

*In the wind...*  
January 2008

## The Smell of Quietness

I'm writing from New York City on the evening of Sunday November 18. It's five days before Thanksgiving, and Fifth Avenue is festooned with every gaudy bauble imaginable. European tourists are spending their gargantuan Euros, spreading Christmas cheer from Gucci's to Saks, from the Disney Store to the NBA Store. Elaborate light displays draw attention to five-thousand-dollar handbags, displays of shoes worthy of Imelda, and unimaginably expensive jewelry. Chestnuts are roasting on open fires. They smell terrific, blending with the bustle of the city. My mind's eye flashes an image of the fireplace in our house, associating the smell of the chestnuts with sitting in the peace of that favorite of rooms. One of the carts selling chestnuts had middle-Eastern music playing over loudspeakers - no doubt a nod to the indigenous music of Bethlehem, Palestine, or the West Bank. Fitting. I'm pretty sure that the shepherds gathering in the alley behind *The Inn* were not singing four-part-harmony in the key of G. I'm pretty sure that snowy flakes weren't falling softly, *clothing all the world in white*. In fact, I'm pretty sure that the shepherds weren't white!

People are wearing Santa hats. And it's snowing. It's okay for it to snow in Manhattan, but it's pretty early for snow here. I wonder if the Fifth Avenue Merchants Association made a special arrangement. Maybe Donald Trump has a connection - the ultimate networker. It would be better if he'd make it rain in Atlanta - they really need the water.

One of the stores is broadcasting Christmas music out to the sidewalk, I'm especially attracted to the meaningful Christmas favorite, the former nun singing, "these are a few of my favorite things." Is there a Willcocks descant for that one? Maybe Rutter...

WWJD? I'll tell you what he'd do, he'd go to Evensong at St. Thomas' Church, Fifth Avenue at 53<sup>rd</sup> Street.

I'm staying in a little hotel on 54<sup>th</sup> Street, two blocks east of Fifth Avenue. It's a pretty quiet street, but turning left onto Fifth is like entering a festive war zone. It's mobbed, it's noisy, a little scary for someone who woke up this morning in rural Maine. Walking into St. Thomas' Church is like walking into another world. In fact, it is another world. It's a world of serenity and grandeur, of peace and spirituality. It's a world created by the best of human effort through design and craftsmanship. And just like the gaudy, extravagant, commercial scene outside, it's the product of great wealth. In contrast to the neighboring stores that are bursting with Santas, inside the church, above the High Altar is a Reredos bursting with Saints. While some Reredoses (or is it Reredosi?) feature Saints that are neatly tucked into their niches, some of those at St. Thomas' Church are renegades - bursting out of their little spaces as though they were in conversation with each other, gesticulating, looking this way and that, making their points for the ages to witness. I don't know the dimensions, but I guess that the thing is more than fifty feet tall. There's a

beautiful photo on the church's website at <http://www.saintthomaschurch.org/interiorview.html>.

Perhaps it's a crude question, but what would something like that cost? If we figure the price of a new organ as "so much per stop," is the price of a Reredos "so much per saint?" There must be twenty tons of stone involved, and heaven knows how many hours of skilled work taking away all the stone that doesn't look like saints. We who regularly install organs might be able to imagine what it's like to install stone carvings on this scale. But radically different from the commercialism on the street outside, this vast expenditure of money, skill, and human effort is dedicated and devoted to the glory of God as an eloquent expression of faith.

The choir stalls, pulpit, lectern, and organ case are all elaborately carved so that their massive construction appears delicate, even wispy in a few places. And the fabric of the building is stone, that most unyielding of media. Drop one stone on to another and you get chips, a little dust, even splitting in two. The fact that the graceful curves of the arches and ribs on the ceiling are made of stone defies the character of the natural material. And by the way, those active saints in the Reredos are also "chips off the old block."

There is a magnificent quietness to a building like this. You can hear distant noises from the street – an impatient taxi, an indignant pedestrian – and you can hear subway trains rattling up the River Styx, but these noises seem only to enhance the quietness. There's a tinge of incense mixed with beeswax that is the peculiar smell of an Anglican Church. It is the smell of quietness. Organbuilders know that the higher up you get in the building, the stronger the smell gets. It must be quieter up in the Solo Organ!

Another brilliant visual spectacle in this church is the richly decorated organ built by Taylor & Boody in the rear gallery, displayed with stunning lighting, and festooned with gold leaf. If you don't notice it when you arrive, it can take your breath away as you stand, turn, and walk out of the church. This organ wasn't used tonight – what we heard was the Skinner/Aeolian-Skinner organ in the chancel.

