

## “RESCUED” 1977 KNEY ORGAN BECOMES A PERFECT FIT FOR ST. JOHN THE EVANGELIST, KITCHENER

( This article appeared in ORGAN CANADA The Quarterly Journal of the Royal Canadian College of Organists, December 2007.)

*Feature and photographs by Pauline Finch (St. John the Evangelist – Kitchener)*

At this time last year, the idea of adding a second pipe organ to the sanctuary of St. John the Evangelist Anglican Church in downtown Kitchener must have seemed as alien and outrageous as contemplating (never!) the removal of its fine existing Casavant. But a timely tip passed to music director Marlin Nagtegaal late in 2006, about a disassembled tracker organ being warehoused in Chatham, ignited one of the most unusual projects this active 151-year-old congregation has ever undertaken.

Today, after countless person-hours of “sweat equity,” gentle persuasion of the doubtful, and second-mile fundraising, the newcomer -- a superb 1977 Gabriel Kney 19-rank, two-manual tracker instrument, originally designed and built for Park Street United Church in Chatham, Ont. -- looks and sounds as if it had always been destined for its visually and acoustically elegant niche in St. John’s southeast transept.

Reassembling the oak case and console did require some minor alterations, however. These included the relocation of a credenza altar, reversing a bank of artificially-lit stained glass windows (now they enhance the renovated parish hall foyer), rearranging a few pews, and moving a concert grand piano to the opposite side of the sanctuary.

The Kney instrument’s footprint was also reduced slightly when a two-foot space, once occupied by an extra pew between console and case, was eliminated. This involved the finicky task of shortening and reattaching all the tracker rods by hand, a task shared with equal patience in mid-July heat by professional supervising technician D. Leslie Smith of Fergus, Ont., music director Marlin Nagtegaal, and volunteer “apprentice” parishioner Alfred Durichen.

Barely four months elapsed from the pickup trip, which started at 4:00 a.m. on May 19 with a small convoy of private cars and a donated tractor-trailer rig, to the mid-September worship service at which St. John’s congregation first heard the rich timbre of the completed and almost-tuned instrument. And only a month after that, on October 14, 2007, a near-capacity crowd gathered to hear guest artist and former St. John’s music director Barrie Cabena play the organ’s spectacular re-dedication recital. His program ranged in style from an early 17th-century Magnificat by Boyvin and a grandiose 19th-century Romantic sonata by Rheinberger, climaxed by the world premiere of Cabena’s own “Clouds” – vignettes on seven Haiku poems (also by the composer) and narrated by soprano Sheri Cabena. The wide-ranging tonal colours coming from a medium-sized instrument surprised even professional organists.

The occasion fittingly closed several significant historical circles, since Cabena had also launched the instrument's "twin sister" (still going strong) 30 years ago at St. Mark's in Port Hope, Ont. Among the thrilled listeners at St. John's on Oct. 14 were former Park Street music director Ron Kingham, who was first to play the Kney in 1977; Rev. Michael Brooks, who was last at the console before its disassembly in 2006; and a delighted Joan Breukelman whose late father, Dr. L.J. Shepley, spearheaded the mid-1970s campaign to acquire a world-class tracker organ for Park Street United. Joan, who donated an original dedication photograph to St. John's, felt her father would have delighted in "his" organ's new lease on life.

The inevitable issue of comparison between the two St. John's organs was a mystery to all but director Nagtegaal, who was convinced from the project's birth that their combinations and colours would be complementary rather than competitive. His prediction became a magnificent reality during the recessional hymn at a recent worship service: the distinct sounds of two extraordinary instruments sharing alternate verses filled the building as never before and some processing choir members admitted to such overwhelming surprise they stopped singing ... just to listen.

#### THE "PROS" GIVE TOP MARKS TO ST. JOHN'S REFURBISHED KNEY ORGAN

Apart from a few weeks' delay in receiving an order of replacement slider seals from Germany, organ technician Les Smith says there were "almost no peculiarities" in reinstalling the 1977 Kney tracker instrument at St. John the Evangelist in Kitchener. "It was very well designed from the beginning, and actually built to be taken apart," he explained. "It's been a great source of pride for me to have been with the team that put it back together ... you rarely get people this competent to carry on the job."

Smith, who worked with the well-known Canadian Kney firm in its heyday from 1973-1981, was the only paid professional on the project. And he rarely sees pipe organ reassemblies like this anymore. "It's only the big organs you hear about now," he said. "Many churches just don't have the wherewithal to remove a medium-sized one like this and save it for future use – if you can even find another buyer."

Area organists who've tried out the rebuilt instrument are unanimous in their praise of what former national RCCO director Peter Nikiforuk enthusiastically called "the right project, at the right time." Admitting he hasn't always been a fan of tracker organs, nor of the ensemble blend of Gabriel Kney's instruments, Nikiforuk emphasized that the St. John's installation "completely belies all that; it sounds refined and yet powerful, as if it was designed especially for that space ... It's very nice to play; you don't have to fight with the instrument and there is very minimal compromise in getting what you want."

Dedication recitalist Barrie Cabena unequivocally ranks the St. John's organ as "Gabriel Kney's work at its very best ... Every stop has a personality of its own, yet they all combine very skillfully to create new colours." The blended ranks "add up to a tutti that is absolutely balanced and satisfying ... This organ has been a wonderful revelation to play."

Cabena praised not only the skilled reassembly team, but also the congregation's support of a project that moved so quickly from concept to completion that numerous logistical and financial details had to be taken on sheer faith. He was especially impressed that some 30 parishioners gathered on a Saturday morning in response to a last-minute decision to clean all the badly soiled façade pipes down to their original bright copper.

“What turns me on is the community involvement that happened around this organ; it does wonders when people come together do something as special as this,” he said. “I could see immediately the enormous pride and love that has gone into your organ.”

It goes without saying that St. John's music director Marlin Nagtegaal has never regretted taking a chance on the instrument that Park Street United loved, but could not keep once the church closed its doors and amalgamated with another.

“I knew it would be a great instrument, but seeing it all together right here and sounding the way it does, it's truly awesome, way beyond my expectations ... The feel of playing this is so different, so 'real'. The potential for what we can do here musically is huge. It's an excellent teaching instrument, an excellent worship instrument, an excellent recital instrument -- it's got everything.”

GABRIEL KNEY 1977/2007 TRACKER ORGAN – ST. JOHN THE EVANGELIST,  
KITCHENER

Approximate dimensions:

Height: 20 ft., Width: 12 ft. 6”, Case depth: 5 ft.

Specifications:

Ranks: 19

Stops: 16

GREAT

Principal 8'

Chimney Flute 8'

Octave 4'

Cornet II 2 2/3' & 1 3/5'

Recorder 2'

Mixture IV 1 1/3'

Trumpet 8'

SWELL

Stopped Flute 8'  
Open Flute 4'  
Principal 2'  
Quint 1 1/3'  
Cymbal II 2/3'  
Regal 8'

#### PEDAL

Sub-bass 16'  
Principal 8' (Great)  
Trumpet 8' (Great)  
Posaune 16'

#### COUPLERS

Great to Pedal  
Swell to Pedal  
Swell to Great

[1275 words – total of all 3 parts]