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Dobson Pipe Organ Builders, Op. 90, 2012

Op. 90

"Of the many activities in American churches which I have been privileged to observe, none pleases me more than the Music Program and Religious Arts Festival which has now become so central to the life of Independent Presbyterian Church and the City of Birmingham.

"Too often the Arts are regarded as an alternative to the church's mission. They are part of it. Nourishing people's imaginations, enlarging their perceptions, facing them with the prophecies which the artists offer to our society, is, I have always held, essential to any kind of evangelism. The association of evangelism with tawdry and trivial art is a deplorable error, against which the authorities of Independent Presbyterian Church are marching with magnificent purposefulness."

— Erik Routley, 1982



PHOTO: STEFANIE GOODWILLER

Independent Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, Alabama, was founded in 1915 with an initial membership of nearly five hundred people. These first members intended to establish a church dedicated to the Glory of God through two primary avenues: the cultivation of beauty, and service to their fellow man. In Birmingham's early years IPC fulfilled many social service roles subsequently assumed by public agencies, and the church today maintains ties to those programs as well as administers its own extensive service ministries.

The church's sanctuary is the work of the Birmingham firm of Warren, Knight and Davis, and was designed by partner William Warren, an IPC member, in the English Perpendicular Gothic style. Completed in 1926, it is built of Shades Mountain sandstone with limestone trim, and has a slate roof surmounted by a copper flèche. The interior is enriched by mosaics that depict the four evangelists and by stained glass windows created by D'Ascenzo Studios in Philadelphia.



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Independent Presbyterian Church's beautiful building is a fitting setting for its extensive fine arts program. With the 1964 arrival of Joseph W. Schreiber as Director of Music came the establishment of an annual series of organ recitals in November. In the forty-seven years since, programs have been presented by the most celebrated musicians of the day, including E. Power Biggs, Maurice and Madeleine Duruflé, and Jean Langlais. The church's annual Religious Arts Festival, established in 1972 and held in February, presents lectures and programs devoted to the visual and performing arts and their intersection with Christian faith and life.

The Independent Presbyterian Church Choir is the crown jewel of the music program and has achieved international acclaim through concerts both here and abroad. The choir strives to maintain professional attitudes and high musical standards and maintains a repertoire consisting of over seven hundred anthems and fifty major choral works. In addition to its participation in worship, the choir has toured Europe nine times since 1977, most recently singing in Prague, Slovakia and Vienna. It is well represented on recordings, with twelve releases to date.



PHOTO: PAUL ROMJUE

Along with its many other beautiful appointments, the church was provided with Op. 516 of the Skinner Organ Co., a gift of the church's Woman's Organization. Completed with the church in 1926, the organ had three manuals, five divisions, and forty ranks. In 1969, it was greatly altered by the Æolian-Skinner Organ Co., with many of the original instrument's distinctive features removed in favor of more contemporary tonal elements. Beginning in 1975, the Antiphonal and Positiv divisions were completed by the M.P. Möller Organ Co., and various additional voices were added bringing the size of the organ to eighty-seven ranks. In 1992, a fire destroyed adjacent wings of the church causing smoke and deteriorating damage to the organ that continued to manifest itself. Dissatisfaction with the organ's compromised tonal design and its increasing mechanical trouble persuaded IPC to explore the possibilities offered by an entirely new pipe organ. A design contract was signed with the Dobson Pipe Organ Builders in March

2006, and a contract for the construction of the organ was executed in May 2010. With thanks to God for the gifts shared through His servant, IPC has named the instrument the "Joseph W. Schreiber Memorial Organ."

As preparation for the new pipe organ, Independent Presbyterian Church engaged Robert Mahoney to assess the acoustics of the sanctuary. His analysis identified the ceiling, covered with Celotex, a construction material made of sugar cane fiber, as a major absorber of sound energy. In addition to its



PHOTO: PAUL ROMJUE

undesirable acoustical influence, the Celotex was beginning to decompose, so with Mahoney's help, architect and IPC member Andrew Hicks, of the Birmingham firm of ArchitectureWorks, developed plans for replacement of the ceiling with more reflective materials. Reconstruction of the sanctuary was carried out by general contractor Brasfield & Gorrie, with site supervision by Robert McElroy and was completed in Summer 2011.

Op. 90 is shaped by two important factors: it is entirely situated in chambers, and it must serve as a capable vehicle for both the accompaniment of a large body of choral works and the interpretation of a broad spectrum of solo literature. Fortunately, at IPC, these factors are complementary. Organs chambers are a phenomenon relatively recent in organ history, and they suggest a style of instrument that developed to exploit strengths of chambers

and overcome their weaknesses. The construction of this sort of instrument, in the first half of the 20th century, coincides with the composition of a body of choral repertoire, especially works from England, which are valued by IPC.

