

After a century, church organ still makes joyful noise

By Gordon B. Seavey

The venerable organ that has occupied a prominent corner in the sanctuary of the old meeting house on the Common for over a century came alive last Sunday with Bach music during the final program of the season of "Musick in The Meeting House".

The fine instrument responded sympathetically to the nimble fingers of Andrew Paul Holman, organist and choir director of the First Parish Church, United.

An Honors String Quartet from the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston took over after intermission, playing Claude Debussy's "String Quartet".

An electronic organ is no substitute for the genuine, a tracker organ. The latter is as churchy as the three-panel stained glass window near the organ's console, depicting St. Elizabeth leading her son, John, "through the path of life" in a pastoral scene.

The Westford organ was built by J.H. Wilcox in Boston in 1871. It is the well-known organ builder's 37th instrument, and this one is the older of only two still in existence. Musicians call it a prize.

Experts say the better organs use a mechanical system known as tracker action to open and close the valves that admit air to the pipes. Early 20th-century pipe organs frequently used electric switches to operate the valves, but some makers of fine organs have reverted to tracker action.

The tracker method permits the organist to feel and subtly manipulate the instrument's response. Its remarkable sound is produced by both reed and flue pipes arranged in 17 ranks co-ordinated by two manuals (keyboards), the pedal bank beneath the console, and 14 stops.

When most stops are pulled out, such as for the "Battle Hymn of the Republic", the sanctuary seems to vibrate.

An old friend

This organ, which cost \$2,200 when it was installed in 1872 by members of the congregation, is like an old friend to me, albeit I never had the talent to play it.

As a small boy until college days, I was at various times the "power behind the scenes". I was the blow boy or organ pumper...the latter term I preferred, obviously.

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On Sundays and other occasions, I would climb into a small chamber behind the set of the huge pipes, exposed to the public. From a platform about as large as a kitchen table, I would sit on a small stool, supposedly very quiet, until the signal came from the organist as he slid onto the bench in front of the console. Air was needed for all those pipes, rows upon rows.

The training period for an organ pumper is brief. One has to slowly raise and lower a curved handle, similar to pumping water from a well. The handle activates leather-bound bellows which in turn feeds air into a wooden chamber. This is the source of power to be activated from the keyboard.

On top of the bellows were several large, flat field stones, each rock weighing probably a hundred pounds, to build up pressure.

Past organ pumpers, such as Allister MacDougall or Huntigton Wells, will tell you that there were necessary techniques to learn to become an expert pumper in order to hold the lofty position each Sunday for 75 cents.

One was to carefully watch a lead indicator on a string, which, as the bellows filled, would drop slowly down to a certain mark on the case to indicate a loaded box. With too much pressure, the air would escape with a noisy swish.

Another was to pump slowly, never jerky for this would make added noise. Another stern rule: never let another companion behind the scenes. Conversation would surely erupt to the consternation of the minister and the communicants. Snickers and giggles seemed to fill the entire sanctuary when a pumper and his assistant got together on the job.

The craft of organ pumper at the First Church United came to an abrupt end when the organ received an electrical blower in 1931.

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Installed in 1872, the Wilcox tracker organ (above) still makes beautiful music while gracing the sanctuary of First Parish Church United in Westford center. (right) In a 1981 photo, Allister MacDougall, Reverend George Downey and organist Harriet Leggat admire the old walnut pump handle used to force air into leather bellows, which gave the organ its power. Today an electronic pump does the same job. In 1985 Leggat retired as choir director and organist after serving the church since 1947.

(Photos courtesy of Gordon Seavey)

