

In South Salem, a Pipe Organ Worthy of a Bach

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By ROBERTA HERSHENSON

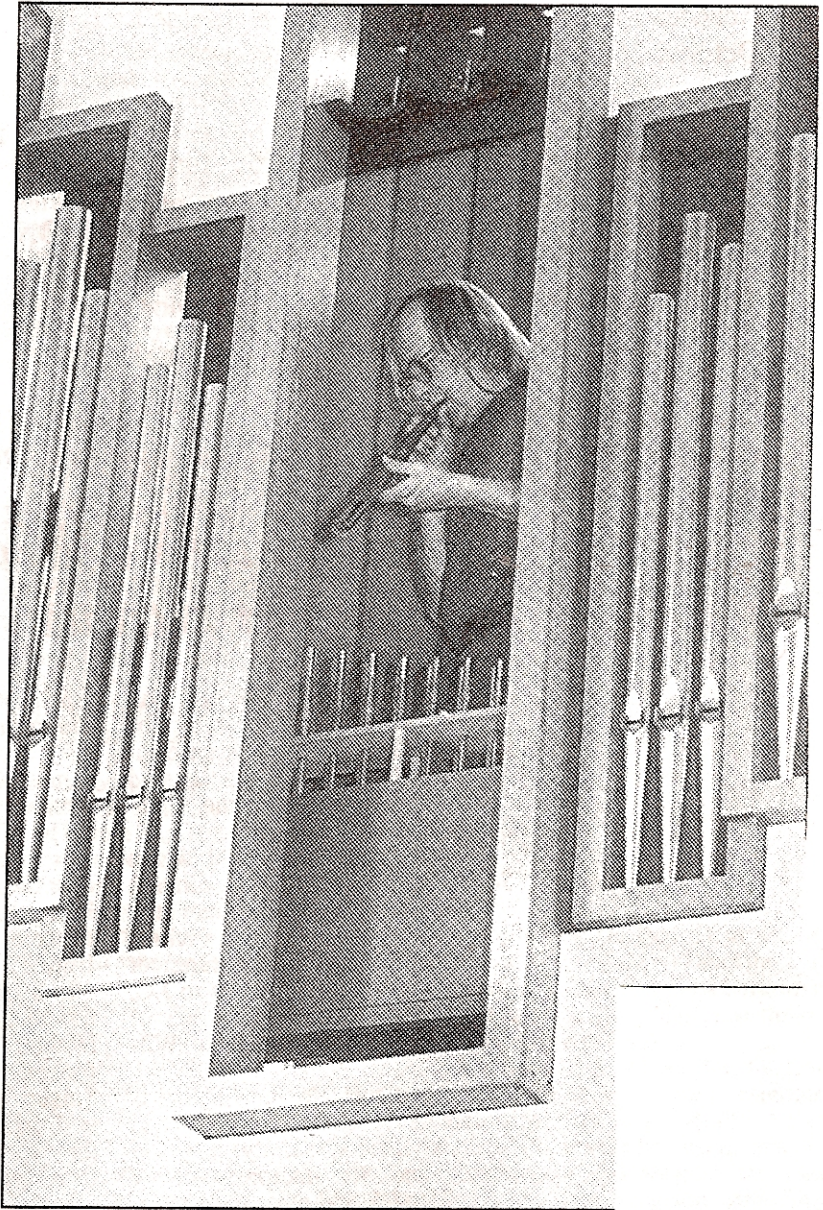
IT MIGHT BE CALLED the Jessye Norman of pipe organs, custom designed and fitted and possessed of a powerful pair of lungs. But its builder, Stephen J. Russell simply called the organ his Opus 27 as he supervised its recent installation at the South Salem Presbyterian Church here.

Organ experts talk in human terms about their instrument. Organs have voices, their pipes have lips, ears, feet and toes, they inhabit rooms of their own. Or, as the organist Robert Fertitta pointed out one recent morning here, the organ room is the instrument, because the chamber is filled with the pipes and wind mechanisms that produce sound.

Mr. Fertitta, music director of the church, was nearly bursting with excitement as he worked alongside Mr. Russell and his crew. The organ builder, president of Russell & Company of Cambridgeport, Vt., had spent more than four months making the instrument for the church. It was rare, Mr. Fertitta said, for a hamlet like South Salem to acquire the grand dame of musical instruments, let alone one specially made by a fine craftsman. He predicted that the new pipe organ would attract musicians from far and wide.

The 225-member congregation began its organ drive two years ago, raising more than \$120,000 to replace its electronic organ with a new instrument and renovate the 20-year-old white clapboard church. A balcony of pews was ripped out and a new enclosure built; the floor of the organ room was strengthened to prevent vibration, and electrical work was done.

