

An American Organ Moves to Germany

Steer & Turner Opus 14

Jay Zoller



Grace United Methodist Church at the time of the removal of the organ

The Steer & Turner Company

John Wesley Steer (1824–1900) (he later changed the spelling to Steere) was born in Southwick, Massachusetts, and had apprenticed to a cabinetmaker. He later started his own cabinet shop in Tariffville, Connecticut, and barely two years later saw his entire shop destroyed by fire, an event that he would see repeated several times during his life. Needing work and the income to support his bride of two years, Ruth Johnson Steer, he sought employment with his father-in-law in the Johnson Organbuilding firm in Westfield, Massachusetts. It was not long before the cabinetmaker had mastered the craft of voicing and he soon found himself in charge of installation and finishing.

George William Turner (1829–1908) from Dedham, Massachusetts, apprenticed with a Boston cabinetmaker at the age of sixteen. With some indecision about his career, he left to study telegraphy in Philadelphia, but six months later he was in New York working for another cabinetmaker. In 1852 he opened his own shop, which proved to be successful, soon employing 25 men. In 1854, he sold the business and worked for a year with the reed organ builder, Mason & Hamlin, before joining the Johnson Company in Westfield. His duties there included both cabinetmaker and action mechanic.

Steer left the Johnson factory in 1866 to begin building organs on his own. He built two organs—one a large instrument for the Third Presbyterian Church in Albany, the other for a church in East Albany—before George Turner left Johnson to join him and the firm changed its name to Steer & Turner. In 1868 Steer & Turner bought a lot on the corner of Elm



Steer & Turner Opus 14 in its new home in Cologne, Germany

and Meadow Streets in Westfield, and in the late spring began clearing it in preparation to building a new factory. Steer sold a farm he owned in West Springfield at this time, probably to help in the financing of the new building.

The new firm built six organs in 1867, all but one for churches near Albany, and in 1868 increased that to ten. The year 1869 saw the number drop to eight, but the list included the building of two of the firm's first three-manual organs, as well as the organ that later I played and that made a transatlantic journey. When Steer & Turner moved into their new building, they employed 12 workmen; soon thereafter it was increased to 25.

Grace Methodist Church, Keene

It was during this year of 1869 that Steer & Turner built one of their finest and most representative instruments for Grace United Methodist Church in Keene, New Hampshire. Opus 14, costing \$3,000, was considered the best organ in the city when it arrived and, in the opinion of this author, remained the best in the city until its removal in 2011, a hundred and forty-two years later! The organ was installed originally in the rear balcony and was moved to an alcove in the front by the J. W. Steere & Son Company in 1907. In the Victorian taste of the time, the Swell Cornet Dolce III was removed and an 8' Aeoline put in its place. At the same time, a rank of the Cornet Dolce was added to the two-rank Great Mixture (probably



The Schulte organ crew arrives to begin dismantling Opus 14



The silver nameplate



A toe on the Double Open

the Tierce set) and the Great Mixture grew to three ranks. One of the two sets of swell shades was also removed.

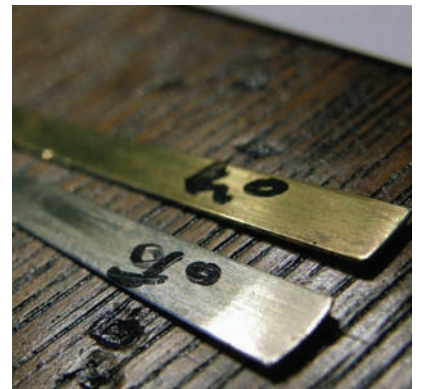
In 1968, during Edward Boadway's tenure as organist, an organ vandal whose identity remains unknown hit three area churches. The Congregational, the Episcopal, and the Methodist church organs all sustained pipe damage. Insurance money paid to have the three reed stops in the Steer & Turner cleaned, undented, and resoldered. Thad Outerbridge from Beverly, Massachusetts replaced the 1907 "nearly useless" Aeoline with the 2' and 1½' stops that remain today. According to Ed Boadway, the façade was painted "a high-school cafeteria green" during the 1907 move, a redecoration of the room that included a baby blue arch over the organ. The façade was painted gold at a later date, at which time a huge wooden cross was hung on the case. It was removed a short time later.

An elderly female organist at one point complained of the cold air about her ankles, so the swell pedal and combination pedals were detached and stuck inside the case and the knee panel covered over! Fortunately, this too was soon corrected, but it goes to show what travesties are committed on organs for the silliest of reasons.

