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Dean's Message
A Christmas Carol

What sweeter music can we bring
Than a carol for to sing
The birth of Christ, our heavenly King?

Many of us will be familiar with the direct simplicity of Robert Herrick’s poem and its eloquent musical setting by John Rutter. The work was commissioned in 1987 for the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols held in King’s College Chapel, Cambridge. The service has been offered each Christmas Eve since 1918 and broadcast live since 1928. Sir Stephen Cleobury was director of music at King’s from 1982 until 2019 and passed away this year on November 22, Saint Cecilia’s Day. He was a prodigious conductor, organist, choir trainer, and teacher, and I was fortunate enough to learn a great deal from him while an undergraduate at Cambridge University.

Stephen last directed the King’s College Choir in New York City at Saint Thomas Church as part of their East Coast tour earlier this year, with many NYCAGO Chapter members in attendance. The choir sounded as thrilling and precise as ever. One of his most significant contributions to the Nine Lessons and Carols service was the inclusion of contemporary music, much of which was commissioned especially for the Choir. Composers such as James MacMillan, Judith Weir, Arvo Pärt, Stephen Paulus, and Harrison Birtwistle all wrote music for the service.

It is extraordinary to think just what an influence the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols has had on organists, choir directors, singers, congregations, and audiences alike. It will come as a surprise to some that the tradition is not actually that old. Christmas then was, as it is nowadays, as much a secular celebration as a religious holiday. Carols likely derive from medieval “caroles,” secular pieces that frequently included dancing. They would have been
associated with the Christian festivals of Christmas and Easter but not sung in churches as part of a religious ceremony. In the latter part of the nineteenth century Christmas carols began to be incorporated into the various Christmas services, and, in 1880, Truro Cathedral in the west of England hosted the first service of Nine Lessons and Carols in the form that many of us would recognize today. In 1918 the Dean of King’s College, Cambridge, Eric Milner-White introduced this pattern to the Chapel. His intention was to attract people back to church following the atrocities of the First World War. Suffice it to say, the radio broadcast nowadays has close to 400 million listeners, and the Chapel and its Choir have become recognized throughout the world.

Stephen Cleobury’s life may have seemed glamorous and lime-lit when viewed through the impressive television productions of Carols from Kings, or the meticulously recorded radio broadcasts. But it was his sense of dedication, tenacity, modesty, and immaculately refined craftsmanship that defined his musical career. For those of us performing throughout churches and concert halls this December, may Stephen’s life be an inspiring example of service to organ and choral music.

Merry Christmas, blessed Hanukkah, and a happy New Year to you all!

James

James Kennerley, Dean
Many thanks to John Bishop, editor extraordinaire of this newsletter since May 2016. His sense of style, professionalism, and camaraderie has done much to elevate this to the impressive publication that we enjoy today. Thank you, John! I am particularly grateful to James Wetzel for taking over John's duties in the new year, as well as to our dedicated and meticulous proofreaders. (Photo credit: Portland Press Herald)
Program News

The Chapter celebrated Saint Cecilia's feast day with a wonderful gathering at Saint Michael's Church on West 99th Street. Many thanks to John Cantrell, our host, and to the members of the program committee who made it such a successful evening, particularly Larry Long who organized the reception.

December is an organist’s harvest time, when all of the preparation of the preceding weeks and months blossoms into numerous services and concerts. Part of the Chapter’s responsibility is to encourage its members to attend not only those events we sponsor, but also those put on by our colleagues. That is why we always leave a gap in the Chapter’s programming in December (so that we can focus on performing and attending) and in January (so that we can recover). To that end, visit our chapter's Concert Calendar for events in the area, and be sure your own are listed. VocalAreaNetwork is also a useful resource for local choral concerts.

In the coming months, you will receive more detailed information about the spring events, but please do remember that our annual Presidents’ Day Conference on Monday, February 17, 2020 is quickly approaching. We will spend the day at Temple Emanu-El on Fifth Avenue at 65th Street.

The staff organists Jack Coen, Daniel Beckwith, and Andrew Henderson will open the day with a shared recital demonstrating the magnificent sanctuary organ. Peter Richard Conte, the Wanamaker Grand Court Organist and one the most admired organists active today, will conclude the conference with a silent movie accompaniment in the afternoon. In between, we will hear lectures about the Temple’s musical history and tour the historic campus. As always, it is free to all NYCAGO members. Stay tuned for more.

