

## 2016 NATIONAL CONVENTION OF THE AMERICAN GUILD OF ORGANISTS, HOUSTON TEXAS

### *A report by Jim Hildreth*

The 53<sup>rd</sup> biennial National Convention of the American Guild of Organists was held in Houston, Texas June 19<sup>th</sup> - 23<sup>rd</sup> 2016. This year also marks the 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the AGO.

Houston is the fourth largest city in the United States, and is said to be the most air-conditioned city in the world. (The later became apparent to me when I found myself frequently wishing I had brought more long-sleeve shirts!). Significantly, Houston is a major cultural center. Its museum and arts district draws more revenue annually than all of the city's sports teams combined. The saying is, "everything is big in Texas" and this is certainly true of the many grand, magnificent churches and organs we saw and heard during our stay.

To my knowledge, four of your colleagues from Columbus attended the convention, including our Dean Mark Meuser, Sub-Dean Tom Gerke, Allan Willis, and myself. The Festival Prelude and Opening Convocation began on Sunday evening. It was preceded by the National Young Artists Competition in Organ Performance (NYACOP) which was held on Saturday, June 18<sup>th</sup>, with the winner's recital on Sunday afternoon. This year's winner was Katelyn Emerson, who was also the winner of the 2011 Region V AGO/Quimby Competition for Young Organists. She played a subsequent recital for our Columbus chapter. Also on Sunday afternoon Daryl Robinson played a Pre-Convention recital at Rice University, and a Service of Choral Evensong was held at Palmer Memorial Episcopal Church. Unfortunately, we were not able to attend these pre-convention events.

The aforementioned Festival Prelude and Opening Convocation was held at St. Martin's Episcopal Church, the largest Episcopal Church in North America with more than 9000 members. The 80-rank Schoenstein organ dominates the front of the church, situated below the beautiful rose window. It was featured in the Prelude, with a performance of Vierne's complete *Third Symphony*, the finale of which was played as a Postlude. Richard Strauss's stirring *Festival Procession* for organ, brass and timpani rounded out the Prelude. Parish Choirs from St. Martin's and St. Thomas Episcopal churches, numbering more than 100, and the Houston Symphony Brass Quintet joined with the organ (played and led by the churches' resident musicians) for a glorious opening of the convention, with an inspiring address by the Rt. Rev. Graeme Paul Knowles, retired dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London. As was the case in each performance during the week, one or more works commissioned for AGO Houston 2016 were presented.

National conventions typically offer far more performances and workshops than one individual can take in, so this report will focus on those events that I chose to attend. On Monday morning, recitals by the seven Rising Stars were presented at St. Thomas Episcopal Church on the 36-rank Schoenstein organ. These young, brilliant performers were each winners of their respective AGO/Quimby Regional competitions last year. They included Colin MacKnight, Jeremy Jelinek, Chase Loomer, Madeleine Woodworth (winner of our Great Lakes Region), David Ball, Monica Czausz, and Tyler Boehmer. It seems that young talent gets better and better as the years go by, and each of these young people demonstrated musical skill, passion, imagination, personal style, and commitment that would be the envy of any seasoned career musician. Surely our profession is in good hands with talent such as this. Marie-Bernadette Dufourcet, wife of composer-organist Naji Hakim, performed an all-French recital which included works by herself and her husband, who was in attendance. The recital was held at the 2100-member Church of St. John the Divine on an immense 143-rank, 5-manual Létourneau organ, with two 64' pedal stops. (Stephen Newberry, Director of Music and Organist of the church as well as convention Registrar and a former college classmate of mine, told me that the organ was paid for entirely with insurance money following water damage in the church!) A beautiful Choral Evensong was held at the 3000-member Christ Church Cathedral, the oldest ecclesiastical structure in the city, and home of a lovely 4-manual Aeolian-Skinner/Schantz organ. The Cathedral's Choir, led by Robert Simpson and accompanied by Monica Czausz (who had played her Rising Star recital just hours before) was exquisite.

Monday evening found us in the Co-Cathedral of the Sacred Heart, for the St. Cecilia Recital (in honor of and endowed by late organist Marianne Webb), performed by French organist Michel Bouvard, who offered a varied program of works by Mendelssohn, Couperin, Grigny, Messiaen, Bouvard's grandfather Jean, Duruflé, and others. The 106-rank Pasi organ is elegant both visually and aurally, capable of supporting the variety of repertoire required of it. Its twin cases are located on either side of the stunning Sacred Heart stained glass window. (St. Mary's Cathedral in Galveston was Texas' first cathedral. Population growth resulted in the co-cathedral being established in Houston in 1959.)