The dedication recital program may be of interest. It seems that the concert was a community event, as many (apparently local) musicians took part. William A. Briggs, a Keene native who for years played a three-manual 1868 Johnson organ at Bethany Church Congregational in Montpelier, Vermont, was the principal organist. In addition to the descrip-



A closeup of one of the reed shallots



The old organ contained a steel rather than brass reed



Some of the inscriptions on the Double Open pipes

tion of the organ, complete with a stoplist, which accidentally left off the Pedal 16' Double Open, the program reads:

- Part I
1. The Chromatische Fantasie – L. Thiele
Mr. Briggs
 2. Chorus "O How Beautiful"
Choir
 3. Organ, "Andante" – Mendelssohn
Mr. Gerrish
 4. Improvisation (exhibiting the Principal Stops)
Mr. Briggs
 5. Solo "Eve's Lamentation" (from the Intersession)
Miss Mason
 6. Organ Fantasie – Meyerbeer
Mr. Briggs
- Part II
7. Fugue in g minor No. 2 – Bach
Mr. Gerrish
 8. "Adagio," Symphony in C – Haydn
Mr. Briggs
 9. Ave Maria (with violin obbligato) – Gounod
Miss Mason
 10. Christmas anthem
Choir
 11. Organ solo
Mr. Gerrish
 12. Concert Variations "Pleyel's Hymn" – Briggs
Mr. Briggs

The original stoplist included a three-rank Cornet Dolce on the Swell rather than the later string or the even later Fifteenth or Nineteenth. However, the stoplist as it appeared in 1975 when I became organist was as follows:

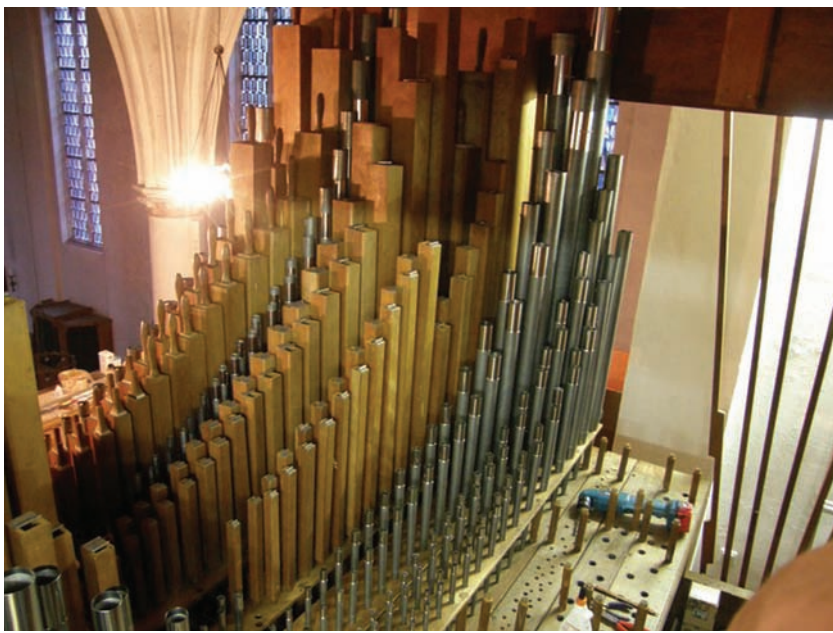
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The Great pipes begin to be installed



Voicing details of the Flauto Traverso 4'

GREAT

- 16' Bourdon
- 8' Open Diapason
- 8' Dulciana
- 8' Melodia
- 4' Octave
- 4' Flauto Traverso
- 2 3/4' Twelfth
- 2' Fifteenth
- Mixture III
- 8' Trumpet
- 8' Clarinet

SWELL

- 16' Bourdon t/b
- 8' Open Diapason
- 8' Stopped Diapason
- 4' Octave
- 4' Flute a Cheminee
- 2' Fifteenth
- 1 1/2' Nineteenth
- 8' Basson Bass
- 8' Oboe
- Tremolo

PEDAL

- 16' Double Open Diapason

Swell to Great
Swell to Pedal
Great to Pedal

The year 1869 also saw some of Steer & Turner's instruments being sent further distances. By the end of the year they had installed organs in Ohio and South Carolina, despite a flash flood in October that washed away a corner of the factory's basement. Then, in 1871 the Johnson factory was completely destroyed by fire in April. Fire also destroyed the Steer & Turner factory in September. Five completed organs were demolished in the blaze, but Steer and Turner decided to rebuild immediately in the same location, a structure that was twice as large. The five organs burned were replaced, making a total of 16 organs for the year 1872.

