The New York City Chapter  
of the  
American Guild of Organists  
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Dean’s Message

Chapter Awards

The Chapter received the excellent news that honorary member and 2012 winner of the International Performer of the Year Award, Thomas Trotter, has been awarded Her Majesty’s Medal for Music for the year 2020 by the Queen of England. The award is presented annually to an outstanding individual or group of musicians, and was first presented to conductor, Sir Charles Mackerras. The Royal press release made mention of the Chapter’s award, and it served as a further reminder of the importance of our work as representing the very best of the pipe organ, its artists, and its music.

Commenting on the award, the Master of The Queen’s Music, Judith Weir, said: “This year’s medal salutes a world-famous organist who has done so much to widen and brighten the realm of this great instrument. Thomas Trotter’s series of regular recitals over four decades as Birmingham City Organist is an inspiring example of
civic engagement for all performing musicians.” Bravo, Thomas!

The International Performer of the Year Award was established in 1978 as a visionary way of reaching out beyond the Chapter community to a wider audience who share a love of organ music. The first awardee, Robert Noehren (1910-2002), long-time Head of the Organ Department at the University of Michigan, gave a concert in celebration of the occasion on the Kuhn Organ at Lincoln Center’s Alice Tully Hall. At the conclusion of the recital, Alice Tully herself presented Mr. Noehren with a handsome silver bowl in recognition of the award. Since then, some twenty organists representing a veritable “who’s who” of the international organ world have taken the stage at Tully Hall and various churches to present a concert in acceptance of their award. The twenty-first century alone has seen the award presented to some of the most stunning keyboard artists: Joan Lippincott, Daniel Roth, Thomas Trotter, Stephen Tharp, Gerre Hancock, Olivier Latry, John Weaver, and Fred Swann.

In 2015 when I was chair of the Awards Committee, then-Dean David Enlow, his wife Loraine, and I were thinking about ways to expand the scope of the IPYA. Several cocktails later, the idea of the Distinguished Career Award was born, and subsequently presented to the board for approval. The award seeks to recognize those individuals who have given exemplary service to the fields of organ music, choral music, and related fields. Diane Bish was the first awardee, in 2016, when she gave a marvelous concert at Marble Collegiate Church. Dear friend and longtime webmaster for the Chapter, Steve Lawson, was awarded the DCA posthumously in 2018 in recognition for, among other things, his extraordinary NYC Organ Project. It is awarded in alternate years with the IPYA.

Due to the COVID-related social distancing requirements, we have been unable to present our two most recent awardees, Joan Lippincott (2019 International Performer of the Year) and Larry Trupiano (2020 Distinguished Career Award), with their respective accolades. As a social-distance-appropriate substitute, 2020 Chapter Directory designer, Len Levasseur, came up with a superb set of articles (assisted by the ever-resourceful Bill van Pelt, archivist for the Organ Historical Society). If you have not seen them, click here for PDF versions. Both Joan and Larry have given and continue to give so much to our community through their remarkable careers, and we hope that these awards are but a small part in recognizing that.

Merry Christmas, Happy Hanukkah, and a Happy New Year to you all.

With my best wishes,

James Kennerley, Dean
Program News

December 2020

Recital at Saint Thomas Church
Saturday, December 5th – 3 PM

Saint Thomas’s Associate Organist Nicolas Haigh will play Messiaen’s *La Nativité du Seigneur* on the Miller-Scott Organ. Arguably the most distinctive and progressive voice in twentieth-century French music, and certainly the most significant organist-composer of any nationality since Bach, Olivier Messiaen is best known for this cycle of nine pieces depicting the Nativity of the Lord.

This event is presented as part of the Concerts at Saint Thomas 2020-2021 season. For more information and to view the recital, click [here](#).

Spring 2021

The NYCAGO’s dual series of virtual programming, *Pipe Organs of NYC* and *Behind the Pipes: Organ Building in NYC*, will be on winter break until Monday, January 18 at 7 PM.

All of the prior videos in these series have been archived on our [YouTube Channel](#) for later viewing.

Please email suggestions and comments for the Program Committee [here](#).

