, approximately the same size as the 1919 and 1956 Kent organs combined, which was available for re-location: it stood in the front of the Universalist Church in his hometown, Concord, New Hampshire, and it had to be removed soon, as the church was slated to be torn down. This instrument had been built in Boston back in 1907, by the firm which since their beginning in the 1830s has generally in the business been considered to be the greatest American organ-builder of the time, Hook and Hastings; and despite its age the instrument appeared to still be in pretty good condition. This organ could easily be substantially enlarged by the addition of a third manual—the Choir—the wind-chest and pipes of which could be placed in a void in the back of the interior of the case seemingly left by the original builders for this very purpose. Also, it had most of the large and therefore most expensive pipes already, so adding a variety of higher-pitched stops to give it greater brilliance could be done at relatively low cost. Jeremy Cooper, undaunted by the fact that he had never done such a large instrument before, seemed anxious to do the work.

It was hard for Headmaster Father Schell to give his approval for this project, partly because it was so unclear what would be involved or how much it would cost, and there was so little political support around the institution for such a risky venture. However, he dared to take a big chance, bade me pursue the project with Mr. Cooper, and helped arrange for the consortium of lawyers now in charge of the Concord property to donate the instrument to the School as a tax write-off.

So it came to pass that during several freezing-cold days after Christmas 1985 a crew of five or so workers including myself gathered at the Concord church with empty boxes and crates, tubs for all sizes of screws, an assortment of screwdrivers and other tools, and a portable space-heater which we presently got roaring away in the vain attempt to raise the temperature in the abandoned church to at least the freezing point. In this enterprise we were led by the late Alan Laufman, founder and long-time director of the "Organ Clearing House," and organ-builder Jeremy Cooper was there, too. It took us several days to dismantle the instrument and spread its pieces all over the interior of the church, then finally load them into a large truck for conveyance to Mr. Cooper's shop, where they were brought in and stored for several years while he figured out what he was going to do to rebuild the instrument.

In June 1990 people from the Peebles-Herzog firm of Columbus, Ohio, arrived at Kent, dismantled the Holtkamp organ, and transported it to their shop, where they enlarged it slightly, made good on some of its worst limitations, and eventually installed it in a Roman Catholic church in Ohio.

That cleared the way for Jeremy Cooper and me to drive van loads of large and heavy organ parts from his shop outside Concord, New Hampshire, down to Kent, and soon the back of the Chapel was filled with reconditioned chests, pipe-trays, oaken case-front panels, planks and boards. By September Cooper and his wife had enough of the organ together for some of it to be playable. They continued all fall and through the winter, only gradually realizing that there were some serious

Organist and choirmaster Thomas Holcombe at the console of the organ.

design problems for which their careful craftsmanship was not going to be enough to compensate. By the late spring the organ was 80-to-90% finished, and with some difficulty playable: it sounded good, and looked good, too, even though it was not yet complete. However, there was a serious manual key-action problem: the touch was much too heavy to be acceptable. Also, the wind ducts to the new pedal chests seemed too small to convey enough air when all the new stops were in. What's more, the pedal action involved long rollers that 'torqued' so badly that they were unable to pull the big pedal pallets open far enough. At this point the organ-builder, exhausted and frustrated, ran out of funds and had to leave, leaving me with a playable but unfinished instrument, and the Headmaster in a politically awkward situation with the board of trustees as well.

The subsequent months turned into years, and various experts were summoned to inspect the instrument and advise the School as to the best way to proceed with the project. Eventually Alan Laufman came and advised the School to contract with Roy Redman of Fort Worth, Texas, to come and complete the job—and so it was that Mr. Redman and his team of men and women came, in the summer of '96, dismantled the organ once again, loaded it into an enormous trailer truck, and packed it off to Texas. There followed lengthy telephone discussions as to what the Redman people were going to do with it, and we decided that besides replacing the key action and the wind system they should enlarge the instrument further, to make it even more complete. Only gradually did it become apparent to me that they were completely re-engineering the instrument from the floor up, and it would have two complete key actions: the desired mechanical action virtually throughout, but also an assisting electric pull-down action to lighten the touch and make the organ easily playable. The wind system would all be new, too. There would also be a new reversed-and-detached console out front . . . and many other things would be changed as well.

Roy Redman and his crew brought the transformed instrument back in midsummer '97, and I had the pleasure of helping them to erect it as it now stands. Some of this was hard physical work: lifting the heavy wind-chests up into their several positions inside the case, also the large wooden double-open-diapason pipes up to their positions in back, and the big metal "sub-bass" pipes in the front "pedal-towers." Luckily, this time things went without a hitch, and the finished organ played beautifully. As completed, the organ has a replacement value of something on the order of $800,000, and we paid less than half of that; it's hard to see how Roy Redman and his crew could have made any money on the project, but they clearly took satisfaction from having created something great. The instrument is now three times its original size, and far better than ever before. One doesn't have to understand all the technical jargon to see that the new St. Joseph's Chapel organ has extensive resources and can give a good account of almost any literature, from any period, that one might choose to play on it. Of all the other great New England prep schools, only St. Paul's and Groton have instruments that are comparable in size and quality.

—Thomas Holcombe, Organist and Choirmaster