On Tuesday morning, the National Competition in Organ Improvisation (NCOI) finals were held at Christ Church Cathedral. The three finalists were Thomas Dahl, Matt Gender, and Kalle Toivio, who performed for a panel of seven distinguished judges. Each contestant was required to perform a prepared composition written after 2000, accompany a cellist in a three-movement Baroque sonata using figured bass, play a three-stanza hymn with introduction and appropriate "treatments," and improvise a four-movement sonata or symphony incorporating either a sonata-allegro form or a fugue, a fast and a slow movement. The performers were given sufficient amounts of time beforehand to prepare for each of these facets of the competition. Mr. Dahl (who has performed in Columbus) was the clear winner and winner of the Audience Prize. We rode the ever-present busses to Grace Presbyterian Church Tuesday afternoon for a delightful concert by Duo MusArt, featuring organist Raúl Prieto Ramirez and his wife, pianist Teresa Sierra. The program included original works by Widor and Langlais, as well as impressive, captivating, and virtuosic arrangements by the duo of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, Lutoslawski's *Variations on a Theme by Paganini*, and Horowitz's *Variations on Carmen by Georges Bizet*. The duo was as fun to watch as they were to hear, and their musicianship and teamwork were stellar. The organ is a 77-rank Schantz. Another 77-rank Schantz, under the inimitable hands and feet of David Cherwein, led the Hymn Festival held at St. Luke's United Methodist Church, assisted by the St. Luke's Chancel Choir and a brass ensemble. Cherwein provided imaginative and exciting accompaniments for a variety of hymns, interspersed with readings by Susan Palo Cherwein. Richard Elliot, principal organist of the Mormon Tabernacle, performed a stunning recital on the 72-rank Aeolian-Skinner at First Presbyterian Church (the first air-conditioned church in Texas). He was joined by brass ensemble for the performance of a commissioned work, *Rhapsody for Brass Quintet and Organ* by Eric Ewazen. Elliot's program included works by Reger, Parry, S. Andrew Lloyd, and Lynnwood Farnam. We then walked down and across the street to St. Paul's United Methodist Church, a grand, beautiful Grecian-style structure with a Byzantine dome. The Houston Chamber Choir, led by Robert Simpson, presented a wonderful program of ethnic and period works, exhibiting superior choral artistry. They were joined by Mary Preston, organist for the Dallas Symphony Orchestra and curator of its celebrated Fisk organ, in a performance of the commissioned work, *Earthquake*, by Zachary Wadsworth. Preston played solo organ works by John LaMontaine and Max Reger on the impressive 84-rank Schantz organ. A service of Compline was held at the Co-Cathedral following these programs, but my weary body and mind convinced me that I needed rest, and, as another attendee commented, our spirits had already been amply filled that day. From reports that I heard, this was also a lovely service, featuring Gregorian chant and music ancient and modern inspired by chant.

Wednesday morning was devoted to regional and national meetings of the AGO. I opted to travel with friends to Tallowood Baptist Church to see the large instrument there which was recently rebuilt by A.E. Schlueter Pipe Organ Company, who has also recently done significant work on the organ at Broad Street Presbyterian Church in Columbus. In the afternoon we found our way (via the ever-trusty busses) to Rice University, which houses a splendid 84-rank Fisk/Rosales organ. Isabelle Demers, who succeeded Joyce Jones as organ professor at Baylor University in Waco, was the featured performer. Demers is a "diminutive dynamo", small in stature but mighty in musical impact and virtuosity. Her memorized program included works by J.S. Bach (*Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue* transcribed by Reger), Dupré

(*Fileuse*), Rachel Laurin (a new work based on the Dupré), and Reger (*Fantasy on "Hallelujah! Gott zu loben"*). She was joined by saxophonist Michael N. Jakobson for the attractive commissioned work *Rêverie: Hommage à Francis Poulenc*. We were then treated to a completely contrasting hour, complements of Dorothy Papadakos, who accompanied a silent film, *The Adventurer*, by Charlie Chaplin on the 4-manual Aeolian-Skinner organ of First United Methodist Church. Papadakos was engaging as she chatted with the audience before and after her performance. Time for socializing was enjoyed by all who attended the Banquet at the Hilton Hotel, headquarters for the convention, and said to be Houston's finest. The Rob Landes Trio provided musical entertainment during the banquet, which included variations on familiar hymn tunes in the styles of famous organ pieces. Centerpieces on the tables were small organ pipes mounted in wooden bases. We then returned to the Co-Cathedral for a glorious concert by The Choir of Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue, New York City. Ably led by Acting Director of Music Benjamin Sheen and Acting Organist Stephen Buzard, who alternated in directing and playing duties, the choir performed repertoire spanning several centuries of the British Cathedral tradition. Particularly touching was the inclusion of music by the two late Organist-Chormasters of St. Thomas, Gerre Hancock's *Judge Eternal*, and John Scott's *Behold, O God Our Defender*. (It was just two years ago that we witnessed a brilliant recital by John Scott at The Church of the Advent as part of the Boston National AGO convention.) The choir treated us to a ravishing arrangement by Gerre Hancock of *Deep River* as an encore.

