

1999/2000 Season

Friends of Music
at Guilford

— A LITTLE PIECE OF

A Visit with Pipe Organ Restorer Lawrence Nevin

by Zeke Hecker

"In the 1970's I apprenticed with an organ builder in New Jersey who knew Graham Down. I remember hearing his stories about a little pipe organ out in Guilford, Vermont, and hair-raising rides down a twisty dirt road with Graham at the wheel."

It's the summer of 1999, and Larry Nevin stands in his two car garage surrounded by the dismembered carcass of that organ: bellows, chests, a fan-shaped keyboard apparatus, a few pipes. Cars have been exiled to the driveway. Like the rest of the house — situated on a wooded ridge in sleepy Langdon, New Hampshire — the garage is a work in progress.

"There was some discussion about whether we would restore the bellows including the pumper mechanism, or just forget the pumper," he says, showing us the result, which looks like a horizontal pile of doorframes edged with new white leather. "We decided to restore it so that it could still be hand pumped. Joe Elliott's son once pumped it for his father during a Labor Day Weekend recital. This is a double bellows, and these strips of leather are check valves. Mice had gotten through them, so they had to be replaced. When you hand pump this double feed system, you hear a little shudder of wind."

A Career Track

Larry felt a big shudder when he discovered his lifelong vocation. "I got the itch to find out about pipe organs in high school. Our music department took us to Lincoln Center for a Leonard Bernstein Young People's Concert. This was about 1965, and Philharmonic Hall was getting its new Aeolian Skinner organ. Virgil Fox, the celebrated organist, was there helping to supervise the installation, and gave us a demonstration. First he played the full organ. I was dumbfounded. I'd never heard anything like it. Then he showed us all the different sounds and voices, from the highest half-inch pipe to the full length thirty-two foot reed stop. I wanted to know how this sound can be produced. I came at it through my ears."

He eventually took a job in Boston with Aeolian Skinner — "the Rolls Royce of organ building" — though the company was caught in a downward spiral and eventually folded. "I wanted to be a voicer. How do you coax that sound out of a little piece of metal and some air?"

Gets Wind of the Guilford Organ

By the time he arrived in Vermont in 1973, he had served a seven-year apprenticeship parcelled out among several builders. "I moved to Jacksonville Stage, near Guilford Center; I was living hand to mouth and working mostly out of state. I met Don McLean at a concert; that's how I found the Guilford Tracker Organ.



"I liked that its location was unique, that it was used for public performance in a barn, with some of the audience seated outside on lawn chairs. I liked that it was a secular location, something sorely missed in this country. It was very common at the turn of the century, with town halls having their own pipe organs and recitals by touring organists. Historically, that came to an end with the advent of movies and recordings. Few remain. The one in Portland, recently restored, is famous: an enormous instrument, almost the opposite of this one.

"Another important thing about the Guilford Organ is the pipe work, most of which was new for the 1999 restoration. Graham had the pipes made by the firm of E. W. Anderson, which was located in the village of Algiers in Guilford. These were the sons of the Estey Organ Company's main pipe makers; they inherited his business. So here's a piece of local history. How rare it is to have a first-class, well-known pipe maker living in a small rural district like Guilford! It's nice that the organ, residing in this town, has indigenous roots."

Romantic Origins

Not entirely. The Guilford Organ began life in the Victorian era, built by E. W. Lane and likely installed in a church in Maine — Graham Down located it in storage in a Maine barn. "It sounded completely different from what we hear now," says Larry. "Graham made it into a baroque chamber organ. Obviously, you can play the notes of any repertory, but because of its stop list this instrument does not lend itself to late nineteenth century Romantic literature, especially French. That's when organ building went off on a tangent, away from the principles of builders at the time of Bach.

METAL AND SOME AIR —

“Nineteenth century builders were affected by Wagnerian ideals of big orchestral sound; the organ tried to imitate the orchestra instead of remembering what an organ should be. The registrations for that repertory don't exist on this organ. Nor does it have some of the 'color' voices of the larger baroque organs — no reed stops, for instance — so some of the big works of Bach don't 'sound' on it. But it's excellent for most baroque literature such as Sweelinck, Buxtehude, and the Handel organ concerti. It's also suitable for contemporary pieces. I'd do John Cage on it. With the hand pump mechanism you can create all sorts of special effects. You can over-pressure it, or let the air out and build up again slowly.”

The action also makes it especially suitable for baroque music. Each key is connected mechanically by a “tracker” to a valve which opens the channel to wind from the bellows. This action, says Larry, gives the instrument an intimate feel. “You can actually affect the speech of the pipe by your touch on the key. Strike the key to make the organ percussive in speech. Open the pallets in a slower fashion to get a smoother, more legato sound. It's like the

difference between staccato and legato tonguing in a wind instrument.”

Full Bodied with a Hint of Squirrel

If you find the vocabulary of wine-tasting esoteric, try describing the sound of a particular organ. Pressed for a Guilford Organ soundbyte, Larry comes up with “fresh” and “bright” and “present.” “It's a chamber instrument; that's where it shines. It has limited voices, but each voice is important to the ensemble. With only seven stops, you have to make sure they're doing what they need to do; you can't allow any to be superfluous. Actually, I found the original voicing a little too bright even for the dead acoustics of the barn in its former condition. All those boards with raw surfaces from the sawmill, the dirt floor — they acted like a sponge, and accentuated the rawness of the sound. The rebuilt barn will make what we used to hear sound better, but I still expect that I'll have to moderate the sound, to subdue some of the 'partials' (high frequency overtones).

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Photo by Robert F. George