

A HISTORY OF THE SANCTUARY ORGANS

FROM THE PAST.....

The first organ in the sanctuary of Plymouth Church was a Skinner organ installed in 1923 by the E.M. Skinner Organ Company of Boston, Mass. The cost of the project was \$21,000. On March 18, 1923, James H. Rogers, Organist and Director at Plymouth as well as Music Editor for the Cleveland News and the Cleveland Plain Dealer, played the inaugural recital to a crowd of 750.

The Skinner organ console was placed far above the chancel area in its own loft and the instrument was placed behind a facade. In addition the original choir loft was quite small because there was no choir, but a paid quartet in the tradition of the time. The organ contained more than 3,000 pipes playable from four manuals and pedal keyboard. In 1940 several more ranks of pipes were added.

By the late 1930's plans were under way to expand the choir loft to accommodate more singers and enable the singers to follow the direction of the organist, but the coming of the war years brought a halt to this plan. Discussions continued well into the 1950's. Plymouth decided to hire a full-time church musician in the 1950's; however, several candidates declined the position due to the small choir loft which would prevent them from expanding the choir program. Finally in 1954 James Darling accepted this position--a post he assumed until 1961 when he left for Bruton Parish in Williamsburg, VA, a position he still holds today. At this time John D. Herr was appointed Director of Music.

"A resolution was passed by the Board of Trustees of Plymouth Church at the January 10, 1962 meeting to appoint a committee to investigate thoroughly the installation of a new organ, or rebuilding the present one [Skinner organ] , along with remodeling of the choir loft and chancel." With Mr. Herr as adviser, Mrs. Brown M. Dobyns served as chairperson of this committee. At the April 10, 1963, Board of Trustees meeting the organ committee presented an organ proposal recommending that the Holtkamp Organ Company of Cleveland Ohio install a new organ at a cost of \$70,000. At a congregational meeting in May the recommendation of remodeling the chancel area, lowering the choir loft, and the purchase of a new organ was approved. Total project cost was estimated between \$100,000 to \$110,000.

One day after the May congregational meeting, the C. Bert McDonald Charitable Trust made a gift to Plymouth Church which covered the entire cost of the organ (\$70,380). The organ contract was signed on June 27, 1963. The Skinner organ was sold to the Toledo Pipe Organ Company for \$3,000. [Note: Recently, via the Internet, Plymouth located the Skinner organ, opus 310, which is now in operation at Church of the Transfiguration, Orleans, Massachusetts]. The chancel remodeling began in June 1964 and was completed in September of that year. The new Holtkamp organ was installed and dedicated on December 18, 1964. To quote from the 1964 bulletin cover, "This American instrument embraces principles of organ building and composition from the Classical era of the 17th and 18th centuries. It is an instrument designed to perform literature of all periods in a meaningful manner to today's congregation." The Holtkamp organ consisted of three manuals and a pedal keyboard, with 2,851 pipes divided into 53 ranks of 40 stops. During this time Mr. Herr brought Plymouth to a new height in musical excellence.

TO THE PRESENT.....

After Mr. Herr's sudden death in 1993, Dr. Peter V. Picerno was called as Plymouth's next Director of Music. In September of 1996 Dr. Picerno presented a report to Mr. John Schier and members of the Music Committee on long range plans concerning liturgy, worship, music, and the sanctuary organ. This comprehensive report addressed issues concerning the inflexibility of the choir loft, the poor acoustical situation, and the state of the organ as addressed by several organ builders who were invited to assess the present state of the Holtkamp organ. No action was taken at that time. A year later Dr. Picerno resigned from his position.

Two months after being called as Plymouth's fourth Director of Music/Organist, James P. Riggs was advised, in September of 1998 by the Expenditure Oversight Committee (EOC), that the sanctuary would be renovated during the summer of 1999. Although no funding had been set aside for an organ project during the Capital Campaign, questions were being asked as to the state of the organ, redesigning the chancel area, etc. Clearly in January of 1999 there were many unanswered questions concerning the sanctuary/organ renovation; therefore, the project was postponed until the summer of 2000.

An organ committee consisting of Jane Hitchcock, Ida Mercer, Norma Nelson, John Schier, and Jim Riggs, as advisor, was formed. During the summer of 1999 the organ committee solicited bids and ideas from four different builders including the Holtkamp Organ Co. Each builder made a presentation to the committee. The bids ranged from \$90,000 to \$400,000. One builder was unanimously voted as being the best to do the job; however, his bid was at approximately \$160,000. By then the EOC had set aside \$100,000 with another \$20,000 coming from the Foundation Fund as voted on by church council on November 17, 1999. It was apparent that the \$120,000 would not be enough to complete the project as hoped. Two anonymous donors came forward-one with a \$25,000 contribution and another with a \$5,000 contribution to be put towards the organ project. The remaining funds came one last time from the Foundation Fund.

On January 6, 2000 a contract was signed with Tim Hemry of the Hemry Pipe Organ Co. from Novelty, OH to do the necessary organ renovations at a total cost of \$166,233. Following the Lural School graduation on June 8, 2000, all the pipes and the console were removed and construction began. The organ renovation consists of refurbishing the console to make it moveable, the addition of new solid state switching systems including 128 levels of combination action memory with full MIDI capabilities, and three programable crescendos. All pipes, chests, and chambers were cleaned and all current pipework re-voiced. Six new ranks of pipes are being added. When completed the organ will consist of 3,217 pipes divided into 59 ranks. The extension of the chancel floor and the removal of the carpet from the chancel has greatly improved the acoustics of both the organ and the choir. Moving the choir out from underneath the organ chests has created a better environment for choral singing. The additional space gained allows for much flexibility with guest instrumentalists, handbell choirs, and future musicals.

TO THE FUTURE.....

Between 1923 and 1964 forty-one years passed. Between 1964 and 2000 thirty-six years passed. Every thirty-five to forty years is normal for repairs, updates, etc. In another forty years this writer will be seventy-two. Will a current member of the Westminster Handchimes Choir or the Joyful Noise Choir oversee the next renovation?

We at Plymouth have been blessed with so much. How appropriate on this Thanksgiving Sunday, November 19, 2000, we rededicate this Holtkamp/Hemry pipe organ to the honor and glory of God. Plymouth has always been a cutting-edge church. With this newly renovated space and organ we have only begun to explore the many worship and ministry possibilities that lie ahead.

This report was prepared by James P. Riggs
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Early information from music archives

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