Thursday morning was devoted to workshops. (Workshops were also presented on Monday and Tuesday mornings, but one had to choose between these or performances.) Workshop topics were diverse, covering a multitude of topics relating to nearly every aspect of organ, choral and church music, professional relations, music and organ technology, and organ building. I was able to attend four workshops in a three-hour period, covering music by Camil van Hulse and Seth Bingham, Alternatim Practice in Classical French organ music, influences in the music of Naji Hakim, and transcribing for the organ. The afternoon offered two recitals. Joby Bell, assisted by registrants, played the 51-rank all-mechanical Fisk at Palmer Memorial Episcopal Church. His intriguing program included works by Franck, Böhm, Dupré, and commissioned work *The Moonpiper: A Bagpipe Dance for Organ* by Ivan Božičević. We returned to Rice University, where Ken Cowen, professor of organ there, dazzled us with a fully memorized program of blockbusters by Roger-Ducasse, Gillou, Saint-Saëns, and Rachel Laurin, as well as commissioned work *Homage to Bach and Widor* by Emma Lou Diemer, based on those composers' most famous tunes. Finally, we returned to St. Martin's Episcopal Church, where we began, for the Closing Concert. The church was bathed in soft blue light. A huge screen was in place in front, upon which ever-changing NASA images of earth and outer space accompanied music by St. Hildegard van Bingen, followed by improvisations on the Hildegard melodies, and the two central works, the Organ Concertos by Howard Hansen and Francis Poulenc. Featured performers were soprano Melissa Givens, organists Aaron David Miller and John D. Schwandt, and members of the Houston Symphony under the direction of Brett Mitchell.

As mentioned earlier, it was not possible to attend every recital or hear every performer. Events I did not attend included recitals by Ludger Lohmann at St. Philip Presbyterian Church (48-stop Fritts, the builder's first in Texas), David Goode at Foundry United Methodist Church (62-rank Hellmuth Wolf), organist Catherine Rodland and violist Carol Rodland at the Episcopal Church of the Epiphany (23-rank Noack), 2014 NYACOP winner Jonathan Rudy and 2014 NCOI winner Patrick Scott at Houston Baptist University (58-rank Letourneau), Hans Davidsson in an Organ and Dance Collaborative at St. Philip Presbyterian Church (48-stop Fritts), and Edoardo Bellotti at Christ the King Lutheran Church (35-rank Noack). A worship service of music from around the world, "Halle, Halle, Halle," was held at First Presbyterian Church. A complete list of performers and venues can be found at the convention website at <http://agohouston2016.com>.

