



Amazing Grace

To provide a new organ in three sections connected by trackers instead of wires for a historic church in New York City was a tall order. **Jonathan Ambrosino** is impressed by how Taylor & Boody have risen to the challenge of a career. PHOTOS BY ROBBIE LAWSON

New York City has long been an incubator of the new. If we observe that fact more plainly in architecture, art and the theatre, organ builders and the musicians who inspire them have hardly remained immune. Consider Henry Erben at Trinity Wall Street in 1846; despite constant tussles with Bristolian transplant Edward Hodges, Erben still produced an organ with six-octave keyboards and novel disposition. Then came Jardine, with wild fan-shaped façades and interesting stoplists. Roosevelt tested electric action here in the 1870s, Hutchings and Skinner likewise in the 1890s and 1900s. Could the American Guild of Organists, founded in 1896, have begun in any other city?

Grace Church, just south of Union Square on Broadway, is the latest New York church to get an unusual instrument. Founded in 1808, the parish moved to an early Gothic-revival building by James Renwick in 1846, the same year Trinity Wall Street finished its iconic Gothic lodgings by Richard Upjohn. Where toney Manhattan parishes might receive a new organ every generation, Grace's evolution has been somewhat more sober. An 1830 Erben from the first building served the new church for 32 years, installed in the west gallery. In 1878 Hilborne Roosevelt completed 42 stops in a newly formed chancel chamber on his trademark tracker-pneumatic action. The brave part came in his introduction of electric action, linking gallery organ to chancel and, as a final adornment, providing a two-stop Echo – the very chest and pipes Roosevelt had proudly displayed at the 1876 Centennial Exposition.

A vested choir of men and boys was instituted in 1894 during the tenure of

James Helfenstein, along with a school to support them (still going strong, not limited to choristers). In a parish of long-tenured musicians, Ernest Mitchell's 1922-60 reign stands out. In the 1920s and 30s, church music pilgrims, initially swayed by the midtown lustre of T. Tertius Noble and David McK. Williams at St Thomas and St Bartholomew, inevitably headed downtown to seek out Mitchell's choir and organ playing. A 'crack player' in the words of George Faxon, Mitchell was a great friend of Canadian virtuoso Lynnwood Farnam at Holy Communion, a 15-minute

Where other Schlickers gained considerable acclaim, this pair never seemed to, and in time came to be seen as the wrong sort of approach for an edifice built not of stone and mortar, as Grace's appearance pretends, but of plaster and paint.

When Patrick Allen came to Grace in 2000, he began a long, slow search for a new organ. He considered everything and almost everyone: instruments new and old, dispositions of all sorts, a broad range of builders. In the process he arranged to have the 1928 Skinner console returned to Grace, and ordered a continuo organ from

The Great speaks a tonal dialect of pure Taylor & Boody: a sonorous baroque chorus, a razor-blade Seventeenth, and a clean trumpet family

walk from Grace. The two sight-read new Vierne and Dupré scores to each other, and Mitchell gave many American premieres at Grace.

As much as any church, Grace launched the career of Ernest Skinner. Beginning in 1902, Skinner provided a new gallery Solo, then a mobile console, then a 32ft open wood. A new chancel organ arrived in 1912, and in 1928 a bold gallery instrument, notable for a stripped-down, string-free specification, and a beautifully thought-out compact console, which set the pattern for double-organ control in the Skinner/Aeolian-Skinner canon.

The tastes of Mitchell's successor, Frank Cedric Smith, dictated the next instruments, two Schlickers completed in 1965. (Skinner's 32ft open wood remained in the gallery; originally voiced on six-inch wind, it now whimpered away on three.)

Taylor & Boody. When it arrived, a light bulb switched on. Why not them? When he introduced George Taylor and John Boody to the organ committee, Boody remarked, 'Why are we here?'

Why, indeed. The earliest disciples of John Brombaugh to set out on their own, George Taylor and John Boody established their shop in 1979, and soon earned a reputation as orthodox standard bearers in the early music organ movement. By 1985 they had built a *magnum opus* at Holy Cross College in Worcester, Massachusetts, four manuals looking eclectically to the 15th-17th centuries for inspiration. In the three decades since, they have held close to pattern, particularly as other tracker builders have strayed. Warmth of tone, dynamic restraint, balance, clarity, friendly key actions, excellence of execution, and a particular love affair with wood sum up the >

◀ Taylor & Boody ethos. The customer who pleads hard enough will receive a swell box, but Taylor & Boody seem more fired up by the possibilities of meantone tuning and sub-semitone keys, as in their fastidiously beautiful instrument for Yale University in 2007.

