

Skinner Opus 774 Is Saved

Mike Foley

It was July of 2004. The voice on the phone was Douglass Hunt, premier organ technician for some of New York City's highest profile churches and their giant organs. He had been in contact with Christ Church in the posh Bronx village of Riverdale. They were very interested in acquiring Skinner Opus 774, an original 1929 organ still installed at St. Paul's Memorial Reformed Church in Reading, Pennsylvania. The building was closed and the organ needed to find a home as soon as possible. Doug asked if we would survey both the organ and Christ Church for a possible match. We did, but alas, the organ couldn't be made to fit. Christ Church went back to their drawing board and the Skinner settled in for what was becoming a long and nervous wait for a new home. St. Paul's building sale was under contract. The new owner wasn't interested in the organ. It had to go, and soon.

Others came to see this dirty but otherwise untouched Skinner. In each case, a match wasn't possible. Closing day was fast approaching but a new owner was not . . . until a chance meeting with Jack Bethards of Schoenstein in San Francisco. At lunch, we got talking about Skinners and all the activity in resurrecting these somewhat forgotten masterpieces. Jack relayed a story about the Episcopal Church of St. Mark in Glendale, California, that was seriously looking for a vintage Skinner of about 30 ranks. Bingo! Many phone calls and one plane trip later, James Wallace, then music director of St. Mark's, visited and heard the organ. To confirm his findings he brought none other than concert organist Peter Richard Conte and the Wanamaker organ's curator, Curt Mangel. All quickly agreed: Opus 774 had found its new home.

Back in Glendale, Rector Mark Weitzel met with assistants and key church members to determine if there was hope for making the dream happen. Besides the organ, the project required a second organ chamber to be constructed above the transept—no small job and with no small cost. An important initial donation by longtime parishioner Isabel Soule launched the project, and our firm was asked to remove the organ to our shop, where it would sleep until adequate funding could be raised for reconditioning and installation.

We were overflowing with work and were forced to seek warehouse storage. As luck would have it, two weeks after the organ was freshly packed away, the warehouse representative called to announce they were closing—but that we could simply move the organ to their second and new warehouse in a neighboring town for just a slightly higher monthly rental rate. With no alternative, we did, and then a year after that, the second warehouse called to say we had to remove the organ, as they were converting to a specialty form of storage that certainly didn't include pipe organs. Even the organ was getting tired of the moves. So much for "professional" storage warehouses. Thank goodness, Phil Carpenter, our head of field operations,



St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Glendale, California



The Choir/Great/Pedal chamber during erection at FBI's Tolland, Connecticut facility. Special elevated chamber houses the harp.



Carved console is American black walnut. Ivory key tops are original but buffed.

makes certain that each piece is inventoried as this helped ward off the possibility of loss with all the shuffling. No more warehouses; we brought Opus 774 to our Tolland facility—on one of the hottest days on record in Connecticut. Certainly, this is one well-traveled Skinner.

It was now 2007 and at Glendale fund-raising went into high gear. Brochures were printed and the committee did all but pound on doors to raise over

a third of the necessary funds. Then, the miracle happened. In 2007 the Bradley Foundation of Philadelphia took interest in the project and agreed to give a generous amount to save Opus 774. Incredibly, not long thereafter, a grant writer located the Ahmanson Foundation, based in Los Angeles. Yet a second and generous donation from this trust, established for the arts, offered an amount that brought fundraising to the



FBI tonal director Milovan Popovic inspects Concert Flute.



FBI techs guide the blower into the new blower room.



FBI tech Adam Lagocki shop tests one of the organ's many pouch rails.

point that the church felt comfortable going to contract. Ongoing fund-raising of every type and variety gathered the remaining needed funds.

The organ's quality and excellent condition proved itself during the reconditioning process. With not a pipe or screw missing, the instrument responded beautifully to the reconditioning process and then fit perfectly into the chambers at St. Mark's. Every piece of leather, be it valve, gasket, reservoir, pouch or pneumatic, was replaced. Every pipe

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Close-up of pipes of the Swell division



Partial view of the completed Swell division



Freshly installed pedal 16' Open Diapason



L-R: Father Mark Weitzel, rector; Bill Welker, Howard Brown (committee chair), Phil Carpenter (FBI job manager), and organist David Houston

was washed and regulated. Every wire was replaced and every board refinished. Thanks to the efforts of all involved and the fact that we had designed, cut, and pre-erected each division, installation went like clockwork and the organ was in and running within a few weeks. Tonal finishing took less than a month. St. Mark's enjoys a reverberant acoustic, and the organ, in its new chancel chambers, has no problem filling the room.