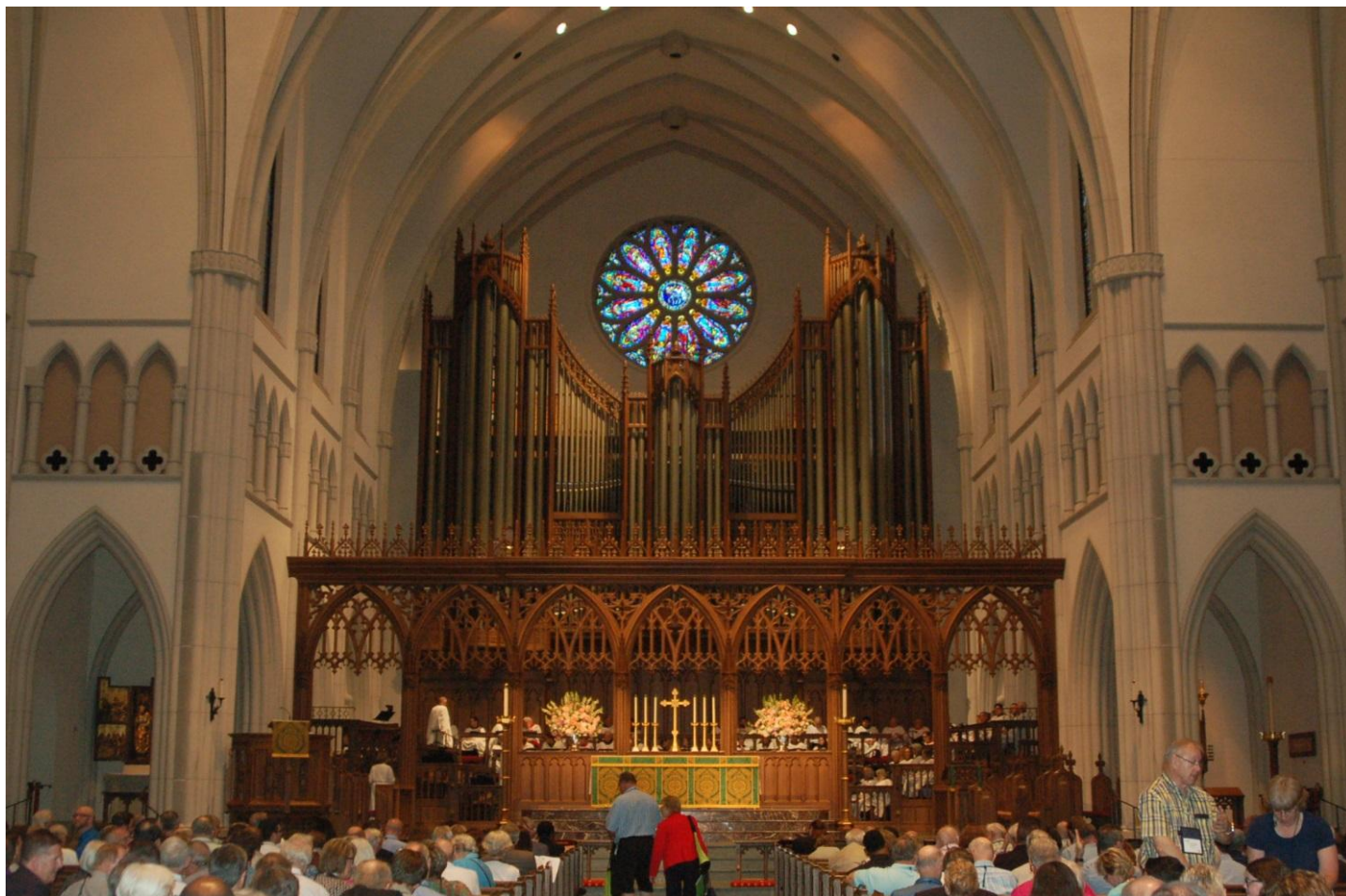
Following the practice of many previous conventions, AGO Houston sponsored the publication of a new volume of organ music, entitled *Bayoubüchlein*, in homage to J.S. Bach's *Orgelbüchlein* and the geographic location in which the convention was held – the Bayou City. The collection consists of preludes based on hymns composed since 1960. Composers represent three categories: commissions, winners of a competition for inclusion in the volume, and freely selected composers. The volume can be purchased for \$50.00 from Selah Publishing.

Houston AGO included a new feature. An app, downloadable onto attendees' smart phones, I-pads, PCs, and other devices included all details needed to navigate the convention, including descriptions and websites of venues, bios of performers and composers, individual program repertoire, specifications and short histories of the organs, facts about Houston, and much more. One could set up a personalized schedule for easy consultation. This format saved excess printing and paper in the well-designed program book.

A copious number of vendors set up their displays in the exhibit hall at the hotel, which also served as a gathering place for socializing and networking each day. It is always gratifying and fun to meet with old friends and make new ones at these conventions, in addition to being stimulated and inspired by superlative performances and instruments, and to discover new repertoire and learn new ideas or solutions to challenges. Houston offered it all in abundance.

Kudos to the Houston Steering Committee, chaired by Rhonda Furr, for their superb planning and execution of this convention. Those of us who attended will hold it long in memory.

