

In the wind . . .

by John Bishop



Did you say millions?

It's like making sausages. You might enjoy the finished product but you don't want to know what went into it. Each month I sit to write, often after the official deadline has passed. If I'm lucky, I start with an idea that I've been chewing on for the past couple days. I've written a few notes on the index cards I keep in my briefcase and car, maybe I've even recorded a couple audio notes on my cell phone as I walk the trails in the park next door. The paragraphs are flowing before I get to my desk.

More usually, I sit down and stare at a blank screen waiting for inspiration. I play a recording of organ music, trusting that I'll agree or disagree with something I hear or that the music will bring up a thought that I can spin into an essay. I type the usual heading, and there I sit. It's like staring at your closet wondering what to wear to dinner. *If only that shirt was clean I'd be all set.* I fidget. I clean my glasses, I clean the screen of my laptop, I organize the piles of paper on the desk, allowing myself to be distracted by details I'd better get done first. I change the recording and try again. (Some of you have gotten e-mails from me commenting on your recordings—e-mails written as I get traction on my subject *du jour* (I don't know the French word for month!))

When I have finished writing a column, re-read it several times, and shared it with my editor-wife for her observations and input, I attach the Word.doc to an e-mail addressed to my friend Jerome Butera, tireless editor of this journal, and press <send>. Often I hear from Jerome within minutes—there's never any waiting before I know his reaction.

E.B. White was a celebrated writer for *The New Yorker* magazine and award-winning writer of children's books (*Stuart Little*, *Charlotte's Web*). Shortly after his second marriage to Katherine Sergeant Angell in 1929 (an editor at *The New Yorker*) he moved his family from Manhattan to a farmstead in rural Maine and continued his weekly writing for the magazine. Let me be quick to say I draw no personal comparisons to Mr. White,

whose writing I admire and enjoy enough to justify periodic re-reading. But I can imagine the anguish and insecurity he felt waiting the days and weeks it took for the 1929-style U.S. postal service to get his manuscripts to New York and his editor's responses back to Brooklin, Maine. (I know he had those feelings because he wrote about them—thank you, Jerome, for your dependable quick responses.)

Once a piece is in the hands of the editor, a new set of anxieties crops up. You know the thing about a tree falling in the forest—if there's no one around to hear it, does it make a sound? Of course, we know it does—a sound wave is a physical thing that results from a transmission of energy, whether it's a tree falling or air blowing through an organ pipe. You can't stop physics. But it works as a rhetorical question: if no one reads what I've written, there's no exchange of information. So once I've pressed <send> I wonder where my thoughts will wind up.

§

In mid-April this year when I wrote for the June issue of *THE DIAPASON*, Wendy and I were fresh from Easter services at St. Thomas' Church in New York. I was the one in the congregation scribbling notes on the bulletin and I knew exactly what I wanted to write. I could hardly wait to get home—but wait I did, because after a Midtown lunch we had matinee tickets for a play at the Manhattan Theater Club on East 55th Street in which the son of good friends was a cast member.

It wasn't until the next morning that I wrote about the majesty and beauty of festival worship in that great church, about the brilliance of John Scott, St. Thomas' organist and director of music, and about the public appeal from rector and organist for funding to support the commissioning of a (very costly) new organ. I wrote about how organs are likely to be replaced as styles change, even as organists succeed one another, and how the other artwork (reredos, windows, etc.) in places like St. Thomas' Church is seldom changed.

This is one time that the tree made noise when it fell. Even before I received my mailed copy of the June issue, I had received e-mails and phone calls from friends commenting on what I had written, and in the next weeks Jerome forwarded two thoughtful letters he received from readers of *THE DIAPASON*. Several important points were raised, and I thought it would be worthwhile to respond directly by way of continuing the conversation.

First, your assignment: re-read this column in the June 2011 issue of *THE DIAPASON*.

Arthur LaMirande, concert organist from New York City, wrote:

It is with interest that I have read "In the wind . . ." by John Bishop (*THE DIAPASON*, June 2011). In particular: his remarks with regard to the Arents Memorial organ at St. Thomas Church, New York City.

Opines he: "We scarcely bat an eye before proposing the replacement of a pipe organ."

Is he serious? He goes on to say: "Across

the country, thousands of churches originally equipped with perfectly good pipe organs have discarded and replaced them with instruments more in tune with current trends, more in sync with the style and preferences [italics mine] of current musicians..."

