

**Dobson Pipe Organ Builders,
Lake City, Iowa
Opus 91, 2013
Merton College Chapel
Merton College
The University of Oxford, U.K.**

by **Matthew Power**

"That sweet city with her dreaming spires," the words from Matthew Arnold's elegy *Thyrsis*, are synonymous with Oxford. So too is its renowned university, the most ancient in the English-speaking world, first mentioned in records of the 11th century. The university has 38 self-governing and financially independent colleges plus six permanent private halls of Christian foundation. Founded in 1264 by Walter de Merton, sometime Chancellor of England and later Bishop of Rochester, Merton College was the first of Oxford University's colleges to be fully self-governing; it contains the oldest quadrangle in the university, and now, the newest pipe organ, built by Dobson Pipe Organ Builders, Ltd. of Lake City, Iowa, and inaugurated in April 2014 as part of a year-long organ festival marking the college's 750th anniversary.

Benjamin Nicholas became joint director of music in 2008 alongside Peter Phillips, taking up the full-time position as Reed Rubin Organist and Director of Music in 2012. The dream of commissioning a new organ soon became a reality. Nicholas explains:

In 2008 the choral scholarships were launched and it became clear that the existing J.W. Walker organ was either in need of a lot of work or replacement. The specification was good for the performance of baroque organ music but not much else, and we needed an organ capable of accompanying all the repertoire that a college choir needs to sing. The other inspiration came from the approaching 750th anniversary of the college.

Once the decision had been made, a search began. A short-list of four builders emerged, with one firm each from England, Canada, Switzerland, and the United States. They all visited the college and submitted designs for instruments; it was Dobson's overall concept and understanding of the space in the chapel, which enabled them to win the contract.

Ben Nicholas was joined by the Rev. Dr. Simon Jones, Merton College Chaplain, on a tour of eight Dobson instruments in the States, ranging from a modest church instrument to the large concert organ in the Kimmel Center, Philadelphia. "I loved the sound-world of all those instruments," recalls Nicholas, "the warmth of their voicing and the way that Lynn Dobson had responded to whatever size room he was building for." And the result? "The new organ has made a whole new repertoire possible—like the Parry *Blest Pair of Sirens*, sung at the dedication Evensong for the first time."

Working overseas did not present a problem for the Dobson team, but the narrow cobbled streets of Oxford, and in particular Merton Street, did pose a challenge. The organ was delivered in a number of metal shipping containers and maneuvering these around corners involved the help of many people including the highways authority and the Oxford police!

John Panning is tonal director at Dobson's. I asked him how the organ's position in the chapel affected the design of the instrument. "With an organ of much greater size than the previous one, there was concern that it shouldn't have an overbearing presence in the ante chapel." The organ stands in front of the west wall of the building facing into the quire, the other side of a

screen designed in the 17th century by Sir Christopher Wren.

There was an interest in revealing the ancient west window, some panes of which date from the 15th century. So we wanted to keep the organ as far west as possible, the case as low as we could, and the shape of the organ case was born out of these constraints. The casework could be described as "gothic style," but of course no gothic organs of that size were built, so we had to invent a new grammar.

The casework has an elegant profile and a complex texture that invites viewing from many different angles. Unusual are the rows of painted wooden pipes set on the sides of the case, and appearing not unlike an English Tudor organ might have been. These are the basses of the Great 16-foot Bourdon, placed there to save space within, and to provide visual stimulation to, people entering the chapel. The casework is entirely the work of president and artistic director Lynn Dobson, from the initial designs to the ornate decoration. "The chapel itself reflects several periods of decoration," says Panning, "from its gothic origins, to its classical screen and its 19th-century Victorian woodwork, and the organ case contains all these elements."

Tonally the organ invites exploration of its stops in both their solo capacity, where distinctive characters emerge, and in ensemble where the blend is successful too. A danger that so-called "eclectic" organs risk is the ability to play any repertoire with only moderate success. The Dobson instrument must convince in all solo literature and its daily purpose is to accompany the chapel choir. What was the philosophy behind its tonal design? Panning explains:

From the beginning an objective was to approach the organ as the servant of the

choir. So many instruments of the last half-century were designed to interpret particular bodies of solo literature, and organs designed to accompany the liturgy were mainly overlooked. I find it remarkable that in Oxford there are very few organs that really could play a proper service. It is ironic though that what we [as American organ builders] consider to be our bread-and-butter work [building organs to accompany the liturgy] is hardly to be found even in the City of Oxford!

Of the instruments he has heard in the city, he reckons the organ in Wadham College Chapel, a relatively untouched "Father" Willis, achieves that best. Also, Kenneth Tickell's recent instrument at Keble is in a similar vein to the Dobson at Merton in being able to adapt to all styles of music convincingly.

This organ is built on a classical framework—the choruses of each division relate to one another; then it is enriched in a 19th-century fashion with colorful flutes, and reeds that have a more specific tonal direction. While there are some French reeds, there are also some closed shallots in stops where a French sound would overwhelm. The beautiful acoustic of the chapel made the voicer's work very enjoyable.