In the meantime, wishing you all a very blessed and fruitful Advent, I am,

Sincerely,
James D. Wetzel, Sub Dean and Chair of the Program Committee

Link to register for all choir dates: https://balanceartscenter.as.me/bac-choir
Link to register for drop-in dates: https://balanceartscenter.as.me/bac-choir-drop-in

Quote of the Month

"There are two means of refuge from the miseries of life: music and cats."
- Albert Schweitzer
Won't you be my neighbor?

Mr. Skinner goes to New York.

November 25th was the fifty-ninth anniversary of the death of Ernest Martin Skinner. His parents were traveling musicians, and he was born in Clarion, Pennsylvania in 1866, presumably in a rented room in a boarding house or a simple inn. The family settled in West Somerville, Massachusetts, and Ernest worked as a “shop boy” in the organ workshop of George Ryder in Reading, Massachusetts. His first substantive work as an organbuilder was in the shop of George Hutchings, one of Boston’s leading firms. He started as a beginner and was gradually raised to the ultimate position as factory superintendent. In that capacity he was deeply involved in the creation of the monumental 1897
Geo. S. Hutchings instrument at the Basilica and Shrine of our Lady of Perpetual Health (The Mission Church) in Boston.

The firm Ernest M. Skinner & Co. was formed in 1901, and the first Skinner organ was completed for the Unitarian Church of Ludlow, Vermont. On July 18, 1902, The Vermont Tribune reported that it was “a handsome instrument, not gaudy or showy, but neat and attractive.” I suppose that made it just about right for Vermont Unitarians in 1902. Anything gaudy could have led to dancing.

In 1903, Mr. Skinner entered into partnership with James Cole, a brief excursion that produced only a few organs. In 1904, Ernest M. Skinner & Co. was revived and renamed as Ernest M. Skinner company in 1905. It was reorganized again in 1919 under the name of the Skinner Organ Company. In 1932, the Skinner Organ Company and the Aeolian Company combined and Aeolian-Skinner was born.

The first Skinner organ built for New York City was Opus 113 for the Evangelical Church of the Holy Trinity on Central Park West at 66th Street. It was the last contract of the Skinner & Cole Organ Company, Skinner bought the contract and installed the organ in 1903. It was replaced in 1929 by Skinner Organ Company Opus 785 which was later rebuilt twice by Aeolian-Skinner (Opus 785-A in 1951 and 785-B in 1962).

From 1903 until the formation of Aeolian-Skinner in 1932, Ernest Skinner’s company under the various names produced 58 organs for churches in New York City. Brooklyn, New York is listed separately in the Skinner Opus List, so I assume that those 58 organs included Manhattan, Bronx, Queens, and Staten Island. This is not carefully researched; I simply went through the Opus List with a pencil in hand, counting the entries for New York, New York. Most were for churches, a few were for concert halls (notably Town Hall) and schools (Juilliard), several were for Skinner showrooms, plenty for private residences, and at least one for a yacht.

Opus 786 was built in 1929 for the yacht owned by Col. E.A. Deeds, with two manuals and nine ranks. It was a continuation of the good Colonel’s appreciation of Skinner organs, as two years earlier, he had purchased Opus 675 (two manuals and eleven ranks) for his Manhattan home.
Having brought 58 organs to New York in a span of 30 years qualifies Mr. Skinner as a neighbor. On the anniversary of his death, we remember the exceptional influence he had on the art of the American pipe organ. He was the first to conscientiously standardize the consoles of his organs, thinking hard about the complex dimensions and how they related to the human body decades before the word *ergonomic* joined the lexicon. He gave us the pitman windchest, and the first combination actions with “Set” buttons. He gave us the Erzähler and the French Horn, and he developed a style that many organists would recognize blindfolded.

There is no measuring the impact Ernest Skinner had on the history of the pipe organ. He and his French predecessor Aristide Cavaillé-Coll invented the modern organ, Cavaillé-Coll festooning the consoles of his large organs with pneumatic gadgets to assist the organist, and Skinner creating the marriage between the organ and electricity.