Bulletin Board

Atlantic City Boardwalk Organ Recording

A new professional recording, the first since 1998, has been issued from the Atlantic City Boardwalk Hall. *Deck the Hall* is a holiday extravaganza featuring eight organists, including Wanamaker Grand Court Organist Peter Richard Conte. The CD explores the vast tonal resources of both the Midmer-Losh organ in the main arena and the W.W. Kimball organ in the Adrian Phillips Theater. For more information, visit [boardwalkorgans.org](http://boardwalkorgans.org).

Coronavirus Relief Fund

The Chapter is providing an emergency relief fund for current members of the Chapter (all categories, including dual membership) financially affected by the Coronavirus and its aftermath. Funds will be allocated on a first-come basis up to a total of $350 per person. Applications and disbursements will be handled as discretely as possible. Please email Claudia Dumschat with your request.
Send Bulletin Board submissions to the editor for publication.

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**Member News**

**Award**

Thomas Trotter (2012 International Performer of the Year Awardee) has been named recipient of The Queen’s Medal for Music 2020. [Click here for more details.](#)

Submit news items (professional appointments, retirements, marriages, births, obituaries, etc.) to the editor for publication.

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**From the Editor**

**Transcriptions**

**From the Start**

Transcriptions have been a part of the organist’s repertory since the earliest days when Renaissance motets and consort pieces were played at the keyboard. When we perennially play *Wachet auf*, BWV 645, we remember that even Bach, whose inventive genius was seemingly limitless, nevertheless repurposed cantata movements as organ preludes. As the style of instrumental music changed drastically over the course of the nineteenth century, new symphonic pipe organs, replete with solo voices and technological assists, facilitated not just increasingly orchestral organ compositions, but ever more dynamic transcriptions as well. In the company of Englishmen William Thomas Best (1826-1897) and Edwin Henry Lemare (1865-1934) and with instruments such as those in the municipal halls of [Portland, Maine](#) and [Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania](#), the first golden age of organ transcriptions reached its apogee.

**Transition and Rebirth**
In the succeeding decades of the twentieth century, the periti did to transcriptions (and the organs that suited them) what they did to so many things of beauty: convinced people that they were worthless or even degenerate. Now the pendulum has swung yet again and transcriptions are no longer a naughty indulgence, but a staple of many organists’ repertoire. This is borne out in the international careers of Thomas Murray, Peter Richard Conte, David Briggs, Stephen Tharp, Cameron Carpenter, and the like, as well as by organists in parish churches the country over. Thankfully, too, symphonic organs are once again finding appreciation.

**Anecdotal Evidence**

A number of submissions to *Pipe Organs of NYC* have been transcriptions. (Keep them coming!) That an organist, when asked to proffer a representative video of his artistry, would choose a transcription over, say, Widor or Vierne, is an indication of how far things have come since mid-century. Orchestral works tend to show off the whole histrionic range of an organ in one brief sitting, making them ideal for the attention span of an online viewer. Plus, the extended techniques (double-pedaling, thumbing-down, piston-pushing, etc.) add an engaging visual component.

**Everyone is always blathering on about how to connect with people**

...but they are right.

The proclivity of the prewar organist for transcription was partially due to the growing public interest in orchestral music; even at a time when philharmonic societies were being formed by the dozen, as they were in the twenty years either side of 1900, one’s accessibility to an orchestra capable of performing contemporary music—Brahms or Bruckner—was limited, both geographically and financially. Thus the organ offered the satiation of that desire for a public that could not yet turn to high-fidelity records or broadcasts. But the tables have turned. Proficient orchestras abound and recordings of almost every imaginable symphonic work are available at the click of a mouse. All the while, the organ no longer enjoys its once-prominent position in church, in civic life, in entertainment, even in shopping. However, the art of transcription is alive and well. Why? They are fun and challenging to create, make for enjoyable listening, and are often more accessible and recognizable to an audience than some desiccated piece of Scheidt.

