

## In the wind...

### It's alive.

There's a small category of inanimate objects that seem alive to those who appreciate and use them. A friend is an avid cyclist who rides hundreds of miles each week. He has a sophisticated bike that was custom-built for him, and he talks about it as though it is a living partner. He's at one with the machine when he shifts gears, powers up a long hill, or throws it into a turn. The sound of the wind in the whirling spokes is like a song to him.

A parishioner at a church I served as music director owned several vintage Jaguar XKEs. Those are the sleek little two-seater roadsters with twelve-cylinder engines that date from the mid 1960s. The garage at his house was his workshop, where he had hundreds of high-quality tools hanging polished on labeled hooks. The workbench had obviously seen a lot of use, but every time I saw it, it was neat and clean—except for one time I visited, when he had one of those marvelous engines dismantled for an overhaul. Each part had been degreased and was spotless. As he talked me through his project, he handled the parts, almost caressing them with his fingers. One Sunday afternoon when he took me for a long ride, I could see how much he enjoyed his relationship with that machine. As an organbuilder, I cringe when I hear the phrase “amateur labor.” But I wouldn't hesitate for a moment to put a Jaguar engine in John's amateur hands.

Sailboats are another great example. Our boat is made of fiberglass, but it has lots of character. Although this was only the first summer we've had her, I've noticed some fun little things she seems to like. On a port tack broad reach, she makes a little skip each time the bow rises to a wave on the port bow. I think that little skip tells me that she likes that particular motion. That skip doesn't happen on a starboard tack, and it doesn't happen when waves cross the starboard bow on a port tack.

And if you think a fiberglass boat can have personality, you should stand on a dock surrounded by wooden sailboats and listen to their skippers. You'd think those guys had all just been out on a first date. There's a special term for that—boatstruck. A boat lover can go simply ga-ga at the sight of a beautiful boat. One of our friends did exactly that a few weeks ago, and it was only a few days between his catching sight of this boat and its presence on a trailer in his yard.

One of the most magical moments in any day in a sailboat is when you've motored away from the dock, raised the sails, gotten the boat moving under the power of the wind, and shut off the

engine. The boat surges forward—in good wind, any sailboat is faster under sail than under power—and the surrounding noise changes from that of the engine's exhaust to that of the motion of wind and water. The nature of the machine shifts from mechanical to natural power.

### Harnessing the wind

That magical shift is a little like starting the blower of a pipe organ. When you touch the switch, you might hear the click of a relay, and depending on where it's located, you might hear the blower motor coming up to speed—but you certainly hear or sense the organ fill with air. It's as though the organ inhaled and is now ready to make music. You might hear a few little creaks and groans as reservoir springs take on tension, and while most organists ask that step to be as quiet as possible, I like hearing those mechanical noises because they remind me of all that is happening inside the instrument.

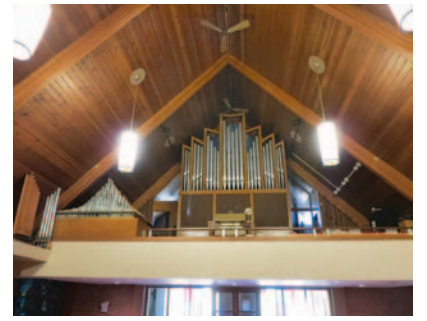
Many organists are unaware of what goes on inside their instrument when they start the blower. We're all used to switching on appliances, noticing only the simple difference between on and off. But when you switch on that organ blower, air starts to move through the organ as a gentle breath that soon builds to a little hurricane. As each reservoir fills, it automatically closes its own regulating valve. When all the reservoirs are full, the organ is alive and ready to play. There's a big difference between the sense you get inside an organ when the blower is running and all the reservoirs are full of pressure, compared with the lifeless state when the blower is not running.

When I'm inside an organ with the blower running, it feels alive to me. It's almost as though it's quivering with excitement, waiting for someone to play. I compare it to the collective inhalation of all the wind players in a symphony orchestra. The conductor mounts the podium and the players give him their attention. He raises his baton and the instruments are at the ready. He gives the upbeat and everyone inhales. The split second before air starts pouring through those instruments is like the organ with blower running, reservoirs up, and windchests full of air pressure, ready to blow air through those pipes when the organist opens the valves by touching keys.