Ernest Martin Skinner was well into his nineties at the time of his death. By that time, the revival of classic styles of organ building was well under way, and he watched with dismay as many of his instruments were “improved” by attempts to convert them with that trend. And Aeolian-Skinner revamped many of Mr. Skinner’s organs as the American Classic pipe organ evolved.

It’s poignant to notice how many Skinner organs are now being faithfully restored to Mr. Skinner’s ideals. Well done, Mr. Skinner. Thanks for coming to New York.

*Biographical information from *The Life and Work of Ernest Skinner* by Dorothy Holden, published by the Organ Historical Society in 1987. Additional information derived from the Skinner Archives. You can visit and riffle through them at *http://aeolianskinner.organhistoricalsociety.net/opus-lists2.html*. 
Joke of the Month

Rudolph Louis was the music critic of the Münchener Neueste Nachrichten in the early twentieth century, and he was not a fan of the music of Max Reger. On February 7, 1906, Louis wrote a review of the February 2 premier of Reger's Sinfonietta in A Major, Opus 90. Reger replied by letter: "Ich sitze in dem kleinsten Zimmer in meinem Hause. Ich habe Ihre Kritik vor mir. Im nächsten Augenblick, wird sie hinter mir sein!"

("I'm sitting in the smallest room in my house. I have your review before me. In a moment, it will be behind me.")

From the Editor

There comes a time when one sees the need to realign priorities and responsibilities. My work and travels as director of the Organ Clearing House and organ consultant have expanded in the last few years, and the addition of new writing projects have made it clear that I need to leave the work as editor of this newsletter. This is my last issue.

I'm grateful to have this opportunity to share thoughts and experiences. I'm grateful for the invitation from past Dean David Enlow to start the work, and for the support of Dean James Kennerley and Sub-Dean James Wetzel, who will be editor starting with the next issue.

As we all prepare for the Christmas season with its mixture of complicated schedules, heavy work loads, and joyful performing, I offer this meditation I wrote several years ago. It's more than a little autobiographical. When my son Christopher (who with his brother Michael sang faithfully in the choir I led in Lynnfield, Massachusetts) read it, he commented, "Anyone who's been to Centre Church at Christmas would recognize this."

As I reread it, I remember the faces and most of the names of the characters. The September planning session happened in low chairs on Old Silver Beach
in Falmouth, Massachusetts, the only meeting of the year when staff meeting dress code included bathing suits.

Perhaps others of you have had similar moments.

**An AGO Christmas Meditation**
'Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the nave Parents were hissing, “Sit still and behave. We won’t drag you back here again until Easter, So quiet your mouth and sit down on your keester.”

A boy in a shepherd suit fastens his sandals, The ushers are frantically handing out candles. One says to the other, “I think this is crazy. Each Christmas we do this – our thinking is hazy. This beautiful building's a hundred years old. We work all year long doing just as we’re told To take care of the place. We treat it like gold.

“But one night a year we go out of our minds, The people walk in here – they’re fools of all kinds. We give them a smile, our best Christmas cheer, Then we give them a torch – will it happen this year? I’ve been saying in meetings that this has to stop, We’re asking for trouble, it’s over the top. At least we should quit with the kids in the choir. Just one of them trips and we’ll have a big fire.”

A family arrives in a swirl of good cheer, (it seems they drink eggnog just once every year!) The father resplendent in holiday dress, (Plaid pants, red carnation, an old green felt vest) Comes through the front door and trips on the sill. His wife shoots a dagger – that look that could kill. He spots an old friend across the big room, Hasn’t seen him since April (when Christ left the tomb). He bellows a greeting in well-oiled voice. The friend only grunts ‘cause he’s here not by choice.

The Pastor in robes is outwardly merry. He’s proud of himself, had just one glass of sherry.
The day’s been a long one – first show was at seven.
  He’s running on fumes now at ten 'till eleven.
His mind is well filled with plans for the service,
  But a thought passes through that makes him feel nervous.
He remembers a box back at home in the attic,
  He bought it himself 'cause his son’s a fanatic
For moving at speed. So some time before six
  His hands will be bleeding. He'll run out of tricks.
A shiny new bike should be built before morning,
  But he wonders just what will go wrong without warning.
This job that he loves takes control of his life,
  He yearns for more quality time with his wife.
Each year at Christmas this problem gets worse.
  His family life shifts for two weeks to reverse.