Steer & Turner, with insufficient insurance, had a difficult time with deep



A closeup of a rollerboard connection showing a new reproduction

financial problems in 1877, which resulted in auctioning the factory for back taxes. However, during this time they continued to receive contracts and build organs. They were still building organs in that location until March 1878, when another disastrous fire destroyed the factory, this time with the loss of only one organ. Transferring production to a nearby whip factory and rebuilding again, they produced ten organs in 1878. No sooner had they moved back into the new building than a dike broke upstream in December 1878 and washed away the new shop. A local paper described them as "having as many lives as a cat, and a singed cat at that." Despite all this, they managed to complete a large organ for the Church of the Immaculate Conception in Washington.

It is no wonder, though, that they decided to move from Westfield to a new plant in Springfield. It was about this time that Steer altered the spelling of his name, adding an "e" to the end. The move improved their luck and the company began to recover, building organs for churches as far west as Minnesota and Wisconsin. Steere & Turner had a good decade in the 1880s and built their 300th organ in 1890. In 1891 John Steere and George Turner decided to part ways, and John took his sons into the partnership to become J. W. Steere & Sons. Turner spent a few years as president of the Bigelow Lithographic Co. By 1894 he had returned to form a partnership with John Wesley Steere's son, John S. Steere, to form a new Steere & Turner in competition with his old partner whose company then became J. W. Steere & Son! The history makes for interesting reading, but we also are going to part ways with the firm at this point. I don't imagine that Steere or Turner ever dreamed that one of their organs would travel as far away as Cologne, Germany!

My story at the church

My part of the story begins when I became the organist and choir director of Grace United Methodist Church, 106



The zinc tubing must be accurately re-paired if it is to fit



Replicas were made as needed

years after the organ was built. The pastor at the time was a friend of mine, Rev. C. Edward Claus, and I was fortunate to have a small choir to work with in addition to this magnificent instrument to play. The church was located in a college town and seemed, in 1975, to be holding its own, although it was not wealthy by any means.

Since the church did not have much of a budget for organ maintenance and seemed indifferent to the quality of the instrument that they had, I often put my background in organbuilding to good use, performing much of the maintenance on the organ during my six-year tenure. When the old Spencer blower, located in a restroom off the downstairs kitchen, gave out, I installed a new Laukhuff blower in the organ chamber. In so doing, I enclosed it in a blower box and added a short windline in which I glued my business card and the date of the work. I mention this because it becomes important later in this story.

My real fun was working with the choir and of course playing the organ. I still have programs from two of the re-

citals I gave at Grace Methodist. In one program, which I played in October 1976 during the Bicentennial year, I began with Bach's *E-flat-major Prelude*, followed by James Hewitt, *Battle of Trenton*; John Knowles Paine, *Concert Variations on the Star Spangled Banner*; the *Tocatta, Aria, and Fugue* by Jan Bender; *Triptych* by Noel Goemanne; *I Make My Own Soul* from *All the Elements of the Earth* (for organ and electronic tape) by Richard Felciano; my own *Passacaglia in D Minor*; and ended with the Bach *Fugue in E-flat Major*. Very patriotic!

A Christmas concert that I played in December 1979 included, along with congregational singing of each of the carols played, *Noël, D'Aquin*; *Greensleeves*, Searle Wright; *Variations on Silent Night*, Jay Zoller; *Adeste Fideles*, Charles Ives; two settings of *Vom Himmel Hoch*, Pachelbel; and ending with Bach's *Tocatta, Adagio, and Fugue in C Major*. It is interesting to see what music I included so long ago!

One other event really stands out in my mind because it is so unusual. This incident seems humorous now, but at the time was on the scary side and must have happened in 1977 or '78. I commuted some in those days to get to the church, and so on Sundays I often had lunch at the parsonage with my friends, the minister and his wife. We were having lunch

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The new knobs look exactly like the old



Sonja Füßmann installs trackers



Viktor Repp dismantles the Great chest



The New Hampshire granite, all blown off, is put back on the reservoir

and two-way radio with handcuffs hanging off of it, I didn't want him to climb up. The fragile Swell tracker run was right next to the Great walkboard and a scuffle could destroy the key action or pipes. In any event, he didn't see anything and after some more looking around and discussing the matter, they concluded that the escapee must have gotten out of the building somehow.

As it turned out, he got out of the church after the police left and was picked up a couple of blocks away. He admitted to the police later that he had, indeed, been hiding in the organ. I can just imagine him laying on the Swell walkboard hoping he couldn't be seen through the façade. To his credit, in climbing up and back down again, he didn't do any damage to the organ.

In 1983 I moved on to a new position and didn't think much about the Steer & Turner until late 2009, when I got a call from one of my former choir members informing me that the remnants of the congregation had put the building up for sale. My first thought was that the bank across the street might buy the building and tear it down for a parking lot. I made some calls to determine what was going on, and then called John Bishop of the Organ Clearing House, who subsequently listed the organ on the OCH website.

