

AN INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE TAYLOR

In September 2012 I had the opportunity to visit the workshop of *Taylor and Boody Organbuilders* in Staunton, Virginia, and take a peek at the penultimate stage in the construction of the large new organ for Grace Church in New York City. *George Taylor* kindly agreed to do an interview with me about this impressive project. I am very grateful to George for taking the time during a period of intense work, and for his thoughtful and insightful answers. – *Tilman Skowroneck*

1) Your Opus 65 for Grace Church is in the process of being installed. We can read on your website that this instrument is inspired by late 19th-century cathedral instruments. This seems to be an entirely new angle for Taylor & Boody. How did this project come to happen?

You are hardly the first to ask what was on our mind when we took on this project. People have come to expect the work from our shop to be based largely on historical models established prior to the 19th century. The new organ for Grace Church represents a bold departure for us, one that has forced us to leap out of our comfort zone and take a fresh perspective on tradition. In countless ways this organ is unique, not only for us, but in its own right. It is, as the British would put it, a “one off.”

The search for an organ began some twenty years ago with a series of reports about the condition of the 1965 Schlicker Organ and a study of the history of the Grace Church instruments. In connection with plans for a major restoration, Dana Kirkegaard was called in for advice on the improvement of the acoustics. When Patrick Allen was called as Organist and Master of Choristers in 2000 much work had already been done. Our own acquaintance with Patrick goes back to 1996 when we installed our Opus 27, a 22-stop organ at St. Thomas Church, where he was associate to Gerre Hancock.

2) What are the special challenges of this particular location for an organbuilder?

From the outset Patrick understood that designing the right organ for Grace would present daunting challenges, both technically and musically. The 1846 Gothic Revival church is a priceless landmark in the city. It is a beautiful architectural statement by the young visionary, James Renwick Jr., who, through the artful use of proportion and detail, created the illusion of a much larger

space than is there. Much of the interior is faux stone made of plaster and lath. Unfortunately, Renwick included precious little room for organ and choir, with the exception of the small rear gallery, big enough for the Erben and their musical forces. No need was foreseen or space provided for musicians at the front. This has plagued the church’s musicians and organbuilders ever since. The new organ will be the sixth instrument built for Grace Church, demonstrating the continual evolution of musical tastes and the search for the best location for choir and organ.



Taylor and Boody Op. 65 at Grace Church, New York City.
Photo: Robbie Lawson

3) What does the new organ need to be able to “do” in its daily life? Were there any design requirements?

As the idea of the new organ took shape, three goals emerged which helped to define the project. First, the primary purpose of the instrument would be to lead worship services and accompany the choirs. The Choir of Men and Boys was established and gave birth to the first Choir School in New York in 1894, and the Girls’

Choir in 1994. When the children are on holiday, a professional Adult Choir sings. The original Choir School has grown into a Private Episcopal School with weekly Chapel services in the Church accompanied by the organ. There is also an excellent community choral society of over 140 voices in residence at Grace Church. The organ's use in the performance of organ literature was a secondary concern. This freed the builder from rigid adherence to a particular national style or historical period. While one could draw much from the 19th-century English builders, other traditions were not excluded. The focus was, simply put, on accompanying the congregation and choir in the best Episcopal tradition as effectively as possible and supporting the daily musical life of the community. The organ is played six days a week as part of musical meditations that take place at the Church celebrating the repertoire of the organ.

Second, it was hoped that the heart of the new organ could for the first time be placed to better acoustical advantage in the room. Roosevelt & Skinner made noble attempts to solve the problem of choral accompaniment near the chancel, but both their organs suffered from being buried in an enormous deep chamber built outside the walls of the south aisle. When the Schlicker was

installed, the "front" organ was placed in this chamber, which had been made shallower to better project the sound of the instrument. To address the placement issue we proposed bringing the Great & Swell divisions into the chancel in two cases cantilevered through arches on either side of the choir. The result has been a marked improvement in the tonal presence of the new organ over its predecessors. Acoustically this is a sweet spot in the space, enhanced by the authentic limestone construction of the chancel.

Third, it was felt that the new organ should, where possible, reflect the long and rich tradition of Grace Church's music, full of nuance, grandeur and power. In our case, this meant we felt free to draw on the examples of previous builders to expand our tonal vocabulary. Honoring the musical stature of Grace Church in the city, the parish expected a large instrument with a wide variety of tonal colors and dynamic levels. Not all of these goals could be met in the limited space of the two chancel cases. It seemed therefore fitting that the powerful main pedal division (including three of its four 32' stops) and the Solo could be appropriately placed in the chamber without compromising their effectiveness. We decided it would be good stewardship and show respect for the skills of our predecessors to use some vintage pipes in the Solo. For example, the 1923 Austin strings are from Reinhold Niebuhr's Bethel Evangelical Church in Detroit, and the Orchestral Oboe 8' on the Solo is from E. M. Skinner. As for the bottom octave of Skinner's 32' Open Diapason installed in 1907, we chose to use it where it has always stood in the rear gallery.

