

All Saints' New Organ

Town Hall Meeting
Oct. 23, 2016

By Tom Mack, Senior Warden and Member, Organ Committee

I want to tell you a tale about the most important piece of “gear” in the new space, the organ, and of the most important and difficult decision we have made: where to put it. The story begins about a year ago. We of the organ committee were zeroing in on the organ builder of choice. We selected CB Fisk of Gloucester, MA, for many reasons, but with one vignette standing out in that process.

It turns out that our fellow Episcopalians at St. Matthews Pacific Palisades have a 30-year-old Fisk organ. That being a modern space, their organ looks nothing like ours will, but functionally (pipes, ranks, stops, etc.) it is very nearly a clone. So we were able to pay “our” organ a visit in advance! I particularly remember Steve O’Connor and I standing at the altar (the organ is in the back) as the organist literally pulled out all the stops, which means all 1,800+ pipes were fully engaged. It was a very powerful musical, spiritual and yes physical experience.

And there is more. The young man who delivered that organ to St Matthews, Steve Dieck, is the current president of CB Fisk. He is preparing to retire but will be there as a consultant to oversee our organ design and build. And the young man who received that organ 30 years ago is the current Director of Music, Tom Neenan. We heard firsthand from Tom of the fine working relationship with and great respect for Fisk and for Steve Dieck. Every once in a while, as you make an important decision, you can feel the warmth of God’s hand on your shoulder, and this was one of those times.

To this point, we had not thought a lot about organ location, assuming we would put it back in there, as it is now. Then the Fisk team arrived on site and shattered that wonderfully simple view. Turns out the organ placement has a big impact on the acoustic experience and a lot of other things.

We considered six or seven location options around the church, most having profound impacts on the look and feel of this space. Over several months, we narrowed these down to two options: one at the back, nestled around the baptistery, and one at the front. The two options had significant pluses and minuses. The option at the back was preferred as to acoustics. However, this option would alter the look and feel of the Nave significantly, and it presented other challenges in seating the choir at the back and in providing for smooth entrance and egress flows. There was absolutely no consensus among leadership as to which option would be best embraced by the parish.

Then we determined that the option at the back was going to require additional expense for structural support and air handling equipment; the estimate was \$200,000+. In light of the surprises about the condition of the structure which you’ve seen in the pictures on the patio, we concluded that it did not make sense to contemplate using up \$200,000+ of construction contingency, when the option at the front provides what we expect will be a great improvement over our current organ buried behind the chancel and has far less impact on the look and feel of the church – something we have said all along that we would preserve to the maximum extent possible.

So let me introduce you to our new organ. As a critical part of the design process, Fisk builds a one-sixteenth scale model of the organ and of the portion of the church where it is going to live. There will be some tweaks yet to come, **but here it is!**

As to where it is going and what it will look like:

- It will be a free-standing piece, projecting 4-6 feet from the back wall into the chancel, which is critical for acoustical reasons.
- The case will incorporate the existing reredos or altar-piece, with the old high altar to go to the Memorial Chapel or other appropriate place
- We are showing a medium bronze color there on the pipes and look forward to your inputs on this
- The console is facing the instrument. This is the traditional location for this type of organ and is the configuration recommended by Steve O'Connor.

As to the organ itself:

It will be designed and built by a firm we believe to be one of the very finest organ builders on the planet. Fisk has been around for about 50 years, and our organ will be Opus 151. It will be a ground-up custom design made especially for All Saints and this space.

- It is a Tracker organ, which means that the pipes are actuated by direct mechanical connections from the console to the pipes. No contacts to corrode and fail, as with our current organ. With proper maintenance a lifetime measured in centuries.
- There will be 27 ranks of pipes, a rank being a set of pipes that provide a certain “voice” across the musical scale – a total of 1,866 pipes ranging from 2ft. flutes to 16ft boomers. That is about half of what we have now, though most of those don’t work! This is plenty of organ power, so that the organ can be voiced with subtlety as well as volume in mind.

And the final touch: there will be a chime, a cymbelstern, to add that sparkling accent to the Sanctus and other elements of the liturgy. I can hardly wait!!