He continues: "Over the decades of service that is the *life of a great organ . . .*" [italics mine].

Now, Mr. Bishop surely must be aware that there are hundreds of organs in Europe that are fully functioning and that have been in existence and in use for *centuries!* (Never mind mere decades!) Even the organ at Notre Dame, Paris, which has been rebuilt several times, contains pipes that go back to the 18th century.

I don't think I was *opining*, rather simply reporting. Plenty of perfectly good pipe organs have been replaced at the urging of a newly hired organist or because the church across the green got a new and larger instrument. It's true, Europe is rich with hundreds of venerable instruments, and we can celebrate that their artistic content and historic value is recognized, allowing them to stay *in situ* and in service. And there are many wonderful historic instruments in this country that have survived the ravages of innovation and fad. Equally, I know many churches where early organs by E. & G.G. Hook were replaced by new-fangled Skinners in the 1920s that were in turn replaced by "revivalist" tracker-action organs in the 1970s—a new organ every fifty years whether you need it or not. When I was starting my career, an older colleague gave me this sage advice: never build an organ for a wealthy church. You'll put your heart into your magnum opus and they'll replace it during your lifetime.

States Mr. LaMirande:

On May 1st this year, I gave a recital on the Arents Memorial organ at St. Thomas Church. The major work on that program was the rarely performed *Chaconne* by Franz Schmidt . . . For an organ that "is on the verge of catastrophic collapse" [from the brochure passed out at St. Thomas Church to which Mr. Bishop makes allusion], it seemed to work extraordinarily well for me. With the exception of one cipher on a (non-essential) stop during rehearsal, I had no problems whatever with this organ. It succeeded in doing everything that I demanded of it. And that for a massive work calling for numerous changes of registration!

We might take exception to the phrase *catastrophic collapse* as used by St. Thomas' Church. After all, assuming the organ hasn't collapsed physically into the chancel wiping out the altos in the choir, what's the big deal if an organ ciphers? (Organists: sorry to say, but there is no such thing as an organ that will never cipher.) Mr. LaMirande experienced a cipher while practicing for his recital, usual enough for any instrument. And if an organ ciphers during worship in a suburban parish church, we might shrug and chuckle, climb the ladder to pull the pipe, and go on with the show.

Keep your pants on.

I've found a delightful video on YouTube showing a significant wedding

faux pas in which the best man's pants fall down just as the couple starts to exchange their vows. As you might expect, the groom found that to be pretty funny—hilarious, in fact. The bride joined in, and the church was full of real, honest laughter for quite a while. The minister was a trooper, acknowledging the humor of the situation. You can find the video at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=26a8JITwImQ>>. You'll love it. It's easy to say "things happen" and enjoy the moment. There's a nice-looking pipe organ in the church. If any of you recognize it, let me know.

But we have a fresh international example of worship and religious festival in which one would not chuckle at the slightest glitch. On April 29 many (most?) of us watched Will and Kate's wedding. Lovely couple, weren't they? Her dress and hair were just right. He had a nice twinkle in his eye, and I enjoyed his little quips to his brother and his new father-in-law. Good thing Prince Harry's pants didn't fall down. The television coverage allowed us glimpses into the personal level of the occasion. But this was a big occasion. Heads of state were omitted from the guest list because of ongoing political and military circumstances. The dignity of the nation's royal family was on display at a time when many Brits are wondering about its future. Heaven only knows how much money was spent. If you include all that was spent by the news media in the weeks leading up to the wedding, the total certainly surpassed the gross national product of many countries. As far as we can tell, it went without a hitch. And the pressure on the staff and officials of Westminster Abbey was made obvious in another wonderful moment immortalized on YouTube when a vergier expressed his relief by turning cartwheels across the nave when the whole thing was over. I know I'm giving you a lot of research to do, but don't miss this one either: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=81Obpxf_p88>.

Off with his head.

The four-manual Harrison & Harrison organ in Westminster Abbey has 84 stops and was installed in 1937 for the coronation of King George VI. How's that for pressure on the organbuilder—miss that deadline and you're in the dungeon. Had that organ ciphered during Will and Kate's wedding, it would have been reported all over the world. Imagine that service grinding to a halt while some technician raced to the chamber. Seventy-five chefs at Buckingham Palace would have panicked. Think of the soufflés. The Queen's lunch would be in ruins. I wonder what Katie Couric and Barbara Walters would have said. The pipe organ universal would have a big black eye. And it would not have been a non-essential stop. There can be no doubt that it would have been the 32-foot Double Ophicleide or the Tuba Mirabilis. Vox Angelicas don't cipher when the pressure is on, and if it had during all that hoopla no one would have noticed. There's an apocryphal story about a team of voicers (I think they worked for Skinner) finishing an organ. The man at the console shouted, "Is the

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Vox Angelica on?" From the chamber, "Yes!" "Make it softer."