When the chapel is not full, with perhaps 60 people present, the organ projects into the quire very much in the manner of an English cathedral instrument in scale and in how it supports the singing. Individual voices reveal a variety of characters, yet coalesce within the chorus with equal success. The Great division's Harmonic Flute is a case in point; its generous soaring solo voice returns among the other foundation stops without obtruding.

This tonal style seems to be what attracted Ben Nicholas and Simon Jones as they explored a variety of Dobson organs in the United States. What does Panning think they found?



I think for them the aggregate was that these instruments were agreeable to play, with a tonal congeniality and you could imagine them accompanying choirs—that was the prime goal. The common thread found in all these instruments was of a “servant” rather than a “solo” organ.

Besides the new organ, an ambitious collection of new choral music has been commissioned and collected to form the *Merton Choirbook*. The idea was that of Michael Emery, a former organ scholar at Merton and senior producer of the BBC Singers, in conversation with Peter Phillips (known internationally as director of The Tallis Scholars, and appointed joint director of music alongside Ben Nicholas in 2008); Phillips retains his part-time post, conducting four services per term. Emery’s idea was to form a collection of new music to celebrate the 750th anniversary along the lines of the *Eton Choirbook*, including music by the finest composers of the day, mainly from Britain. For reasons of practicality the 50 pieces are all published individually by the composers’ respective publishers, and a single bound volume of the collection will be kept in Merton College Library. Premieres of all the works, mainly at Merton but elsewhere too, continue into 2015.

The organ dedication concert was given on April 26 by John Scott (formerly director of music at St. Paul’s Cathedral, London, and now in his tenth year at St. Thomas Church Fifth Avenue, New York). Scott used a cleverly devised program to explore the facets of the Dobson organ as a solo instrument. A capacity audience packed every inch of the quire and spilled into the ante chapel.

The program began with *Modus Pleno Organo*, a majestic treatment of the “Benedicamus Domino” plainchant and with unusual use of double pedal, implying

gravitas from the outset. Sweelinck’s *Fantasia Chromatica* opened with the tone of what could have been a restrained English principal, with clear articulation and warm speech. This steadily lengthy fantasia was made continually interesting through Scott’s phrasing and pacing. Buxtehude’s D-minor *Passacaglia* was made to sound later in style with larger-scale fluework, the entrance of an 8-foot Pedal reed in the central section, and finishing with 8-foot and 4-foot flutes of fine clarity.

After tricky minimalistic palate-cleansing provided by Ad Wammes’s *Toccata Chromatica* (*Echoes of Sweelinck*), Scott delivered a flawless and compelling reading of J. S. Bach’s G-minor *Fantasia and Fugue*, revealing well-balanced independent parts. Scholars now think that the two movements only became the pair we know today much later (as with many of Bach’s preludes and fugues); reflecting this, Scott imaginatively interpolated the expressive *Orgelbüchlein* chorale prelude “Wenn wir in höchsten Nöthen sein.”

The program changed tack with Franck’s third *Choral*, depicting a thick and powerful wall of sound from 8-foot reeds and *fonds*, and the very effective swell shutters came into their own. Peter Racine Fricker’s *Pastorale* exhibited the smaller reeds and tremulant, and its undulating textures benefited from Scott’s attention to detail and fine judgment in the long, perfectly balanced diminuendo at the end. A demanding syncopated *Toccata* by Simon Preston—who delighted the audience by emerging and taking a bow—contained scurrying pedal writing, which demonstrated quick speech. The program ended with a masterful rendition of Dupré’s *Variations sur un Noël*. Again, a perfectly good French timbre ensued, the large and characterful Harmonic Flute climbing high, and

Dobson Pipe Organ Builders, Ltd.

Merton College Chapel, Merton College, The University of Oxford, U.K.

GREAT ORGAN (II)

- 16′ Bourdon
- 8′ Open Diapason I
- 8′ Open Diapason II
- 8′ Harmonic Flute
- 8′ Chimney Flute
- 4′ Principal
- 4′ Spire Flute
- 2½′ Nazard
- 2′ Fifteenth
- 2′ Recorder
- 1½′ Tierce
- IV Mixture (19.22.26.29)
- 8′ Trumpet
- Tremulant
- Swell to Great
- Choir to Great

SWELL ORGAN (III, enclosed)

- 8′ Open Diapason
- 8′ Lieblich Gedeckt
- 8′ Salicional
- 8′ Voix Celeste FF
- 4′ Principal
- 4′ Nason Flute
- 2′ Fifteenth
- IV Mixture (15.19.22.26)
- 16′ Double Trumpet
- 8′ Trumpet
- 8′ Hautboy
- 8′ Vox Humana
- 4′ Clarion
- Tremulant

CHOIR ORGAN (I, enclosed)

- 8′ Geigen Diapason
- 8′ Geigen Celeste FF
- 8′ Gedeckt
- 4′ Gemshorn
- 4′ Open Flute
- 2′ Doublet
- II Sesquialtera (12.17)
- III Mixture (26.29.33)
- 8′ Corno di Bassetto
- Tremulant
- 8′ Major Trumpet
- Swell to Choir

PEDAL ORGAN

- 16′ Open Diapason
- 16′ Subbass
- 16′ Bourdon (Great)
- 8′ Principal
- 8′ Bass Flute
- 4′ Fifteenth
- 16′ Trombone
- 8′ Trumpet
- Great to Pedal
- Swell to Pedal
- Choir to Pedal
- Zimbelstern

Mechanical key action
Electric stop & combination actions
Manual/Pedal compass 61/32
3 manuals, 43 stops, 52 ranks

◀ Bird’s-eye view of case, as seen from the bell ringers’ gallery in the chapel tower



Above: Side view showing woodworking detail

Below: Façade detail and keydesk





Dobson Opus 91

a final flourish was brought about by the celebratory Zimbelstern.