As organists contemplate how to grow our audience, may I suggest that transcriptions are a *porta caeli*—or gateway drug, if you prefer? The organ once helped introduce John Q. Public to the orchestra. Now the orchestra can help draw people to the organ. Chances of a layman off the street “connecting” with Tom Murray’s *In the Hall of the Mountain King* or Cameron Carpenter’s *Sleigh Ride* are (without out assigning a relative value judgement or denigrating those talented organists who eschew transcriptions) much higher than with a Bach fugue or a Franck *Choral*, no matter how perfectly constructed, well registered, or sensitively interpreted the latter may be. Something to consider as you choose between Mendelssohn’s *Overture to Saint Paul* and Distler’s Opus 8, No. 2 this Advent.

**A Personal Postlude**
May I conclude this final column of 2020, on the heels of Thanksgiving, with a personal line of thanks? Since taking on this editorship, I have treated these epistles as I do my voluntaries at Mass: with as much care as possible, but with the nagging suspicion that they garner little attention from the intended audience. However, I was buoyed by the number of responses I received from November's rather tart missive—and mostly positive ones at that. So at least nine people read this thing. That's not nothing!

Wishing you all a very Merry Christmas and a peaceful conclusion to a challenging year, may I remain,

Sincerely,

James D. Wetzel, Sub Dean

Robert M. Thompson
Favorite Hymn Settings
for the Church Year
for Organ
Volume I • Advent

Contents
ABERNYTWYTH “Watchman, Tell Us of the Night” • WACHET AUF “Sleepers, Wake!”
CHESTERFIELD/RICHMOND “Hark the Glad Sound! The Savior Comes!” • TRURO “Lift Up Your Heads”
N. HOLLAND, REV. “Die Himmel auf” “O Heavenly Word, Eternal Light”
PICARDY “Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence” • HELMSEY “Lo! He Comes, with Clouds Descending”
BERNHARD VÅG FÖR HERMAN “Prepare the Way, O Zion” • ELLACOMBE “Hail to the King’s Anointed”
MIT FREUEN ZART “Lord Christ, When First You Came to Earth”
STUTTGART “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus” • ANGEL’S MESSAGE “The Angel Gabriel”
VENI, VENI, EMMANUEL “Oh Come, Oh Come, Emmanuel”
FLER NOBIS “On Jordan’s Bank the Baptist’s Cry” • BESANÇON “People, Look East”

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Getting to Know You
Radio City Music Hall
**Introduction**

According to Rockettes’s [website](https://www.rocketsnews.com), more than 75 million people have seen their *Christmas Spectacular*. And that only accounts for two months of the Hall’s very busy year. Part of the unforgettable, high-kicking experience has always been the mighty Wurlitzer organ greeting the audience. Indeed, an outline of the original staging from 1933, produced by Leon Leonidoff in collaboration with designer Vincente Minnelli (yes, *that* Vincente Minnelli), specifically mentions an organ solo.

I would posit that this instrument is the most widely heard instrument in the City by several magnitudes. Even the Kilgen down the block at Saint Patrick’s Cathedral does not reach the ears of that many tourists. So since the 2020 show has been canceled, here is a look at the Music Hall’s organ.

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**General Information**

The plot of land now occupied by the Radio City Music Hall was intended for a new Metropolitan Opera house as conceived by architect John R. Todd, although plans were canceled in 1929. (The MET would eventually leave its original 1883 home on Broadway at 39th Street for Lincoln Center in 1966.) Following the Stock Market crash, the developers pursued a deal with the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) to establish a complex for entertainment and broadcasting—hence the name “Radio City.” Of the initially proposed four, two Art Deco-style theaters were built as part of a revised scheme: the 5,960-seat Radio City Music Hall which opened on December 27, 1932. The 3,500-seat Center Theatre, which opened two days later down Sixth Avenue at 49th Street, proved unsuccessful, was
demolished 1954, and was replaced with a 19-story addition to the U.S. Rubber Company Building. (Construction of Rockefeller Center, with Saint Patrick’s in the foreground, is pictured here.)

Samuel Roxy Rothafel was the impresario who oversaw the project, in cooperation with architect Edward Durell Stone and interior designer Donald Deskey. Hildreth Meiere, having just completed mosaic work at Temple Emanu-El and Saint Bartholomew’s, designed the Hall’s exterior roundels. (“Song,” from the Hall’s 50th Street facade, is pictured here.) Incidentally, Lee Lawrie, another ecclesiastical artist who designed the reredos of Saint Thomas Church and the exterior crucifix of Saint Vincent Ferrer, created Atlas, the bronze statue facing Saint Patrick’s in front of the International Building.