While it may be okay for an organ to cipher or a participant's pants to fall down somewhere else, it is not okay at Westminster Abbey. And St. Thomas' Church shoulders a similar responsibility for dignity, grandeur, eloquence, and perfection, inasmuch as perfection is humanly possible. The much-altered Aeolian-Skinner organ there is not the artistic equal of the famed and fabled St. Thomas' Choir, and while the brilliant musicians who play on it don't miss a beat, we can only imagine what it will be like to experience worship there when the new organ is complete. The musicians there can almost taste it. And the responsibility born by the leadership and membership of that church is heightened by the simple fact that in an age when a pipe organ of average size installed in a "usual" church can cost more than a million dollars, an instrument for such a place as St. Thomas' absolutely costs many millions.

Samuel Baker of Alexandria, Virginia wrote:

In the June issue, John Bishop suggests that perfectly good pipe organs are discarded and replaced with instruments more in tune with current trends and more in sync with the style and preferences of current musicians because pipe organs are in motion, whereas windows and statues are not replaced because they are static; physically they stay still.

Despite Bishop's claim that seldom if ever are original design elements integral to the style of the building itself subject to change because they are considered old fashioned, many examples are easily found in my neck of the woods of Federal-style churches being "Victorian-ized" or Victorian-style churches receiving neo-whatever treatments.

And certainly organs are replaced because styles of organbuilding and preferences of musicians change but, rather than ascribe the reason that windows and statues are safe but organs are not to the premise that one is in motion and the other isn't, I would propose that many more pipe organs are replaced because they were poorly designed, built with sub-standard materials, received little or no voicing, and

were wholly unsatisfactory installations in the first place. The same fate awaits stationary items of poor quality and artistic merit with equity.

I agree fully with everything Mr. Baker says here. I appreciate his interest in including these thoughts in this debate. I've been in and out of hundreds of church buildings (actually probably thousands, but that sounds specious) and I've seen countless examples of beautiful liturgical and architectural appointments that have been discarded in favor of newer, lesser "looks," and I've seen less-than-thrilling original equipment replaced to great benefit. However, what I wrote (page 12, fourth column, second paragraph) is, "But seldom, if ever, do we hear of a place like St. Thomas' Church replacing their windows or reredos." The key word is "like."

I wrote, "Just imagine the stunned silence in the vestry meeting when the rector proposes the replacement of the reredos." The allusion is to the vestry and rector at St. Thomas' Church, not the Second Congregational Church in Newcastle, Maine. On Easter Monday I was writing with tongue in cheek—but it's fun to revisit the image. I don't know any of them personally, and I haven't been in their meeting rooms, but I imagine it would be an august group of accomplished, insightful, and influential people sitting at an elegant table in a grand room. And they would be stunned. Images of that reredos have been published on calendars, record jackets (remember those old black LPs?), CD jewel-cases, postcards, and publicity photos for generations. The choir, resplendent in scarlet and white, stands in the chancel with that heap of saints in the background. Replace the reredos? No, Father. It's staying.

The Aeolian-Skinner organ was famously revised by G. Donald Harrison in 1956, converting the 1913 four-manual E. M. Skinner instrument (91 stops) from symphonic to neo-classical in style. Harrison was personally working on the project, hurrying toward completion in time for the AGO national convention

that year. Taxi drivers were on strike and Harrison had to walk many blocks in city heat to get home. He died of a heart attack on the evening of June 14 (93 days after I was born) while watching Victor Borge on television. The organ has subsequently been revised several times. It's 98 years since Ernest Skinner finished the organ, which has now been altered just about every generation with diminishing degrees of success.

When there's so much need in the world . . .