The following day, a recital of baroque organ music, played by Benjamin Nicholas and organ scholars Anna Steppler (who graduated in 2013), Charles Warren, and Peter Shepherd, had a decent but by no means large audience. This gave the organ a chance to speak into the room as it will each day in term time accompanying Choral Evensong, its principal *raison d'être*. The tonal egress was certainly more substantial, the acoustical effect now of a cathedral rather than a chapel. The ubiquitous *Toccata and Fugue in D Minor* BWV 565 (attributed to J.S. Bach) was given a vibrant interpretation by Nicholas, especially in its imitative echo passages, and his rapid tempo still left room for some rhetorical surprises. Of particular note was the superb fluency and delivery of Anna Steppler's *Voluntary for a Double Organ* (Purcell) and her musical phrasing in the Buxtehude *Te Deum*, which caused the work to sing.

That Sunday evening, the Bishop of Oxford dedicated the instrument at Choral Evensong; the chapel was filled, with some members of the Dobson Pipe Organ Builders and their families in attendance. Canon Peter Moger, Precentor of York Minster, was the preacher, and the choir sang the *Canticles in G* (Howells), *Blest Pair of Sirens* (Parry), and the voluntary was *Flourish for an Occasion* (Harris).

I ask John Panning what he and the Dobson team will take away from their encounter with Oxford.

The opportunity to work in a space like Merton College Chapel is probably a once in a lifetime experience. It was an ideal situation; the college was extremely supportive, Paul Hale was an excellent organ advisor, understanding the technicalities and



Zimbelstern star

providing a bridge to the musicians at the college; he asked the right questions, not necessarily prescribing the answers. Ben Nicholas was very supportive and helped with suggestions during our work. The whole experience of building an organ at Oxford, and in a chapel with such beautiful acoustics—something that is rare for us to find in the States—was unforgettable. The inaugural weekend of concerts and services, especially John Scott's recital and hearing the organ accompany the services, made for a very satisfying and emotional weekend.

Matthew Power gained an honors degree in music at London University and won the improvisation and composition competitions at Trinity College of Music, graduating with the Recital Diploma. He was Editor of Choir & Organ magazine for nine years, and works in London as a musician and writer.

Photo credits: Colin Dunn



Kirner residence organ, M. P. Rathke, Inc., Opus 7



Basswood pipe shades in 23k gold leaf



Left stop jamb

**Karen Schneider Kirner Family Residence
South Bend, Indiana
M.P. Rathke, Inc., Opus 7**

The design of this instrument evolved during a longtime friendship with the client, which in recent years came to include discussions of a residence organ that was affordable, compact, and relatively complete in its tonal resources, in that order. The result thus reflects equally the client's needs (practice, teaching, occasional chamber concerts) and the builder's ideas.

The organ is housed in a case of solid walnut nine feet tall, five feet wide, and two feet deep; the removable cornice for a future residence require the organ to fit under an eight-foot ceiling. It utilizes suspended mechanical key action and mechanical stop action. Winding is via a weighted wedge bellows and small rotary fan blower, both housed within the base of the case.

Opus 7 was designed with a total of seven stops, of which the treble-compass Seventeenth is currently prepared. The instrument is deliberately voiced gently so as not to fatigue the player's ears during extended periods of practicing. This is especially true of the upperwork, which is likewise scaled and voiced to be flutier than one might expect in a larger space.

The manual naturals are grenadil; the reverse-skunktail sharps are made with ebony sandwiched between two strips of holly. The keys of the concave and parallel pedalboard are maple with walnut sharps. The forged iron drawknobs were designed and fashioned by Louise Pezzi of Philadelphia. The hand-lettered stop and coupler labels were accomplished by Linda Cook of Gloucester, Massachusetts; another noted Cape Ann artist, sculptor Morgan Faulds Pike, designed and carved the basswood pipe shades, to which she applied 23-karat gold leaf.

Photo credit (all): Stephen Schnurr

M. P. Rathke, Inc.

Karen Schneider Kirner Family Residence, South Bend, Indiana

Manual II

8' Stopped Diapason (permanently on)

Manual I

8' Principal
4' Spire Flute
2 2/3' Twelfth
2' Fifteenth
1 3/4' Seventeenth (c1) (prepared)

Pedal

16' Bourdon (ext, Stopped Diapason)

Couplers

Manual I to Pedal
Manual II to Pedal
Manual II to Manual I