

Pulling Out All The Stops, Literally

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Fifteen years after its construction put two organ builders into business and fanned the embers of envy among church musicians in town, Opus One was treated to a long-awaited tune-up in backcountry Greenwich this week.

"We are in the process of giving it what I call it's 15-year oil change," said J. Michael Roush, music director for St. Barnabas Episcopal Church on Lake Avenue, where one of only two tracker organs in Greenwich is undergoing adjustments and minor repairs.

Tennessee-based Richards, Fowkes & Co., which built the Opus One organ for the church, are back working on the 2,300-pipe instrument in preparation for a mini-festival the church intends to hold in two months.

When the work is completed, the organ will play and sound much like what 17th-century Baroque musicians intended.

"Pure, round, clear and clean," described Roush.

Since its construction in 1991, several other Greenwich churches have considered commissioning their own tracker organ, though none have been able to follow suit for reasons of cost and space.

Christ Church Greenwich, which has in its main sanctuary a large electropneumatic organ that operates on a combination of electricity and mechanical action.

In contrast, a tracker organ is nearly all mechanical, requiring all the pieces of equipment be placed near one another. In addition to requiring many pieces of moving equipment, including large pipes, reeds, valves, connectors and wind chests, the gargantuan instrument requires months and even years of specialized craftsmanship. The price tag can well exceed \$1 million.

Opus One not only put St. Barnabas on the map as one of few institutions to have the space and money to buy a tracker organ, it also helped launch Richards, Fowkes & Co., a company that has gone on to build 16 more organs.

"We found the best and most talented guys we could find in this country and helped them start their organ firm," Roush said of American organ builders Ralph Richards and Bruce Fowkes.

Before Opus One, Richards was best known for his collaboration with acclaimed organ builder Paul Fritts while Fowkes had come from working with John Brombaugh, another leading figure in the organ business.

The two came together in 1988 to form Richards, Fowkes & Co. and St. Barnabas Episcopal Church commissioned the new partnership's first tracker organ.

"It's sort of an audacious first work that immediately sealed their reputation," said Jonathan Ambrosino, a Boston-based organ consultant. "You could say it was a proving ground."

Richards, Fowkes & Co. has since moved on to building organs for institutions such as Duke University. Their latest project is Opus 17 for an Episcopal church in Dallas.

The history of the pipe organ dates back to classical times, though it was during the Renaissance and Baroque eras that the instrument grew in popularity. Electrical organs became the norm starting in the late 19th century when the technology became available, but by the middle of the 20th century there was renewed interest in tracker organs, which by relying on mechanical parts as opposed to electrical ones allows an organist to have a better control of the instrument and produce a more superior sound.

"It certainly feels different to me," said David B. Johnson, music director at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Riverside. "It's like I'm having a home-cooked meal rather than McDonald's."

St. Paul's was the first in town to have a tracker organ custom made in Austria and imported into town in 1979. Twelve years later, St. Barnabas Church commissioned Opus One.

At the time, Patrick Spiesser, 44, had just emigrated to Tennessee with his wife. With a background in maintaining and restoring pipe organs as old as those from the 16th century in his native Strasbourg, France, Spiesser came in search of work in the United States. His first project was to help build Opus One.

Spiesser was back in Greenwich this week to replace the organ's wind chest and the leather connectors inside the organ. In addition to mechanical upgrades, artists are expected to come next month to help with tonal fine-tuning on the organ. That work is expected to culminate in a mini-organ festival on Oct. 15 when St. Barnabas has invited two celebrated German organists, Johannes Unger and Andrew Dewar, to perform at 5 p.m.

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