

From our history: The role of the organ at St. Matthew's

You may be aware that the Royal Canadian College of Organists is holding its annual convention in Halifax this week. Several of workshops are being held at St. Matthew's, and the sanctuary and organ will be well used throughout the four days of meetings. Welcome to any convention goers who are visiting us today. Let me tell you a little about our experience with organs.

Our first organ was installed in 1873 amid considerable controversy. St. Matthew's was a Presbyterian congregation then, and not everyone thought an organ would be a good thing. Some people were deadly opposed to instrumental music, and others feared that polyphonic music would distract from the essence of plain worship. But there was also concern that St. Matthew's wasn't keeping up with the Joneses – or, to be precise, with St. Paul's Anglican and St. Andrew's Presbyterian. And so, not to be outdone, St. Matthew's acquired an organ. When it arrived, several irate members of the congregation left.

The first organist was Susan Tidmarsh, a widowed music teacher who formerly had been organist and choir director at St. Paul's. She ruffled a few feathers by practising psalm tunes immediately before the service, which was supposed to be a quiet time for silent worship. She also played a "voluntary" as a prelude, which was contrary to a congregational agreement that the Session would only allow the simplest style of music. Folks squabbled about her musicianship for a few years, and she left the position in 1877.

The next organist was an American named Arthur Bird. Not only was Arthur a budding composer, he also was a superior professional musician who had trained in Germany. He had many conflicts with the congregation and Session about his style of playing, his choice of music, and his recruitment of non-church members to the choir. Recessionals in particular were frowned upon as "hurting the cause of religion by drawing idle persons around the church from motives not consistent with the character of the Sabbath day." So incensed was the congregation with Arthur that the Committee on Psalmody – I suppose a precursor of our Worship and Music Committee – was called upon to supervise not only the conduct and composition of the choir, but also his choice of music. Like Mrs. Tidmarsh, Arthur only lasted four years. Luckily his replacement, Charles Porter, was less controversial and, over time, the congregation began to view the organ's contribution to worship at St. Matthew's as a good thing.

The organ was replaced more than once between 1873 and the end of the First World War, and in 1921 a Casavant pipe organ was installed at a cost of \$25,000. It has had a long life, with a little assistance. In 1957 the church acquired a new console and Casavant did a tonal revision. Forty years later, in 1998, the congregation decided that it was time for a complete refurbishment and tonal revision of the organ. This time Casavant eliminated redundant stops and gave the instrument a brighter sound, a moveable console, electronic pre-settings and computer compatability. The church was without the organ for a year while the pipes and console were sent back to Quebec for restoration.

Today we look fondly and with great pride on our Casavant organ and its role in the life of St. Matthew's.

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