Fourth, the organ was to have a mechanical playing action. With the exception of the largest pedal pipes and the two high-pressure reeds in the Solo, we have been able to meet this requirement. We have built an entirely modern, self-adjusting playing action with aluminum rollers and 2 miles of carbon fiber trackers.

4) One of the outstanding characteristics of this project seems to be its sheer scope. What are the special musical challenges of realizing such an organ?

With seventy-seven stops the organ is half again as large as any of our previous work. It has indeed tested each of us more than we could imagine. We are greatly relieved to see its completion in sight, but most of all to hear the sound of the organ unfolding beautifully as the voicing proceeds. The large scales of the Great principal chorus are filling the room in a most rewarding way and the string choruses of the Swell, where we were on un-



One half of Op. 65 in the workshop. Photo: Tilman Skowroneck

familiar ground, are surprising us in their warmth and character. We have designed a reed chorus that is fundamental, powerful and warm, perhaps one that E.M. Skinner would have approved (the specifications can be found at http://www.taylorandboody.com/opus_pages/opus_65/specification.html)

5) *After two years of workshop preparations, you are now on location, putting everything in place. What special logistical challenges did you have to overcome to make it all happen?*

We had intended to install the organ last summer, when there would have been little conflict with the church's schedule. However, extensive renovation of the church and the magnitude of the project prevented our arrival before fall. Because of the limited storage space in the historic building, we have delivered the organ in multiple shipments with our own trailer, so we have had little problem accommodating the church's schedule.

6) *When I visited your workshop in September, I heard that this grand project is not only bigger than, but in many ways different from earlier Taylor & Boody projects. I saw, for example, various technical solutions for the action that looked nifty and very modern. How do you decide on such matters? Is it the instrument's size, the use such an instrument is going to be put to, specifics of the location, or an instrument maker's sheer technical curiosity that guides the design of the action?*

Yes, technically speaking the Grace organ has many departures from our previous experience. The stop action is electrical and the console is detached. The wind system is based on 20th-century models with multiple reservoirs on various pressures located in the basement below the chancel. The size of the organ largely dictated our decision to take this route. Perhaps the most striking difference for us has been the many thousand hours of design required to fit such a huge instrument into a severely limited space, with the result that, unlike Renwick's church, the organ appears smaller than it is. We have overheard occasional parishioners discussing whether the organ has always been there or is in fact new.

7) *Will the experience with new materials and techniques make an impression on your following projects? Or is the decision about what materials and techniques to use strictly bound to the type of instrument being made?*



Chris Bono demonstrates some pipes.
Photo: Tilman Skowroneck

There has been worldwide interest in this project and quite some curiosity about how a builder who has up to now built largely 17th- and 18th-century North European organs might develop this wider tonal palette. It has been a demanding exercise and could well influence our future work. This doesn't mean that the firm won't continue to produce instruments as in the past, but our musical vocabulary has been increased. In the next couple of organs we look forward to returning to familiar territory with mechanical stop actions, attached keydesks and the traditional winding of wedge bellows.

8) *I am intrigued by a paragraph on your website (http://www.taylorandboody.com/opus_pages/opus_65/announce.html) where you explain what you call the "English Cathedral Temperament," especially because the explanation is in the future tense. What will the practical process of arriving at this temperament be?*

The reference to English Cathedral Temperament was, of course, a teaser. It has been customary to assume that when English builders broke with meantone in the early 19th century they then tuned in a purely equal temperament. However, there are references to the fact that in practice, once the temperament was laid, builders would go back and "sweeten the thirds." Just what this meant we do not know. Consequently, we have tried out a cou-

ple of our own interpretations of this sweetening. We then gave Patrick the opportunity to experiment with them on his house organ and our continuo organ in the chantry. After almost a year of playing there, both he and Stephen Tharp agreed on a version of equal temperament that was musically exciting and beautifully suited to the acoustic and responsibilities of the organ. It is interesting to point out that large spaces are much more forgiving of the shortcomings of equal temperament than smaller ones. We are pleased with the effect of this flexible temperament at Grace.

9) What does the planned timeframe look like from here on out? Is the inauguration date already set?

The Inauguration of The Bicentennial Organ, Opus 65 will take place on Friday, April 26 at 7:00 p.m. The Com-

bined Choirs of Grace Church will offer a special concert of anthems and hymns conducted by the church's long time friend Dr. Barry Rose. Patrick Allen will be at the organ. Final voicing, which cannot be completed by that time will continue in the weeks following. The church has showed unusual patience and understanding as we work to finish the organ in whatever time it takes. We greatly appreciate the trust given us by Patrick Allen, the Rector, The Rev. J. Donald Waring, and the Wardens, Vestry and people of Grace Church. During this period of economic stress while many organ building companies have wished for more substantial work, Taylor and Boody has been fortunate to be able work at maximum capacity building this major instrument.

Thank you very much for taking the time to answer these questions!