The project was completed early and the organ was ready for Christmas of 2009. The dedication concert was on April 25, 2010. Peter Richard Conte, with his special affinity for early twentieth-century Skinners, put the organ through its paces. The "new" Opus 774 hosted a most memorable concert.

Like so many organ projects, this one was faced with more than its share of obstacles and also like others, this project was sprinkled with people who roll up their sleeves, push the obstacles aside, and make a difference. The result is that Opus 774 is in like-new condition, thoroughly appreciated, and safely installed in its new California home. ■

Mike Foley was born and raised in Manchester, Connecticut. He studied piano for 15 years and essentially taught himself to play theatre organ. He saw his first pipe organ at age 13 and, as he puts it, was never the same thereafter. With friend Tom Felice's help, he started collecting and selling used organ pipes and parts, and when he was 17, they bought and installed the organ from Hartford's Colonial Theatre.

In 1968 he teamed up with William Castle Baker to form a "Keyboard Instrument Service" business they called Foley-Baker Enterprises. Within months, and with some professionally designed advertising, business grew to include the care of pianos, harpsichords, electronic keyboards, and pipe organs. In 1982, Mike split off all but the pipe organ department to concentrate on building a high quality and nationally recognized pipe organ service business.

Foley-Baker Inc. employs 15 full-time technicians who, Mike acknowledges, are the reason behind the firm's success. FBI services instruments throughout the Northeast and is regularly engaged in major work throughout America, some of it high profile.

**Skinner Opus 774
St. Mark's Episcopal Church,
Glendale, California**

- GREAT 5" wind pressure**
- 16' Bourdon
 - 8' First Diapason
 - 8' Second Diapason
 - 8' Clarabella
 - 4' Octave
 - 2' Fifteenth
 - 8' Tromba
 - 8' French Horn
 - Chimes

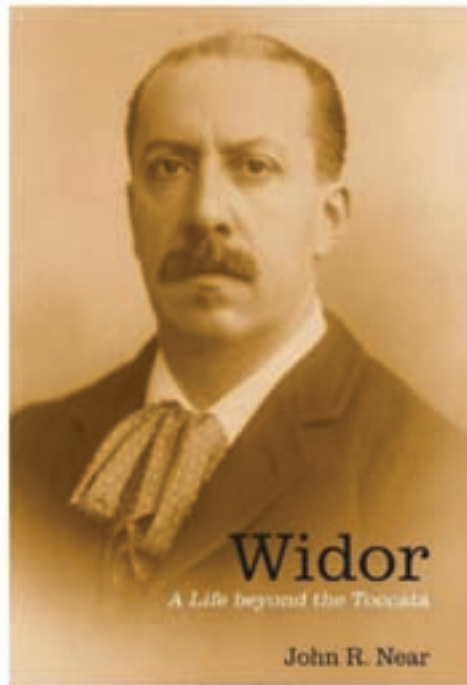
- SWELL 7.5" wind pressure**
- 16' Bourdon
 - 8' Diapason
 - 8' Rohrflöte
 - 8' Salicional
 - 8' Voix Celeste
 - 8' Aeoline
 - 8' Flute Celeste II
 - 4' Flute Triangulaire
 - 2' Mixture III
 - 8' Cornopean
 - 8' Oboe d'Amore
 - 8' Vox Humana
 - Tremolo

- CHOIR 6" wind pressure**
- 8' Orchestral Flute
 - 8' Dulciana
 - 8' Unda Maris
 - 4' Flute
 - 8' Clarinet
 - Harp
 - Celesta
 - Tremolo

- PEDAL 6" wind pressure**
- 32' Resultant
 - 16' Open Diapason
 - 16' Bourdon
 - 16' Echo Lieblich (Sw 16' Bourdon)
 - 8' Octave (ext)
 - 8' Gedeckt (ext)
 - 8' Still Gedeckt (Sw 16' Bourdon)
 - 4' Flute (ext)
 - 16' Trombone (ext, Gt)
 - 8' Tromba (Gt)
 - Chimes (Gt)

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