Surely they were as surprised as anyone to discover that they'd signed a contract for their Opus 65 at Grace Church. For here was to be an organ physically disposed in such a manner that seemed a folly for mechanical action: free-standing cases either side of a chancel, a remote Solo and Pedal in the old Roosevelt/Skinner chamber one side aisle away, the gallery 32ft open linked up electrically. And from

Taylor & Boody! The only thing missing was a French Horn. Organ plot twists don't come much better.

And yet, such is the persuasive power of Patrick Allen, whose breadth of knowledge and catholicity of taste is matched to a passion for accompanying the human voice at every stage. Allen brought a way of thinking about action, placement and tone that wasn't merely musically based and broadly informed; it was so kindly and earnestly felt that the builders found themselves swept along in fascination. The result is an instrument whose individual elements are plainly retrospective (every stop has its precedent) but whose overarching concept seems without forebear – save, perhaps, for John

Brombaugh's 1990 organ at Christ Church Christiana Hundred in Wilmington, Delaware, with its Willis-inspired Swell located next to, not above or behind, the key-desk and main case. But the technical challenges at Grace would be far greater, in an organ larger still, with a more integrated and considered form of eclecticism. It was an order as tall as a skyscraper.

Visually, the builders have kept the cases restrained. The mouldings hew to simple lines, and the real interest comes in their asymmetrical prospects. For the action, the solution came in the form of creating a common corridor underneath the two cases. Climate-controlled and roomy, this space contains the many single-rise reservoirs, coupler chassis and carbon-fibre tracker runs. The Solo and main Pedal trackers extend through a trough to reach the side chamber. (Such an arrangement seems particularly apt in a city where the term 'street level' acknowledges all the tunnels and tubes underneath.) Great, Swell and Choir couple mechanically; the Solo and Pedal main chests are tracker, but the Solo couples electrically. Finally, some of the Pedal and the two high-pressure reeds are on electro-pneumatic action.

Above the console on the right, the Great speaks a tonal dialect of pure Taylor & Boody, a sonorous baroque chorus from Double to Scharf, with a razor-blade Seventeenth for leavening and a clean trumpet family crowning the whole. The two spire flutes, stringy in the bass and fruity in the treble, continue the theme. The Swell flue chorus is almost the Great's equal, with an unenclosed façade Principal anchoring, and a bright, five-rank mixture topping. With shutters on three sides and the box fully open, this chorus has the effect of unenclosed ranks. (A small set of shutters on the back of the case provide swellings for transept listeners.) The main Pedal is in the old chamber, at the far right, and if it announces itself from a separate location, it sounds remote only at the console.

The supporting voices of the Swell manage delicacy with colour, showing how the role of accompaniment has fundamentally informed levels and balances. A second diapason inside the box provides a staple accompaniment voice, while the flutes, strings and Oboe manage bright, clean



The left case contains the Swell above (with shutters not only on front and sides but mini-shutters on the rear as well), and the Choir Pedal below, with the 8ft Cello of wood in façade

tone without being at all loud. That idea sets the stage for the Choir. The remarkable Principal Dolce, a wood façade rank, reaches right into the room with a seltzer-like tone and crisp speech, yet no louder than the Swell Rohr Flute. The Stopped Diapason is a dark, hooded cousin of Father Smith, while the 4ft has chime without becoming cute. The soft flute and celeste are as lovely as they are truly quiet. The reserved reeds continue the theme (the corky Cor Anglais is particularly good), and it is particularly happy that this department, right behind the console, deftly balances colour, charm and speech with a sophisticated sense of quiet – an Echo organ that matters, like the work of Carlton Michell speaking an ancient tongue. Given the strength and position of the Swell plenum, I'm not sure the prepared-for Choir chorus is really missed; so close to console and singers, it might be a bit much anyway.

The Solo fluework has both colour and extroversion, taking up logically from the coupled Swell and Great foundations. All but the Harmonic Flute are recycled early 20th-century pipework, as are the fine orchestral reeds. The two high-pressure reeds are especially good specimens (voiced by freelancer Chris Broome). They want coupling into the ensemble with care, however, for while they don't overwhelm the tutti, they do tend to simplify the otherwise complex texture.

The design of the Pedal responds to the manuals. The big chorus and bass stops match the Great and Swell from the chamber, while smaller voices in the lower left case are delicate and clear. In each location the string registers are elegant and fast, the wooden Cello taking façade position to match the Choir Principal. Skinner's 32ft – preposterously effective – serves as a climax register.