Besides the notion that the organ is a living, breathing thing is the personality of a good instrument. There certainly are plenty of “ordinary” organs that don't exhibit any particular personality. But a well-conceived and beautifully made instrument almost always shares its being with the players and listeners. Just as our boat tells us what it likes, so



Harnessing the wind



Schlicker organ at First Lutheran

an organ lets the player know what it likes and what it doesn't. How many of us have put a piece of music back on the shelf just because the organ didn't seem to like it?

And besides the idea that an organ might have opinions as to what music it plays best, so a good instrument lends itself to a particular form of worship. My work in the Organ Clearing House is centered on finding new homes for redundant organs, and by extension, I'm always thinking about the strengths and weaknesses of each instrument we handle, especially from the point of view of what type of church it might be suited for.

### A tale of two cities

St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Glendale, California, is a peppy, active place with lots of young families. I got to know it about four years ago when they put their 1973 three-manual Schlicker organ on the market. While I am not able to visit each organ that comes across my desk, it happened that I was in California on other business, and took the opportunity to see the instrument, take measurements, and assess its quality and condition. St. Mark's building has pseudo-gothic lines, and is built of concrete reinforced with steel (it's earthquake country). Most of the Schlicker organ was located in a chamber on the nave wall, in the place where a transept would be. The Positiv division was in a little cubby above the choir seats in the chancel, twenty feet behind the rest of the organ, the exact opposite of traditional placement of a Positiv division.

Herman Schlicker was a third-generation organbuilder, born in Germany, who immigrated to the United States in the late 1920s. He founded the Schlicker Organ Company in 1930, and along with Walter Holtkamp, was at the forefront of the revival movement that shifted interest toward the style of classic instruments, and of course later to the powerful revolution that reintroduced mechanical key action to mainstream American organbuilding. Through the 1960s and 1970s, Schlicker built instruments with

slider chests, low wind pressures, and open-toe voicing with few, if any, nicks at the pipe mouths. There are plenty of mutations and mixtures, and a higher-than-usual percentage of tapered ranks like Spitzflutes.

I felt that the Schlicker organ at St. Mark's was not a great success because the low wind pressure and relatively light amount of deep fundamental tone meant that the organ could not project well from the deep chamber. And all that upperwork meant there was not a big variety of lush solo voices with soft accompaniments that are so important to much of the choral literature featured in Anglican and Episcopal churches. It's a fine organ, but it was a boat in the wrong water.

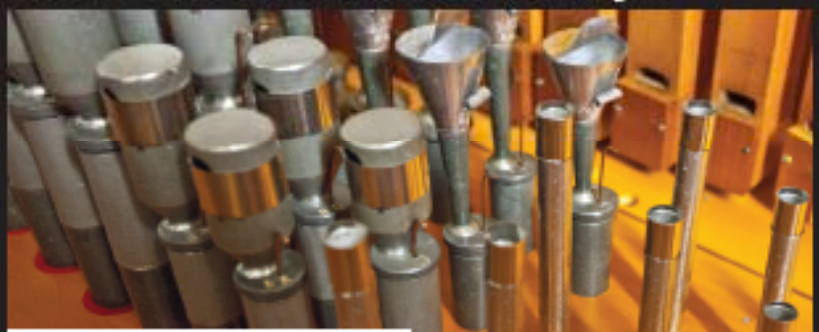
St. Mark's was offering the Schlicker for sale because they had acquired a beautiful three-manual organ by E. M. Skinner from a church in Pennsylvania. Foley-Baker, Inc., of Tolland, Connecticut, would renovate the Skinner and install it in the same chamber then occupied by the Schlicker. (See “Skinner Opus 774 Is Saved,” *THE DIAPASON*, December 2012.) The Skinner organ (Opus 774), built in 1929, has higher pressures than the Schlicker, two expressive divisions, and of twenty-seven ranks, eighteen are at eight-foot pitch (including reeds), and there are three independent sixteen-footers, plus a sixteen-foot extension of the Swell Cornopean to produce a Trombone. That's a lot of fundamental tone.

The people of St. Mark's felt that the Skinner organ would be more useful for the particular liturgy they celebrate. And because of the higher pressures and larger pipe scales, there is more energy to the sound, allowing it to travel more effectively out of the chamber and across the sanctuary.

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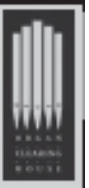
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day, traveling through the many tunnels. You never saw so many buses as pass through the Lincoln Tunnel during any rush hour. These are the people whose lives came to a standstill after Hurricane Sandy caused New Jersey Transit to cancel train service for two weeks. To add to the maelstrom, sixty percent of the gas stations in New Jersey were closed because fuel delivery systems and storage facilities were damaged by the storm. It took months to restore the normal massive flow of traffic.