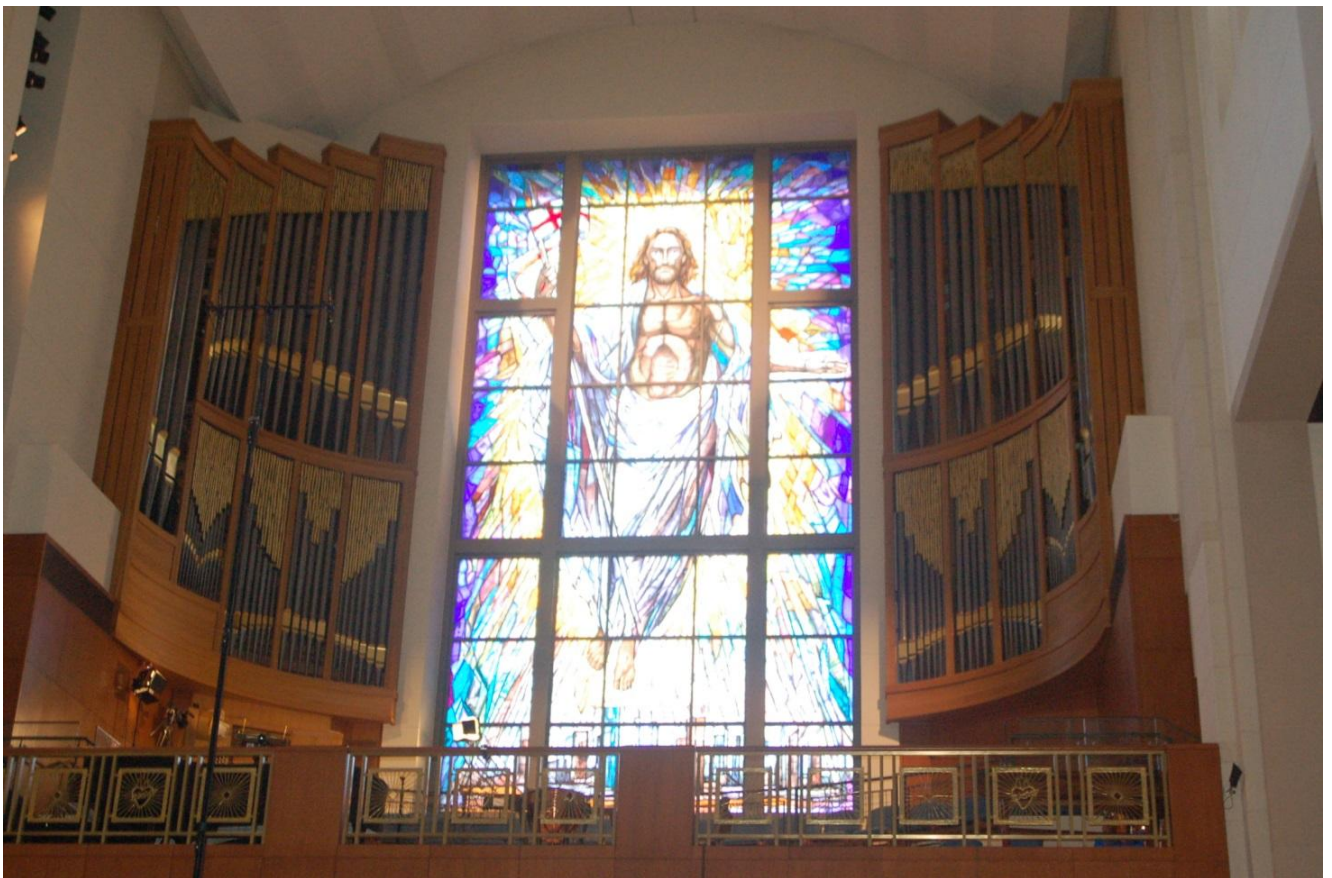
#### **PHOTOS BY JIM HILDRETH**



St. Martin's Episcopal Church (Schoenstein)



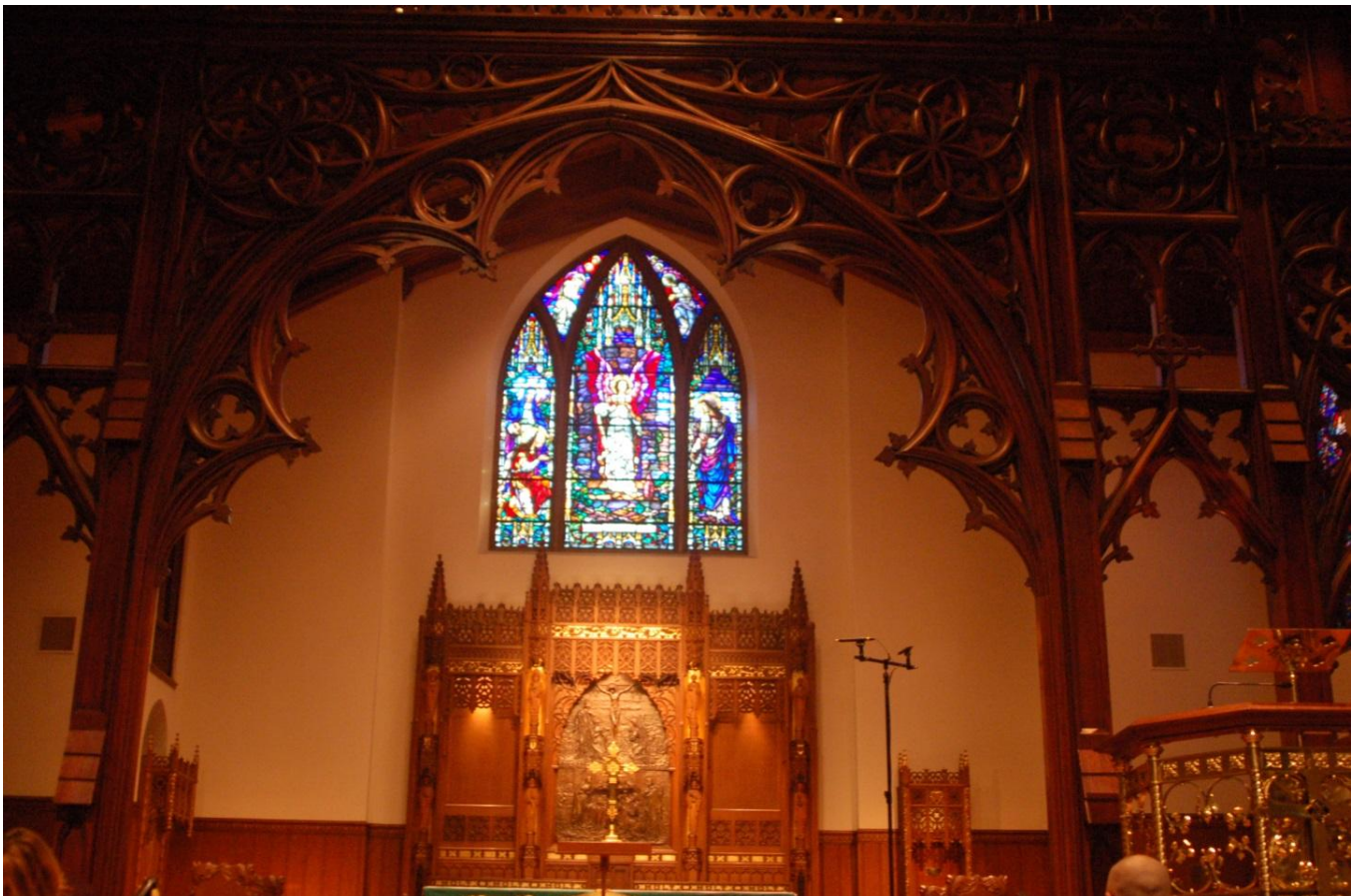
Church of St. John the Divine (Létourneau)