Cut into the new wall high above the chancel, where a workman was now installing some of the organ's 1,192 pipes, were rectangular openings that marked the instrument's facade. Unseen behind this simple face, an elaborate mechanism would produce music, as organs had done for 1,000 years. Bach was said to test



Photographs by Roberta Hershenson for The New York Times

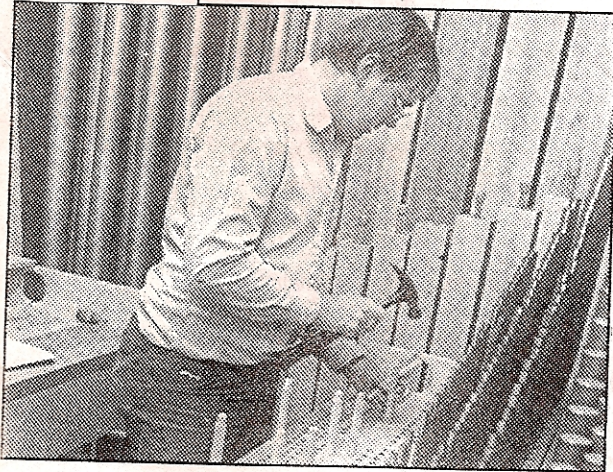
Larry Nevin, an organ builder, checks the "voicing" of a pipe by blowing into it. Stephen Russell of Russell & Company, a Vermont organ maker, hammers in rack pins, which will support a group of pipes.

Creating sound with air, not electrodes.

what he called "the lungs" of every new organ he played. Now, as the weeklong installation here neared its end, Mr. Russell began the painstaking job of tuning the new instrument and testing its lungs. "Each pipe is individually adjusted for volume, tone quality and articulation," he said. "Each pipe has its own unique shape, which determines tone."

He was seated at a console in the sanctuary, shouting instructions to workers up in the organ chamber. "That's slow and a hair soft," he said as he played one pitch. "A little more drive, please, a little more wind." Another pitch had a different problem. "That has a bright sizzle in it," he said, "and it's a hair loud."

If the adjustments sounded like the efforts of a bad flute or recorder player, it was because organ pipes are constructed like recorders, Mr. Russell said. But the longest pipe of the South Salem organ is eight feet long, while the working length of the shortest pipe is one quarter inch and approaches the sound of a dog whistle. As in most contemporary organs,



this one receives wind by means of an electronically driven blower; holes in the "toe" or bottom of each pipe allow the air in. If a particular pitch is not desired, the air hole is covered or stopped; hence the expression "pull out the stops" in organ parlance.

The county's newest organ, with 20 ranks — or sets — of pipes, is of medium size compared with some others in the county. Mr. Fertitta said the organ in the Rye Presbyterian Church, with 68 ranks, is the county's largest. Mr. Fertitta often plays the world's largest movable organ, the 59-rank Flentrop pipe organ owned by Purchase College. He dresses up like Bach to play the Flentrop for schoolchildren and has performed the Saint-Saëns Organ Symphony on it with the Westchester Philharmonic.

Mr. Fertitta, an associate professor of music at Purchase College and director of the Sacred Music Program there, has also performed with the Philharmonia Virtuosi and the Westchester Symphony. He is a seasoned recitalist and accompanist who has played at St. Patrick's Cathedral and Columbia University. He deserves a fine instrument, said George VanMarter, a member of the congregation and choir at the South Salem Presbyterian Church.

Mr. VanMarter said it was "a financial stretch" for the congregation to buy the organ but that a good instrument was necessary "to bring in people of the quality of Robert Fertitta." He said he hopes the new organ "would be enjoyed for many generations to come."

Mr. Fertitta, meanwhile, was gleefully ready to dismantle the old electronic organ that he had played since coming to the church a year ago. "It's shot, just about dead," he said, pulling the plug on the pipeless console. While the old instrument produced a sound with "transistors, electrodes and speakers," he said, the pipe organ "creates sound with air, and you can feel it." He added: "It has a wonderful way of combin-

ing with the human voice because that, too, is wind. An electronic organ is just like turning on a stereo."

Mr. Fertitta and the organists Anthony and Mary Jane Newman will present a free concert to dedicate the new organ in the 350-seat church next Sunday at 4 P.M. Ms. Newman is a former music director of the church, and her husband helped design the organ. The concert will feature the music of Bach, Handel and Brahms.

Three concerts will follow, Mr.

Fertitta said. On Dec. 11 at 4 P.M., Harold Rosenbaum will lead the Canticum Novum Singers in a Christmas concert, with Mr. Fertitta at the organ. Tickets are \$10.

On April 21 at 8 P.M., Mr. Fertitta will be joined by a brass ensemble, and on May 21 at 4 P.M. the church choir will present its spring concert. Mr. Fertitta will conduct and play the organ in a program combining classical works with show music. Ticket prices will be announced.

For further information, including directions to the church, at 111 Spring Street, the number to call is 763-9282. ■