Mr. LaMirande's letter ends:

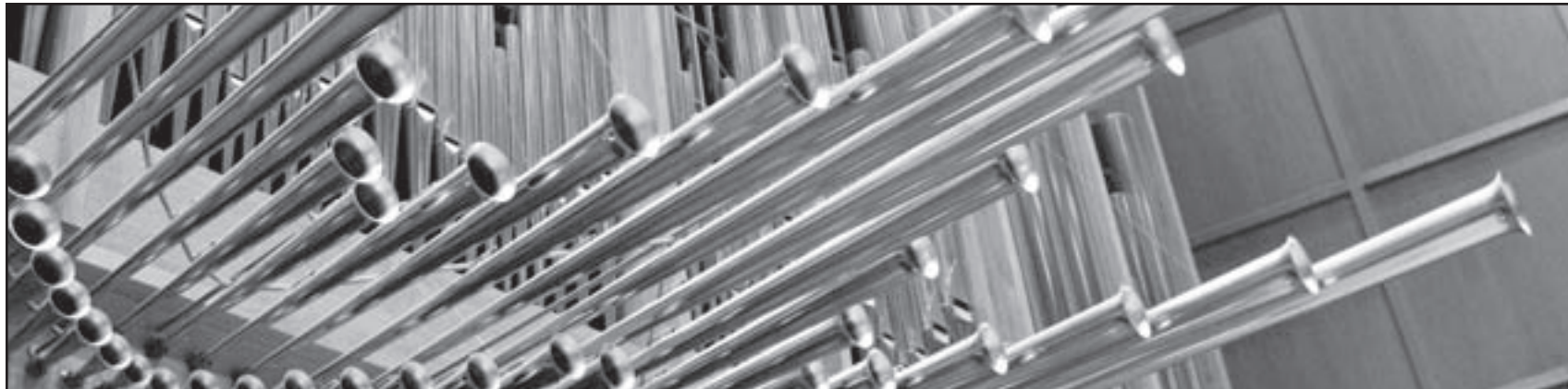
Incidentally, I can't resist pointing out that while St. Thomas Church is prepared to spend the extraordinary sum of \$8 million the homeless and destitute are ensconced on the front steps of this church every night of the week! . . . How many homeless and destitute could be fed, clothed, and housed for that \$8 million?

This is one of the most difficult questions we face as we propose, plan, and create pipe organs for our churches. Of course, it's the mission of the church to care for homeless, destitute people—to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. It's also the mission of the church to provide and present worship experiences at every level. The Royal Wedding was cause for national and international celebration, but Oliver Twist and his cronies still haunt the back streets of London. Without the church's need for illustration of religious texts, tenets, and principles, we would not have the sculpture or painting of Michelangelo, the organ music of Bach, the choral music of Mozart and Haydn, or the Gothic cathedrals. If it had developed at all, without the influence and resources of the church, the pipe organ would be a wholly different entity. And the majesty of our great churches as they serve as figureheads and examples for all worshipful expression supports and inspires the work of the church at all levels and in all places. Those who toil in suburban and rural vineyards travel to the big city to experience "big city" worship in "big

city" buildings, just as we marvel in the great museums, theaters, orchestras, and other institutions that can only be supported in a city like New York. I care a lot about the homeless and I try to do all I can to support them, but I don't go to St. Thomas' Church to hear a sub-standard organ any more than I want to see plastic flowers on the altar in front of that reredos.

All this talk about expensive art leads us to the world of philanthropy. Any church that plans to acquire a new pipe organ will rely on the availability of a few large gifts to make it happen. I've long assumed and often witnessed that those individuals who are capable of making a major gift in support of an organ project do so because of their personal interests. But I've been privileged to witness another level of philanthropy that has informed and affected me deeply. Wendy served on the board of a major university for nearly twenty years. During that tenure we became friends with a lovely couple of immense wealth. They are dedicated to philanthropy—she focuses on social and humanitarian projects and he supports the arts. Their names are at the top of donor lists for every show in town. Several years ago during dinner at our house, the husband told us how a repertory theater company had approached him asking for a significant grant to support the production of a controversial play that tackled some of our thorniest social issues. He disagreed with a lot of the content and was uncomfortable with most of it, but he thought it was his responsibility to make the gift anyway. He said something to the effect of, "I knew if I gave them the money I'd have to go see the play."

I was impressed and moved by this story, and in the years since I've often reflected on the nature of philanthropy and how much we all benefit from it. Whether it's a church organ, a statue in the park honoring a public servant, an academic building, or a shelter for the homeless, the world relies on philanthropy. The trick is to be sure that all the bases are covered. ■



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