Radio City Music Hall has hosted numerous forms of assembly throughout its history, including live theater, movies (with many premieres), awards ceremonies, comedy specials, television broadcasts, sporting events, and graduation exercises. But of course it is most closely associated with the annual Christmas Spectacular starring the Radio City Rockettes.

**Pipe Organs**

The Radio City Music Hall Wurlitzer organ is playable from two identical four-manual consoles which are completely independent of each other and can sustain separate registrations. The 58 ranks and 4,178 pipes of Opus 2179 are installed in eight chambers divided on either side of the stage. Rothafel had a relationship with the Kimball Organ Company, having contracted them to build three organs for his eponymous Roxy Theater just one block west on 50th Street. So they drew up the initial prospectus. However, the Wurlitzer Organ Company of North Tonawanda, New York was ultimately chosen, as it was the most highly recognized builder of theater organs at the time. Many aspects of the more traditional Kimball stop-list were retained, so the Radio City organ is truly one of a kind. The American Theatre Organ Society offers its overview of the instrument here. An article about restoration work on the Wurlitzer appeared in the *New York Times* in 1965, viewable here.

As just one example of this instrument’s enormously broad listenership, you can hear the organ (as well as see composer Jon Brion playing the stage right console) in the opening and closing credits of comedian John Mulaney’s stand-up special *Kid*
*Gorgeous*, filmed in the Hall. Mulaney even gave Brion a shout-out before his opening monologue and discussed the use of the organ in this [article](#). How many organs are lauded by a stand-up comedian?

Three other organs that were previously in Rockefeller Center were all Wurlitzers: a 3-maunal, 14-rank instrument in a sound studio on the fifth floor of R.C.M.H., a 4-manual, 34-rank [instrument](#) in the aforementioned Center Theatre (*pictured here*), and a 3-manual, 10-rank instrument in the Rainbow Room on the 65th floor of 30 Rockefeller Center.

**For more information:**

- [NYCAGO Organ Project](#)
- [Radio City Music Hall](#)
Quote of the Month

Noel: Christmas Eve, 1913

Pax hominibus bonae voluntatis

A frosty Christmas Eve
when the stars were shining
Fared I forth alone
where westward falls the hill,
And from many a village
   in the water’d valley
Distant music reach’d me
peals of bells aringing:
The constellated sounds
    ran sprinkling on earth’s floor
As the dark vault above
   with stars was spangled o’er.
Then sped my thoughts to keep
that first Christmas of all
When the shepherds watching
    by their folds ere the dawn
Heard music in the fields
    and marveling could not tell
Whether it were angels
    or the bright stars singing.

Now blessed be the tow’rs
   that crown England so fair
That stand up strong in prayer
unto God for our souls
Blessed be their founders
   (said I) an’ our country folk
Who are ringing for Christ
    in the belfries to-night
With arms lifted to clutch
    the rattling ropes that race
Into the dark above
    and the mad romping din.

But to me heard afar
   it was starry music
Angels’ song, comforting
   as the comfort of Christ
When he spake tenderly
   to his sorrowful flock:
The old words came to me
    by the riches of time
Mellow’d and transfigured
   as I stood on the hill
Heark’ning in the aspect
    of th’ eternal silence

~Robert Bridges (1844-1930)

This poem was used by Gerald Finzi (1901-1956) for his Christmas cantata for soloists, chorus, and orchestra, a masterpiece of the genre and one of Finzi’s last compositions. Click for notes about the work and a recording on YouTube.
NYCAGO Chapter Information

General Inquiries
Chapter Contacts Page
Chapter Committees and Appointments

Newsletter
James D. Wetzel, editor
The newsletter is published on the first of every month. Please submit all material (advertising, announcements, classifieds, etc.) to the editor by the 24th of the preceding month.

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The biographies of the board members are provided here.

Visit the NYCAGO Chapter website by clicking here.

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