

# The Organ's Voice

## Reflections on visiting CB Fisk to witness the making of the next organ for Christ Church

CATHERINE CONYBEARE

Turn right at the inlet and squeeze under the rail tracks. The road climbs gently through woods, very bare now, dotted with erratic boulders. And there between the trees is the Fisk workshop, where our new organ is being built. It looks like a gigantic garden shed.

When you walk into the first room, it looks more like someone's gigantic garage. In fact, there is one of those up-and-over garage doors, but it's dwarfed by the scale of the room. Bits of lumber are stacked against the walls and up on a balcony. There are mysterious collapsed boxes in wooden frames. There's a huge grid of steel bars, apparently lying on its side; and a vast elegant piece of curved painted wood that on inspection proves to be a bit of our own organ case. Such is the scale of the room that you only gradually realize: in the corner by the garage door is an entire organ, rising magnificent to the ceiling...



This organ hiding in plain sight by the entrance to the Fisk workshop is not our organ. It's been built for a different Christ Church – the Cathedral in Cincinnati. But it works on the same principles as our new organ.

Parker immediately sat down at its keyboard and started playing. Because the organ isn't yet nestled into its own space, you can walk round the back – between the casing and the pipes – and actually see how the organ works. It's so simple that it's miraculous. Thin rigid rods of carbon fiber attach to the back of the keys and connect directly to valves at the base of the pipes.

They're known as "trackers", and this type of organ is "tracker action". The rods aren't much bigger around than a kebab stick. But you can see them pulling to and fro and triggering the release of air into the pipes. The resultant sound is amazing – especially when you're standing in the middle of the instrument!

Part of what makes the sound of a "tracker action" organ amazing is the direct mechanical connection between the fingertips of the organist and the release of air into the pipes. The carbon fiber rods are an innovation – they used to be wood – but the mechanism is the same as in the sixteenth century. A lot of modern organs have an electrical connection there – it's just like flipping an on/off switch. But tracker action gives a more subtle and various sound.





I climbed up a ladder onto a platform by the pipes, about 10 feet off the ground. Michael Kraft, President of Fisk, climbed precariously after me and showed me the bellows box for the organ from which the air is blown. The art, he explained, is to make the air flow constant enough to be reliable, but still to get some sense of ebb and flow. It's like gentle steady breathing through the organ.

This organ is almost like a person. It responds differently to different touches. It breathes steadily and gently in order to sing. But back to our own organ!

That huge grid of steel bars at the back of the messy room we came into is in fact the first glimpse of our new organ. It will be actually bolted into the new wall between the sanctuary and the tower. And on it will repose almost the entire structure of our new pipes. What we'll see from the front will be our familiar elegant eighteenth-century organ case. But this solid modern structure will be an integral part. It's just like the mixture of old and new in the action: modern keyboard and carbon fiber rods; but basic mechanics that have stayed the same since medieval times.



Now, we go down a dark corridor and through swing doors into a huge, light work-room. And here we really see our own organ. Even if so far it's still in pieces. For every single person at work in this room – there are about ten of them, at different stations – is putting together some part of it.

The only bit that is remotely recognizable is by the door. There are two tall flat metal panels arranged parallel to each other, standing on a large work-bench. One side of each is cut in steps. These are going to support the three manuals of the keyboard. There's a basic frame in place now and someone is sitting on the work-bench beginning to connect, yes, the tracker rods to it.

And then there are a lot of mysterious big flat wooden boxes on other work-benches. They all have holes of different sizes drilled in the top..

Those big flat wooden boxes turn out to be called wind-chests. They're what stores the air at the base of the pipes, ready to be released into the pipes when the valve is opened. The boxes are made of poplar – "it's a Goldilocks wood," explains the project manager, Andrew Gingery. "Neither too hard nor too soft." The top panels with the holes drilled into them are called toe-boards. ("A lot of organ-building is about drilling holes," says Andrew, rather lugubriously.) The narrow base of the organ pipes – the "toes" – will sit in those holes.