Heard halfway down the nave, the impact of the whole recalls other Taylor & Boody work: as full and rich as one could want, and plenty clear, but never so much as to overwhelm. The spatial relationships are fascinating. We more commonly encounter side-facing organs in chancel chambers, which cause the tone to emerge mostly as one, slightly unclear entity. Here, the two chancel cases are freestanding, stereophonic, clear yet distinct. To this is added the Pedal



The four-manual console keeps a low profile with couplers on drawknobs and wide, American-style stopjams

and Solo from the side chamber, which blend or stand out depending on registration. The balances have been cunningly managed so that Solo foundations merge into the Swell and Great in chordal textures, while rising above for solos. When the music is Buxtehude and the manuals are uncoupled, the effect is not unlike a giant baroque organ that someone has tipped on its side. When the music is Mendelssohn or Brahms, and the manuals now coupled, the blended homophony underscores how intimate a space this chancel really is.

The original project narrative described a kind of English Cathedral organ, perhaps one that retained older material and had mechanical action. The finished result resists such easy categorisation and, besides, is so much more interesting. If the mild Swell reeds are several notches below the Great – something often found in the romantic English organ, and useful here for leading young voices – we almost never find flue choruses so equal in power and impact, and hardly ever in an honest baroque tonal language. Charm from

◀ quieter voices is something we expect from 19th-century England; but here the tone is largely pre-romantic, with added sparkle from placement and crispness. The builders seem to have developed a language entirely true to their thinking, and yet a surprise all the same, to us and to them. Factor in the dragon-slaying quality of the engineering, and you sense that you are in the midst of a triumph. This is an organ of rare intelligence, bravery and conviction. ■ www.taylorandboody.com

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Grace Church, New York

TAYLOR & BOODY OP. 65, 2013

GREAT

Dbl. Open Diapason (façade EE)	16
Bourdon	16
First Open Diapason	8
Second Open Diapason	8
Spire Flute	8
Principal	4
Spitz Flute	4
Twelfth	2 ² / ₃
Fifteenth	2
Seventeenth	1 ³ / ₅
Cornet (g-d3, mounted)	V
Mixture	V
Scharf	IV
Double Trumpet	16
Trumpet	8
Clarion	4

SWELL (ENCLOSED)

Contra Gamba (façade EE-BB)	16
Façade Principal	8
Violin Diapason	8
Rohr Flute	8
Salicional	8
Voix Celeste (GG)	8
Principal	4
Open Flute	4
Nasat	2 ² / ₃
Fifteenth	2
Wald Flute	2
Tierce	1 ³ / ₅
Mixture	V
Contra Bassoon	16
Cornoean	8

Oboe	8
Clarion	4
<i>Tremulant</i>	

CHOIR (UNENCLOSED)

Principal Dolce (façade, wood)	8
Stopped Diapason	8
Flauto Dolce	8
Unda Maris (t.c., tuned flat)	8
Octave (prepared)	4
Rohr Flute	4
Gemshorn	2
Larigot (prepared)	1 ¹ / ₃
Sesquialtera (prepared)	II
Scharf (prepared)	III-IV
Cor Anglais	16
Cremona	8
<i>Tremulant</i>	
Tuba (Solo)	8
Harmonic Trumpet (Solo)	8

SOLO (ENCLOSED)

Harmonic Flute	8
Gamba	8
Gamba Celeste	8
Viol d'Orchestre	8
Viol Celeste (t.c)	8
Traverse Flute	4
Corno di Bassetto	16
Orchestral Oboe	8
Vox Humana	8
<i>Tremulant</i>	
Tuba (15" pressure)	8
Harmonic Trumpet (15" pressure)	8

CHOIR PEDAL

Bourdon	16
Cello	8
Spitz Gedackt	8
Clarabella (prepared)	4
Bassoon	16
Schalmey	8

MAIN PEDAL

Double Open Diapason	32
(ext 16, in west gallery)	
Contra Bourdon (ext 16)	32
Open Diapason	16
Subbass	16
Violone	16
Principal	8
Spire Flute	8
Fifteenth	4
Mixture	V
Contra Ophicleide (ext 16. Tr.)	32
Contra Fagott (ext 16)	32
Trombone	16
Fagott	16
Trumpet	8
Clarion	4
Tuba (Solo)	8
Harmonic Trumpet (Solo)	8

Sw-Gt 8, Ch-Gt 8, Solo-Gt 16, Solo-Gt 8,
Solo-Gt 4
Solo-Sw 16, Solo-Sw 8, Solo-Sw 4
Sw-Ch 8, Solo-Ch 16, Solo-Ch 8, Solo-Ch 4
Gt-Ped 8, Sw-Ped 8, Ch-Ped 8, Solo-Ped 8,
Solo-Ped 4