PARK AVENUE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, ARLINGTON

The organ in the Park Avenue Church was originally built in 1917 for St. Mark's School in Southborough by the prestigious Ernest Skinner firm of Boston. It was installed in the then-new Park Avenue building in 1961 by Henri Lahaise & Son, and appears to have been later repaired and modifie by Robert Morel. One or both of these firms made some useful tonal changes (mostly in the addition of higher-pitched stops and mixtures), but much of the original Skinner tonal work remains, largely unaltered. The organ is advantageously placed, front and center, and speaks out well into the room. When empty, the acoustics are pretty good, although when the room is full there may be some drop-off at the back. Mechanically, the organ has been subject to normal deterioration of leather and electrical components. Rather than being dealt with as a whole, however, mechanical failures have been repaired on only a patchwork basis. The organ has many merits, is of the best quality, and the church is indeed very fortunate to have acquired it when it did. However, due to age and wear, it is by no means in optimum condition either tonally or mechanically at present, and thus does not give the best account of itself.

With an organ of this age, patchwork repairs and tonal additions can only go so far, and in any case are not cost-efficient. What this organ badly needs is a "master plan" that addresses both mechanical and tonal issues in a wholistic and efficient way. I always advise organ committees to view an organ as two separate departments – mechanical and tonal. If the work must be done in segments, mechanical alterations and upgrades should precede any tonal work. Dead notes and cyphers are a signal that the windchest leathers need to be renewed – not one by one as failures occur, but entire chest by entire chest. Then you know that the whole chest is sound, and this saves considerable expensive "band-aid" repairs for a substantial period of time. The same holds true for magnets, air switches, and the like. Even though many still work, they are all the same age as the ones that have failed. The regulator-bellows have all been recently releathered – no doubt because they had to be! – but other leather in such places as swell motors and tremulants probably hasn't been. The console shows many signs of mechanical deterioration, especially in the combination action, but in this case some substantial upgrading is indicated, and most builders will advise converting the stop and combination action to solid-state operation, and adding "memory" and more pistons.

Once all mechanical concerns (restoration and upgrades) have been addressed, attention can be turned to the tonal element. Many sets of pipes require repair and regulation, and all need cleaning. If any further tonal additions are contemplated, they should have been prepared for mechanically (offset chests, stop actions etc.) when the other mechanical work was done. But new pipework should be added only when the mechanical renovation is completed, as part of the total tonal refurbishment – which is the last step in the master plan. While it is possible for this plan to be carried out in stages, those stages should be as large as possible to be cost-effective, and the more that can be done together, the greater the saving. The end result, if done by an experienced and reputable firm, should be an organ that is mechanically reliable and tonally outstanding – and able to give distinguished service for the next half-century or more as an important element in the church's music program. Some of the rebuilding firms that I would personally recommend include Foley-Baker Inc., Pelland Pipe Organ Co.,

Thad H. H. Outerbridge, Czelusniak & Dugal, and Spencer Organ Co. All would probably be happy to come and survey the organ, and give you a workable master plan for its rehabilitation.

Barbara Owen, May 2005