But the performance of a wide range of solo literature stretches the abilities of an enchambered instrument. After all, many works expect an instrument that speaks freely and distinctly, even intimately, into the room. How can an enchambered instrument accommodate this music?

Skinner Op. 516 was situated relatively far behind façades of non-speaking pipes. Although there was sentiment within the congregation to retain these façades, we argued strongly for the construction of new casework. Not only would it be able to carry



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speaking pipes, but the woodwork could also be designed to project farther out of the chambers, allowing the placement of windchests in the chamber openings rather than behind them. This materially aids not only the projection of sound from the Great, whose windchests are right behind the façade but also that of the Swell and Pedal, also located in the right chamber, as they can be planted closer to the chamber opening. The new façades were carefully designed to respect the original oak woodwork, and contain pipes of 93% tin belonging to the Great Principal 16' on the right and the Pedal Octave 16' on the left.

The Choir and Solo, located in the left chamber, have an interesting relationship also dictated by the chamber. While there was ample room for the pipes of these divisions in that space, the size of the left chamber relative to its opening precluded

each division from having a dedicated swell shade front there. Instead, the Solo swell box stands as a separate entity within the Choir, the latter having a shade front in the chamber opening. As a result, the Solo is under double expression.

The physical situation in the choir loft similarly affected the design of the console. IPC was eager to introduce a third row of choral seating, but the size of the old console prohibited it. Our new console, inspired by Skinner's examples, is made as shallow as consistent with the style by, among other things, the provision of only three manuals, with both the Choir and Solo at home on the lowest keyboard.

Tonally, the instrument has a classical structure that is expanded by a variety of romantic and symphonic elements. The Great,





Swell and Choir each have choruses framed around 8' Principals, and there are Trumpet voices of varying tone in every department. Each manual has a cornet or jeu de tierce possibility, and there is a variety of strings of differing scales, including a pair of very slender tin Violes d'Orchestre in the Solo. This division recalls smaller examples of Ernest Skinner, with the unexpected luxury of a 16' Tuba, originally Op. 516's Swell Posaune. Because of insufficient height even for pipes of Haskell construction, the Pedal Contra Diapason borrows another page from Mr. Skinner, employing stopped wood pipes of very large scale for the 32' octave, which then change to open wood pipes for the remainder of the rank. Except for the Solo, wind pressures are moderate, with the Great, Choir and Pedal upperwork voiced on 4" pressure, while the Swell is voiced on 5-1/2". The Solo is voiced on 10", save for the Tubas, which are on 20". The Pedal Bombarde 32' is voiced on 12". The Great, Swell and Choir speak on slider windchests having our special design that incorporates relief magnets for crisp repetition. To accommodate the higher pressures and volume of wind required, the Solo and Pedal basses have electro-pneumatic windchests.

PHOTO: PAUL ROMJUE



To honor the original instrument, and because they contribute to the musical whole, several ranks were retained from Op. 516. Additionally, the Möller Antiphonal organ, with its own petite console in the gallery, has been retained, as well as the Chimes, two digital stops and the Bell Star.

The voicing of the instrument brings together various tonal influences in a harmonious, well-digested way. Chorus ranks are voiced boldly to fill the nave, while the location in chambers and effective swell boxes give the softer foundation stops subtlety of expression. A modest number of extensions and duplexing expands registrational possibilities without compromising divisional integrity.

IPC welcomed the arrival of the new organ on Wednesday, 12 October 2011, with a 'Blessing of the Pipes', a brief service complete with crucifer, thurifer and bagpiper. The physical installation of the organ was complete by Thanksgiving, and tonal finishing began on 9 January 2012.

In this day, when budget cuts and the scraping to find the lowest common denominator have, if anything, increased the general debasement of liturgical art lamented by Dr. Routley, it has been a true and refreshing joy for Independent Presbyterian Church and Dobson Pipe Organ Builders to work together in the creation of an instrument fit to assist in the worship of God. May it long serve as a prophetic voice of art and inspiration!

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PHOTO: STEFANIE GOODWILLER



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PHOTO: DAVID J. SANDERS

DOBSON PIPE ORGAN BUILDERS

Dobson Pipe Organ Builders, Ltd. was founded in 1974 by Lynn Alan Dobson, the firm's President and Artistic Director. The firm has constructed ninety new organs that can be found in churches, educational institutions, concert halls and residences from Long Island to Los Angeles. In addition, Dobson has completed about thirty restorations or renovations of older instruments. Though all of its work to date has been in the United States, the company has recently been commissioned to build a three-manual instrument for Merton College in Oxford, U.K., in celebration of the College's 750th anniversary. Employing twenty craftsmen, Dobson's workshop is located on the historic city square of Lake City, Iowa.