Co-Cathedral of the Sacred Heart (Pasi)



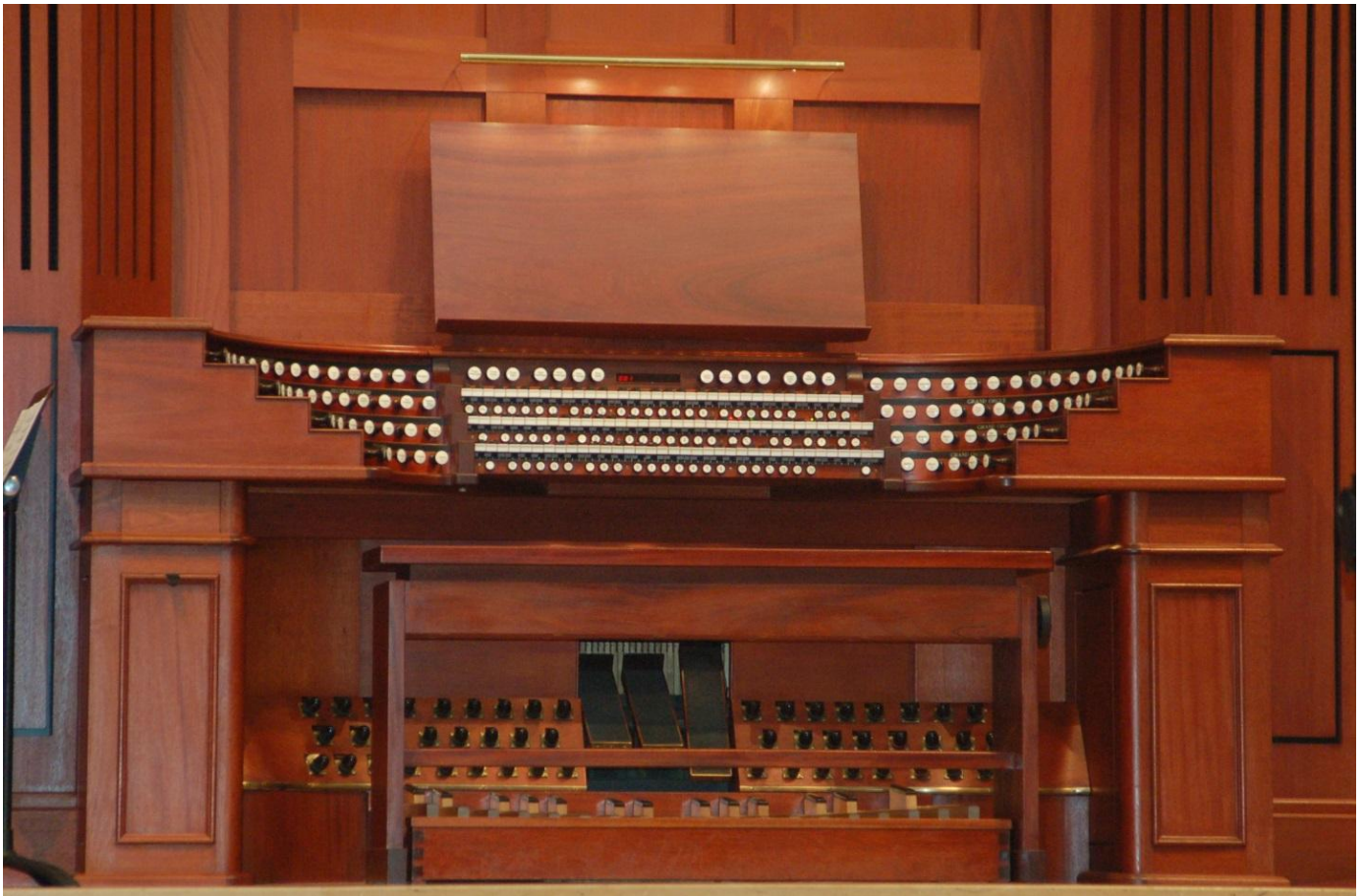
St. Paul's United Methodist Church (Schantz)