The flower committee did it big time this year.
  They drafted their husbands who worked without fear
On ladders and stools with nails and hammerous,
  The wives were so proud that it made them feel amorous.
Wreaths and fresh garlands stretched here, there, and far,
  The whole thing topped off by a fake natal star.
The organ façade was covered with greens,
  And ribbons and sparkles of various sheens.
It was tricky to fasten that stuff to the pipes,
  “Just a few little holes couldn’t hurt, holy cripes.”

The R.E. director lassoes the great crowd
  Of donkeys and angels and kings with heads bowed.
They huddle together and practice the script
  And try not to laugh when a shepherd gets tripped.
Joseph pipes up that his costume is ripped.

The organist sits by himself on the stair,
  He cradles his face in his hands in despair.
He wonders what force dragged him in to this mess.
  But he knows deep inside that he has to confess
That part of the plan for this night was his work.
  The love of the pageant – a personal quirk.

It started last fall, in early September,
  He had an idea, a smoldering ember.
The staff went away for its planning retreat,
   They sat by the waves, hot sand under their feet.
Each one of them brainstormed when asked by the pastor,
   The silly ideas came faster and faster.
They developed a plan that they thought they could master.
   Not one of them saw it could cause a disaster.

Eleven o’clock, the hour appointed,
   But we can’t start yet – the crowd’s still disjointed.
The ushers encourage the folks to the pews,
   “The wise men are waiting and so are the ewes.
If we can’t get started we’ll never get finished,
   The later it gets, the more joy gets diminished.”

A ten past the hour the signal light blinks.
   The prelude is ended, the organist thinks
About how to arrive in the key of G major.
   From where he is now, this is nothing but danger.

But suddenly, somehow it happened like magic.
   *They came, all those faithful,* and nothing was tragic.
An improvised intro that sounded just glorious,
   Including a hint of a descant notorious.
The choir appeared in the aisle like a vision
   With nary a hint of rehearsal derision.
The chorus of creatures in costumes a-flowing
   Were following suit, their faces were glowing.
The last verse with harmonies rich and appealing
   Concluded – the church was in silence revealing
A beautiful scene – a well honed tableau,
   Outside, in the dark, it started to snow.

A moment of silence, and then invocation,
   A reading, an anthem, a psalm incantation.
A carol, and then the Luke-based Christmas sermon,
   Not even the littlest donkey was squirming.
The pageant was next – parents’ eyes starting tearing.
   The kids DID speak up, so the people were hearing
The young tuneful voices with words full of meaning
   While camels and oxen and sheep sat there preening.
One kid whispered, “Mommy, it’s not even boring.”
There was no other sound save the vested man’s snoring.

At the end of the story the lights were turned down.
And a pretty young angel in flowing white gown
Lit a candle. And under the gaze of that usher,
All candles were lit, and the hush became husher.
A shimmering sound from enclosed Unda Maris,
A note from the chimes, and the prayerful parish
Began to sing quietly, then gradually swelling
*Silent Night, Holy Night*, the old story retelling.

We work all year long, way down in the trenches,
Sometimes it seems the gears fill up with wrenches.
Holiday times can bring out great frustration
But you shouldn’t forget that all through the nation
Your colleagues are sharing the work of the season.
The planning. The practice. Remember the reason.
Your talents have been freely given as gifts;
In order to hone them, you work double shifts.
Then freely and humbly you offer them back
To the folks in your church. So stay on the track.
Keep up your strength, keep your eye on the prize,
And give to the parish a Christmas surprise.

Come Rutter, come Willcocks, come Benjamin Britten
Composers of anthems with which we are smitten.
Come T. Tertius Noble, come William Matthias,
Come writers of music that’s stirring and pious.
There’s no better way to receive Virgin Mary
Than with music by Bach and C. Hubert H. Parry.

The service is ended, the candles are snuffed,
The fear of a fire once more is rebuffed.
The blower is off now, the costumes are shed,
The angels and donkeys and cows are in bed.
The choir room table is covered with piles
Of music that brought all those holiday smiles.

The pastor’s son’s bike gleams bright in the hall,
And finally the parking lot’s closed at the mall.
The man with the funny green vest is in bed
While visions of sugarplums dance in his head!

The AGO member now turns off the light,
“Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night.”

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