Orgelbau Schulte

Oliver Schulte of Orgelbau Schulte in Germany knew of a church in Cologne looking for just such an organ. Schulte ran across the name of John Bishop and

the Organ Clearing House while doing work in England. An organ from the USA seemed too far away to be possible, but when the archdiocese of Cologne asked him for an organ, Schulte turned to Bishop for possibilities. The parish of St. Maternus had been saving for years for a new organ, but the actuality kept looking further and further away. When John Bishop showed him pictures, stoplist, and measurements, the Steer & Turner from Grace Methodist in Keene, New Hampshire was a perfect match. Schulte and a committee from St. Maternus examined the organ in May 2010 and a contract was signed in July. Schulte and his colleagues Sonja Füßmann, Viktor Repp, and Martin Ommer arrived in November to dismantle and ship the organ. Oliver's father Siegfried Schulte ran the shop in the absence of the crew. The instrument arrived at the Schulte shop on a snowy December 28th and work began on the restoration immediately in January 2011.

I am pleased to report that Orgelbau Schulte has kept the organ virtually intact. It is one of the earliest examples of Steer & Turner and a prime example of their tonal and mechanical work, and Schulte has made every effort to keep it in the same excellent condition as Steer & Turner left it. Because of its new location, however, some alterations had to be made. Since the organ had sat in an alcove in Grace Methodist, new matching sides for the case had to be made. To make it look right in its new setting the 16' Open Diapason in the Pedal was moved from the sides to the rear of the organ, making the silhouette narrower. At the same time, to make the Pedal division more complete, three new stops were added and placed on an electric chest to the rear of the manual chests: 16' Subbass, 8' Stop'd Diapason, and 8' Horn (reed). New matching drawknobs were made for these stops and room was found where the old electrical switch had been drilled into the stop jamb. Slider seals were added to the manual chests for greater stability.

Everything in the instrument was meticulously cleaned and repaired. Tracker ends, where needed, were made just like the old ones. Any old parts that were not needed in the organ, such as the Pedal tracker run, were carefully recorded and stored in a room behind the organ. Even the little windline that I made so many years ago with my business card and note inside now resides there as a small part of the organ's history.

The dedication at St. Maternus in Cologne was held on Sunday, September 11, 2011—coincidentally, but unintentionally, the tenth anniversary of the 2001 attack. A Mass was held in the morning at which a Mass by Gounod was sung, followed by a dedication re-

cital in the afternoon. Professor Jürgen Kursawa played music of Franck, Mendelssohn, and the Americans Matthews, Coerne, and Parker to a full church. The audience was enthusiastic and excited about the new instrument, which looks spectacular in its new home.

The Steer & Turner that was at Grace Methodist Church has always been one of the favorite organs in my career. I had enjoyable times in that position, and it was with alarm that I later watched as the church sank into financial difficulties. Those same difficulties may have saved the organ from extensive disfigurement or some sort of "modernization," but it also made real the possibility that it would be destroyed at some future date. Both the organ's new home as well as its old home are brick buildings and look remarkably alike on the outside.

I am glad that my phone call was able to set the Organ Clearing House in motion and ultimately provide for a new home in a new country, saving the instrument. I am looking forward to the day when I can travel over to visit my old friend!

Author's note

I would like to thank Oliver Schulte whose willingness to answer my questions and provide a chronology as well as photos, has proven to be invaluable. Oliver is the second generation in the company founded by his father, Siegfried Schulte, in 1978. He apprenticed with his father, spent a year away learning about restoration of early-romantic instruments and since 2006 has been a principal in the company. Orgelbau Schulte is located in Kürten, Germany and is responsible for about 35 new organs from I/3 to III/45, as well as a number of restorations.

I wish to thank Barbara Owen who answered my questions and generously helped provide information from her files. I would also like to thank Ed Boadway, the organist in the late sixties and up until 1972, who was also most helpful with verbal and written information.

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Jay Zoller is organist at South Parish Congregational Church in Augusta, Maine, where he plays the church's historic 1866 E. & G. G. Hook organ. He holds degrees from the University of New Hampshire and the School of Theology at Boston University.

A retired designer for the Andover Organ Company, he currently designs for the Organ Clearing House and for David E. Wallace & Co. Pipe Organ Builders of Gorham, Maine. Zoller resides in Newcastle, Maine, with his wife Rachel.

In addition to writing several articles about Heinz Wunderlich for *The American Organist*, *Choir & Organ*, and *THE DIAPASON*, he has played in all-Wunderlich recitals in Hamburg, Germany in 1999, 2004, and 2009. His article, "Heinz Wunderlich at 90," appeared in the April 2009 issue of *THE DIAPASON*, and his article, "An Organ Adventure in South Korea," appeared in the December 2011 issue of *THE DIAPASON*.

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