Sitting in the Gothic half-light before the service started, listening to and smelling the silence, I reflected on the complicated processes that go into the creation of monumental art works like the Reredos, the organ, or the building itself. Having been involved in many projects building, restoring, and moving organs, I have first-hand experience with the complexities of the conversations that lead to the creation of these things. Moving from concept to vision to fundraising to design to construction to completion, these great efforts are both challenging and rewarding.

In Craig Whitney's entertaining and informative book about the twentieth-century American pipe organ, *All the Stops*, we read that during June of 1956 G. Donald Harrison, the famed creator of so many wonderful Aeolian-Skinner organs, was hard at work supervising the completion of the large organ in the Chancel at St. Thomas' Church, racing against the calendar to have the organ ready for the convention of the American Guild of Organists. In the late afternoon of June 14, Mr. Harrison left St. Thomas' feeling unwell,

walked eight blocks home because of a taxi strike, had dinner with his wife Helen, turned on the television to watch a performance by musician and humorist Victor Borge, and died of a heart attack at 11pm. (I was a couple days short of three months old.)

I find in this story a link between a creative genius involved in great and enduring work and the passage of life. I wonder what stops Harrison was working on that last day? What was the last pipe he handled? Did I hear that pipe tonight? Did he know as he left the church that he would not be back? Did he stop for a drink on his way home? (We know that when working on the organs at Boston's Symphony Hall and First Church of Christ, Scientist, he was very fond of stopping for refreshment at the Café Amalfi next door to Symphony Hall.)

John Scott must be one of the wisest imports from Great Britain since E. Power Biggs. In the few years since he began his work at St. Thomas', he has carried on the great tradition of music so beautifully nourished by Gerre Hancock, bringing the famed Choir of Men and Boys to a new thrilling level of musicianship and dignity. Immaculately clad in scarlet and white with elaborate frilled collars, standing out from the muted tones of stone and wood, they add to the stunning visual effect of the surroundings.

The precision of their movements – processing, standing, sitting – adds dignity to the worship, but I noticed that it also removes the possibility of distraction. I was able to listen almost wholly to the music, without the back of my mind clattering about someone falling out of step, someone standing later than the rest. Because they were paying such close attention I was able to.

The first sound I heard from the choir was the vigorous, sonorous, precise “and with thy spirit” coming from a distant corridor as they were led in prayer before entering the Nave. Even so, the worshipper-listener could not be prepared for the inhalation of breath and utterance of the first few chords of perfectly balanced and expertly tuned tone as they sang the psalm after the opening words. I was sitting about a third of the way down the Nave (Pew 51 had a wad of chewing gum under the seat) on the epistle side (starboard), far enough back that the choir members, especially the very young boys, were dwarfed by the majestic height of the place, but their voices filled the building in a most moving way.

Great care had been given to the balance between organ and choir. We talk and talk about *The English Cathedral Style* – when you hear it done so well you can understand it better. The organ needs to have the ability to sound as if its going “all out” without overpowering the choir, and it needs to be able to melt into the ether. This evening, while I heard the organ in its great fullness in hymn and postlude, I was so impressed by the sound of “full organ” including powerful chorus reeds and mixtures enhancing the sound of the choir.

Choral Evensong in a great church like this is a syzygy of genius and creativity. The vision of the architect and the skill of the builders make possible the magnificent building. The proportions, decorations, symbolism, and acoustics are all essential to the experience.

The genius of the composers brings us music that brings the building to life. These are musicians who knew these buildings, who made music in these buildings, and whose inspiration came from these buildings.

The organbuilders who were contemporary with the composers (tonight we think of Charles Villiers Stanford, Ernest Skinner, Henry Willis) heard the music, knew the buildings, and invented and perfected machines that transcend machinery - machines that melt into magic under the hands of a master organist, machines that consume air as fuel and transform it into sound energy sufficient to excite tens of millions of cubic feet of air mingled with the scent of incense and beeswax.

The commitment, dedication, discipline, and devotion of the musicians interpret that music for our modern ears. Their voices burn the same fuel as the organ, turning static air into sound energy. Their tuning is precise, their phrasing lofty, their harmonies true.

And the present clergy and congregation in all their various roles as officers, committee members, evangelists, ushers, welcomers, and worshippers combine their talents, energy, and (just say it) financial resources to make the entire experience available to us in this world of Gucci and taxicabs.

These are a few of *my* favorite things.