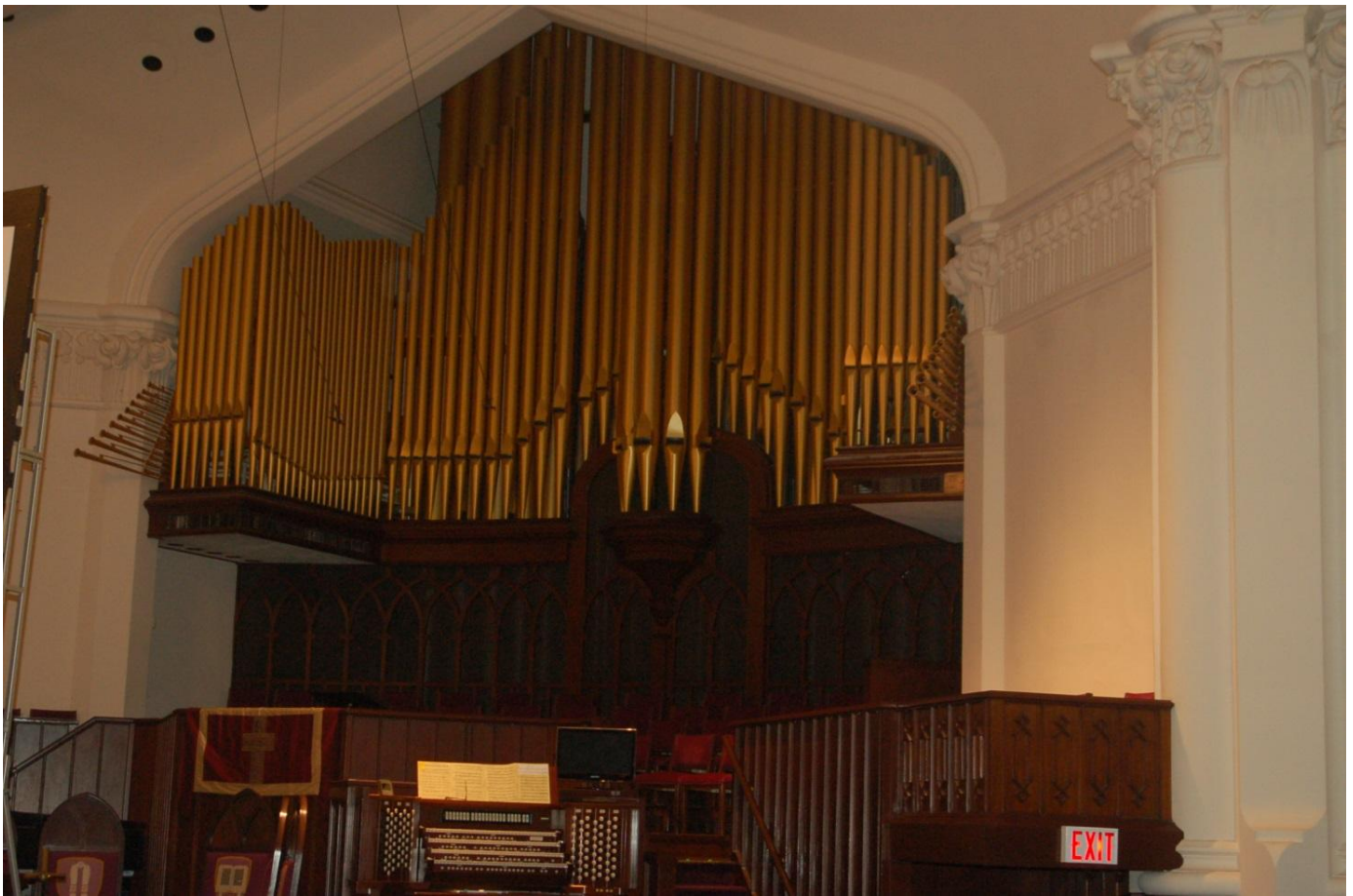
Christ Church Cathedral (Aeolian-Skinner)