Organ pipes are people too, it seems. Not only do they have toes: they have mouths, and lips, and ears. The mouths are the oblong slits

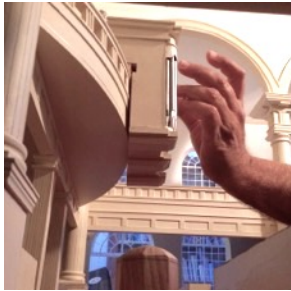


through which the air is forced to create the sound. The lips, as you would expect, surround the mouth. Less expectedly, the ears are little flaps on either side of the mouth. And they're all involved in creating a true note.

All the pipes are made from scratch, starting in another room in this rambling garden shed. It's the smallest room we've yet seen, about 20 feet long by 8 wide, and there's something very medieval about it. Perhaps it's the huge crucible sitting atop a furnace at one end of the room. The furnace isn't running, but there is still a swirl of hardened metal in the base of the crucible. Perhaps it's the bucket suspended at one end of a long metal-topped bench. Perhaps it's the wooden frame running the length of the bench.

Whatever it is, the method seems quite medieval, too. A mixture of tin and lead is melted in the crucible. Then it's ladled into the bucket, and the contents are gently tipped onto the bench. The molten mixture is smoothed by drawing a wooden beam along the frame... and when it cools, that's the beginning of an organ pipe.

On into yet another room. This is where the long flat medieval panels of metal are actually made into organ pipes. There is a whole set of solid pipe templates called mandrels. (That's a sixteenth-century word, by the way. It seems appropriate.) The metal is rolled around a mandrel of the appropriate size for its note. It is eased gently into place to create the typical tapering organ-pipe shape. And then it's handed to a welder, a cheerful red-haired young man with a very fine torch and a very steady hand. I watch him draw out a perfect silver thread along the length of an organ pipe.



"These are the wild guys in this room," says my guide. "Sometimes they even *listen to music*." It's only then that I realize how quiet the workshops are. The place is a many-chambered temple to organ-building.

Today the wild guys with the mandrels aren't listening to music. After Parker has finished playing the Cincinnati organ, the only notes we hear are coming from the room with the furnace.

A safe distance from the furnace, a solitary woman is working. In front of her is a set of pipes – or rather, a rank – placed upright in a toe-board with a single manual in front of it. This is where the pipes are "voiced".

She takes the pipes carefully, gently, one at a time, from their places on the toe-board. She shapes the mouth a little, adjusting, bending, even nicking it slightly. She puts the pipe back on the toe-board, plays its note, listens carefully. Off again, adjust again. This painstaking work is what turns an assemblage of wood and metal into a cascade of beautiful clear perfectly-tuned sound.





But the beauty of our organ isn't just in the sound: it's in the eighteenth-century wooden casing that has been shipped all the way to Gloucester so that the new organ can be built into it. And in a final vast room, we see the casing in its glory. The moulding has been sanded down and carefully repainted. What used to look like lump-and-strip designs are revealed once again in their egg-and-dart precision. The urns from the very top of the casing are sitting on the floor, and the flames flaring from their mouths (are they flames of joy? of victory? of the holy spirit?) have been re-gilded. We shall never see them this close again.

Best of all, perhaps, is an ingenious combination of casing and sound: the invisible panels of material that have been let into the casing to let the new organ ring out more fully.

So, on May 13 all these pieces will have been put together. The organ keys will connect to their rods; the rods to their valves; the valves to their pipes. The casing will once again surround and protect the whole structure. The air will pass into the bellows box: the organ will begin to breathe. It will begin to sing its new song to the Lord.

Welcoming the new organ to Christ Church will be like welcoming a new member of the congregation. The organ will take a long time to settle in, for after arrival, every single one of the pipes will have to be re-voiced specifically for the church space. But, we will be blessed with incalculable new riches to our worship and our lives.

Truly, we will sing a new song to the Lord.

*Catherine Conybeare is a member, bell ringer, organ student, and writer at Christ Church. She is a professor at Bryn Mawr College in the Department of Greek, Latin, and Classical Studies.*

