

## ORGAN REPORT TO VESTRY—FEBRUARY 2024

I think that, today, we have lost our sense of the holistic place of the organ within the church building, and begun to see it as merely an isolated instrument, a machine that produces sound. I can't blame laypeople for this trend, because us organists started this trend when we viewed the church's organ as our own personal little plaything, to tinker with and alter for our sole benefit. In the late-nineteenth-century when this concept was better understood, the three main cathedral organs and "gems" of Toronto organ-building—the Warren organs at St. James of 1853 and 1889, St. Michael's of 1880, and Metropolitan Methodist (later United) of 1876—were all architected alongside their respective buildings to serve as exemplars of the best of Canadian craftsmanship, of the Canadian Christian identity, and as the musical equivalent to their Gothic Revival architecture. Just as the high altar, baptistry, tabernacle, or pulpit are carefully crafted to serve their function within the overall space without unduly standing out, so did the organ, and whether one visually inspected the façade and casework or listened to the sounds the instrument would produce, one would not think it out of keeping with the overall identity of the church and congregation. Sadly, this thinking is no longer common, and two of the aforementioned organs are no longer with us. However, I believe that this thought is no less relevant today than in 1880, 1680, or 300 A.D.

The first organ which served St. Olave's was constructed by Charles Sumner Warren, son of the legendary Canadian organ-builder Samuel Russell Warren, around the turn of the century. As I mentioned, Warren's musical aesthetic was drawn from the same sources as those which inspired Gothic Revival buildings such as our own, from the mid-nineteenth-century revival of artistry in North American religion that accompanied the liturgical revival. Aesthetically, this was congruent and made a great deal of sense.

Good-quality organs can last a century or more without major repairs; I think we fail to appreciate this in Canada where most of our major churches were built less than two hundred years ago. There is an 1898 Warren organ in Stratford, and an 1898 instrument by another Canadian builder in St. Paul's Basilica near Regent Park, and both have only been overhauled once in their lifetime. The organ at St. Olave's had been overhauled in 1941 when it was moved to the church from its old home, and yet somehow was in major disrepair by 1962. When they met, vestry decided to move ahead with the acquisition of an all-new replacement instrument.

After searching around for a contractor and soliciting three bids, the organ committee decided on the Keates Organ Company. Before it was even installed, the congregation was assured by multiple organists that it would be an amazing instrument, solely by looking at the list of stops. By analogy, this is as if you asked a car enthusiast to help you find a new daily driver for the next fifteen years, and he made his recommendation solely on the top speed and horsepower rating. And thus the congregation spent almost twice the estimated cost to rebuild the Warren (which was the pinnacle of quality in its day) to purchase the Keates organ which still stands above our chancel today, with the first notes being sounded a hair over sixty years ago in December of 1963.

I do not fault the congregation and corporation for this. They made the best decision they could have with the advice they were given, and if I were in their position I probably would have made the same choice. But the ramifications of that advice have not proven beneficial, and they would directly affect the church's ability to repair and maintain its own instrument.

To paraphrase one of the organbuilders who was asked to consult on this matter, the Keates organ was essentially designed to enter into decay without anyone being able to enter it. The layout is so cramped that it is almost impossible to access anything for regular preventative maintenance. Many systems of the organ are not designed to last and will frequently fail regardless of how much money is poured into them. Some are proprietary and undocumented, and almost impossible to diagnose without total replacement. Unfortunately, what repairs have been made to the organ since 1963 have often been done unprofessionally, and the work hidden away where the congregation cannot see it. There are also many life-limited components made of leather that can usually last forty or maybe fifty years; we are past sixty years on those components, and they have already started to fail. These in particular are a tremendous amount of money to repair, and they may catastrophically give way, silencing the organ.

I presented all of this to St. Olave's corporation last August after researching the subject for almost six months. My conclusion, shared with that of the organbuilders who surveyed the instrument, was that most of the instrument would need to be replaced in any rebuild to extend its life. In other words, except for a limited number of components, we would essentially be creating a new instrument. Therefore, St. Olave's corporation has decided to take action sooner rather than later, and has authorized the creation of an organ committee whose mandate is to evaluate the viability of the various paths we might take in the future.

As we look forward to the next decades and beyond, I am not interested in placing the congregation of 2084 in the same position we are currently in. Therefore, there are a few ground rules that will guide our work. One is that the instrument must be built to last, with solid materials and components throughout, and should be laid out in a way that makes it easy to access and maintain. Another is that it must fit the identity of the church's architecture and the space as a whole. Acquiring an instrument that is in accord with who we are and who we aspire to be is a key tenet of this endeavour. Following these principles will likely result in a smaller instrument than we currently have. However, if properly crafted, it has the potential to be much more unique and compelling, with each pipe having more individual character. An investment like this will ignite new interest in St. Olave's from the new generation of organists and organ enthusiasts, and give our parish something unique and special to be proud of. Most importantly, it will be a responsible investment that serves the needs of the church and its entire community.

Around us, churches have lately been asking themselves, "Are we planning to stick around?" I believe that St. Olave's has unequivocally voted "yes" to this question, and decided to invest heavily in its future, launching many initiatives that will carry us well into the century. Over the last fourteen months, I have been privileged to bear witness to how closely the parish holds its traditions and fights for their importance well into the future. I hope that my work on this project is a suitable contribution to that goal.



*Figure 1: Damaged pipework on the west facade chest.*



*Figure 2: Unsupported collapsing reed pipes in the Swell Organ chest.*



*Figure 3: Unsupported and cramped larger pipes in the Swell Organ chest.*



*Figure 4: Poor-quality wiring underneath the Choir Organ chest.*



*Figure 5: A repair to a wind trunk made with a file folder and plank of wood leftover from a nearby repair.*

## ST. OLAVE'S ORGAN COMMITTEE 2024

*The Director of Music:*

Jeremy Tingle (chair)

*A choir member:*

Aden Shapland (secretary)

*Members of the congregation:*

Cathy Hutcheon

Carol Drummond

*Members of clergy:*

The Rev. Dr. Jim Leatch

The Rev. Dr. Pearce James Carefoote

*A member of corporation:*

Janice Douglas

*A musical tenant of St. Olave's:*

Alexander Cappellazzo

*The Rector:*

The Rev. Canon Robert J. Mitchell (ex officio)

*External advisors:*

Dr. Kevin Komisaruk, Professor of Organ at the University of Toronto (2003–)

Adrian Ross, Titular Organist of Tres-Saint-Nom-de-Jésus, Montréal (2022–)