Five years ago, I received a call from Will Moser, the pastor of the First Lutheran Church in Montclair, New Jersey, in the heart of that area. His church was home to an aging and relocated Austin organ that had, through some inept handling earlier in its life, passed through its period of greatest distinction. Much later in this story I learned that Will had grown up learning to play the organ, and worked as a professional organist before going to seminary. He grew up in a church in Western Pennsylvania that had a Schlicker organ, and as he matured into his ministry, he dreamed of having a Schlicker in his church. (Can you tell where this is going?)

I visited the church in Montclair and found a nice variance on the ubiquitous A-frame building. Rather than straight walls supporting the wooden pitched ceiling, the side walls are broken into roughly ten-foot sections, set in gentle parallel angles and divided by windows. The ceiling is supported by heavy beams of laminated wood. And there is a spacious balcony above the rear door—the perfect place for an organ with low wind pressure, clear voicing, and well-developed principal choruses.

It was just a few weeks after my visit to Montclair that the Glendale Schlicker came on the market, and I immediately thought of Will. With three manuals and about thirty-five stops, this organ was larger than what Will and I had discussed, but it sure seemed as though it would be a good fit. I got back on the train under the Hudson and put the specifications and photos of the Glendale organ in Will's hands. It wasn't long before he got to California to see the organ, and we agreed pretty quickly that the church should acquire the organ.

We dismantled the organ and placed it in storage while the people in Montclair gathered the necessary funds, and now, several years later, the organ is in place, complete, and sounding terrific. The organ's tone moves easily and unobstructed through the sanctuary. Each stop sounds great alone and in combinations. The full organ is impressive, but not overpowering. The reeds are colorful, and the bass tones project beautifully.

We might describe the result of the Glendale/Montclair caper as a Lutheran organ in a Lutheran church and an Episcopal organ in an Episcopal church.

When smart organbuilders design new organs, they consider all the elements that make up the physical location and acoustics of the room. They calculate the volume, and consider the lines of egress over which the organ would have to speak. They divine how much sound energy will be necessary and calculate the pipe scales and wind pressures accordingly. Each organ is designed for the space in which it is installed. I imagine that Mr. Schlicker felt that he was building an organ that would sound great at St. Mark's. And he was building it at a time when many organists and organbuilders felt that the ideal organ had low pressure and plenty of upperwork.

**Fashion conscious**

I write frequently about the revolution in American organbuilding in the second half of the twentieth century. We celebrate the renewal of interest and knowledge about building tracker-action organs while simultaneously lamenting the loss of those organs they replaced. At the same time we should acknowledge that there was another twentieth-century revolution in American organbuilding that started and progressed exactly fifty years earlier. If in 1950 we were building organs with classic stoplists and thinking about tracker action, in 1900 they were building organs with romantic stoplists and thinking about electro-pneumatic action. In 1970, dozens of new tracker organs were being built and in 1920, hundreds of electro-pneumatic organs were installed. And as those electro-pneumatic organs had American organists in their thrall, so many distinguished nineteenth-century organs were discarded to make space.

What I celebrate about early twenty-first century organbuilding is that the last fifty years of intense study and

experimentation have allowed American organbuilders to become masters in all styles of organ building. We have firms that build tracker organs based on historic principles, and tracker organs inspired by the idea of eclecticism. Other firms build electro-pneumatic organs with symphonic capabilities, or electro-pneumatic organs with the "American Classic" ethic. And I love them all.

Looking back over forty years, I wonder if that Schlicker organ was the best choice for St. Mark's. I have not read the documents from the organ committee to know what drove or inspired that choice, and I don't know the history surrounding it. But I bet that part of the decision was driven by the style of the day. Everyone was buying organs like that, whether or not history has proven them all to be the right choice. And we all wore paisley neckties.

I'd like to think that Mr. Schlicker would be pleased with the new home we've given his organ.

Through my travels during thirty years in the organ business, I know

of many organs that were acquired by churches at the instigation of persuasive organists. Some of them were great successes. But some were under-informed mistakes based on the personal taste of the musician without proper consideration of the architecture or liturgy of the individual church. If an organ is to be a success, it needs to be a boat in the right water. You'd never wear blue socks with a pink shirt. ■

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