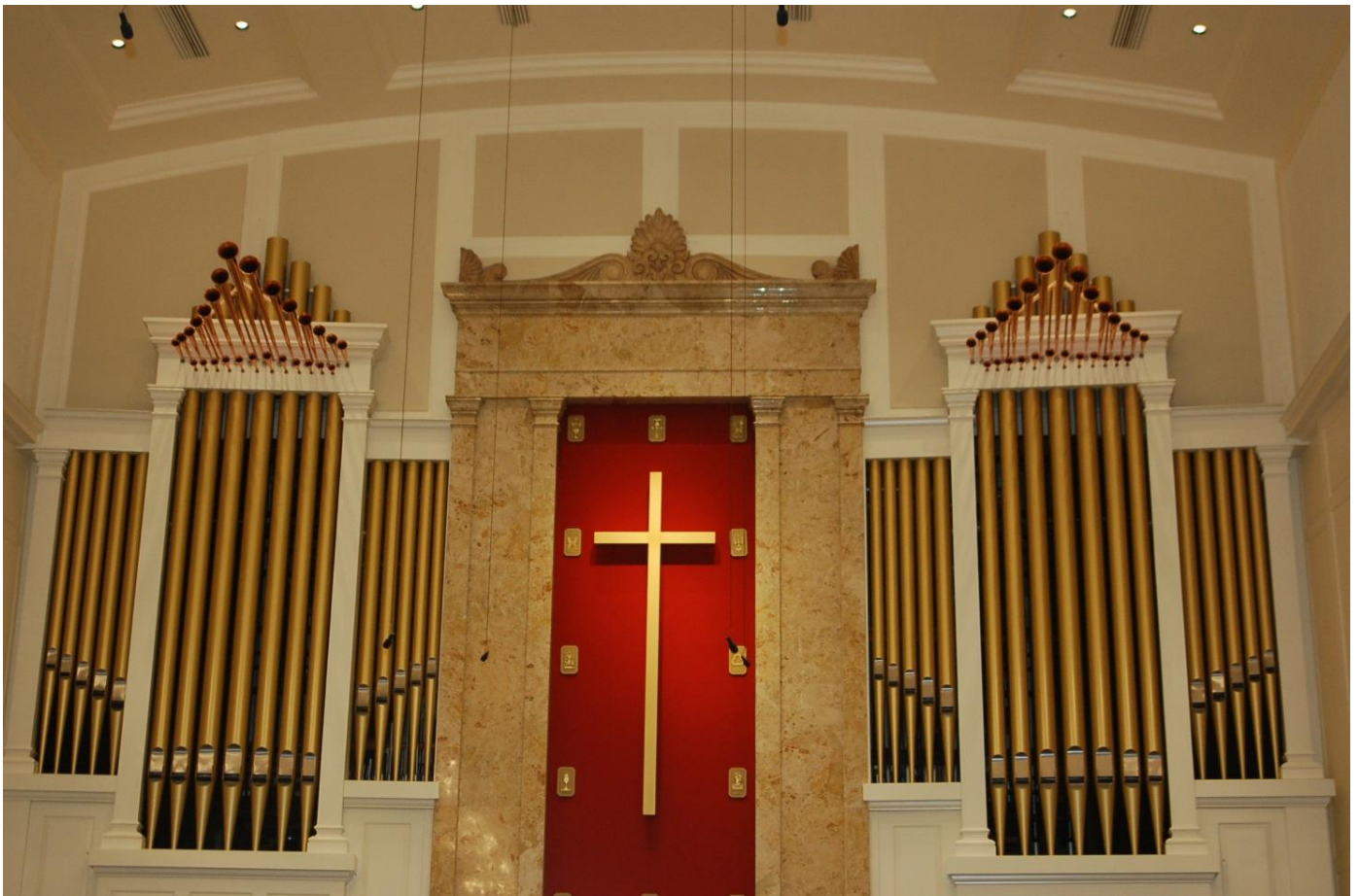
Rice University façade (Fisk/Rosales)



Rice University console



First United Methodist Church (Aeolian-Skinner)



St. Luke's United Methodist (Schantz)



**SHARED PHOTOS FROM CONVENTION**



Wilma Jensen, Isabelle Demers, Joyce Jones



Marie-Bernadette Dufourcet and Naji Hakim at the Létourneau console at St. John the Divine



Nathan Laube and Katelyn Emerson, 2016 NYACOP winner



Michel Bouvard



Ludgar Lohman with Chelsea Chen, whose commissioned Chorale Prelude on BETHOLD he premiered



St. Thomas Choir at the Co-Cathedral



Rising Star Monica Czausz (left) and friends at St. Paul's UMC (Monica will perform at Central College Presbyterian in Westerville this fall.)