ST. DOMINIC'S R.C. CHURCH

CARL SCHWARTZ

ST. DOMINIC'S PARISH was established by the Dominican Fathers in 1852. Located on what was virtually an island, surrounded by the Potomac River and other swampy tributaries at Sixth and F Streets, SW, the first Gothic-style church building was dedicated on March 19, 1854. The first organ of St. Dominic's was a 1/8 Pomplitz & Rodewald installed the same year. One of the early choir directors of the church was John Esputa, a Spaniard, who was the first music teacher of John Philip Sousa. Sousa lived only a few blocks away.

On November 9, 1865, ground was broken for the present gray granite church designed by architect Patrick C. Keeley of New York. Because of poor economic conditions following the Civil War, construction ceased once the exterior walls were raised, and it was not until 1870 that the work resumed. The new church, 200 feet long by 80 feet wide, was dedicated on June 13, 1875. We assume that the Pomplitz organ was relocated to the new church at that time.

On March 12, 1885, the church was badly damaged by a fire that destroyed the roof and much of the interior, including the altar and organ. Like the medieval cathedral builders, the parishioners immediately set to work rebuilding their church. The following Sunday, Mass was celebrated amidst the rubble. There seems to have been little hesitation in the matter of reconstruction. The contract for the Hilborne L. Roosevelt organ, Opus 290, dates from 1885. It was not installed, however, until at least 1887, at which point the church had been rebuilt and the fine tower added. This discrepancy gave rise to the notion, held until recently by some, that the organ was both designed and built under the direction of Frank Roosevelt. Hilborne died on December 31, 1886, and the organ is listed in company publications as the work of Hilborne.

The Roosevelt organ is similar to the Style 55 (Bis) found in the company's catalog. Pipes were placed on Roosevelt-Haskell pneumatic windchest rather than standard slider chests. St. Dominic's instrument has a Mixture V on the Great instead of the specified four-rank Mixture, and a Swell Cornet III-IV-V instead of the Mixture III. Judging from latter comments in correspondence from Theodore Lewis, the organ was not equipped with the Roosevelt adjustable combination action and had a standard mechanical-action console. This must have been one of the finest organs in the city at the time it was installed and was considered one of the larger if not the largest in the area.

The organ was most likely in the center of the gallery with the enclosed Great and Choir immediately behind on the lower level, the Swell division above, and the Pedal divided at the sides. The organ's colorful diapered facade blocked the view of the rose window. A 1903 article gives evidence that the bellows were operated by means of a water motor, but the water pressure was often insufficient and the organ sometimes had to be pumped by hand!

1. Roosevelt Organ, August, 1892. A dated, geographical list of organs built by the Roosevelt Organ Works from 1873–1892, p. 7: St. Dominic's Church R.C. 3 manuals, 1885, 33 speaking stops, 58 total number of stops. It is likely that business arrangements for the organ were transacted direct with the New York factory of the Roosevelt firm. Roosevelt was a favored builder for parishes run by the Order. Much correspondence regarding later work to the organ was handled through the Dominican Fathers, Province of St. Joseph, 869 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York.


3. Hilborne L. Roosevelt, Manufacturer of Church, Chapel, Concert and Chamber Organs, catalog published by Roosevelt Organ Works (December 1888), 48. The contract is said to reside in the archives held at the Dominican House of Studies. While others have seen it and confirm its existence, the writer's request went unanswered at the time of the writing of this article.


5. No photograph has been found. The instrument is similar to other Roosevelt organs of the period, however.

6. The original diapering can be studied on the former facade pipes, now offset within the present layout.

The record indicates that the church enjoyed excellent music and the organ was highly regarded. Joseph Bonnet, organist of St. Eustache, Paris, played at St. Dominic's on January 20, 1921.  

In 1929, another fire damaged St. Dominic's. The organ was not burned, but the tracker action was ruined and the organ suffered smoke, heat, and water damage. The firm of Lewis & Hitchcock, then just blocks away, removed the organ to the factory until the church could be repaired. Lewis praised the excellence of the Roosevelt organ with comments reflecting his usual appreciation of the fine qualities of older instruments.

When returned to St. Dominic's, the organ was arranged on one level, new wind regulators and blower were installed and the windchess converted to electropneumatic action. A new electropneumatic console with combination action was attached to the case in the manner of the original. The new console had a compass of 61 notes for the manuals and 30 in the Pedal, but the chest compasses were not extended. No alterations to the pipes were proposed or effected. A new facade was fashioned, still with speaking pipes, and other pies, formerly part of the center array, were planted on offsets, some horizontally on top of the expression boxes. As one carefully proceeds through the organ to reach the Pedal division, tightly packed behind the organ, an apparition of sorts looms up: the low C pipe of the Double Open Diapason with faded diapering standing all alone like a great obelisk against the inside back wall of the church. Behind the new facade, the Great and Choir are on the left side and the Swell is on the right. The enclosures stand separately and do not share a common wall. There is a narrow passage between the two through which one must pass to reach the Pedal division, divided at the rear of the organ. The latter is installed with little space for direct access to the pipes. The motivation behind the alteration to the layout was likely the uncovering of the previously-hidden rose window.

The original feeder bellows and double-rise reservoir were removed. A Spencer Orgablo was provided with an attached Spencer regulator that fed individual cone-valve regulators, still in use. There is no evidence that the wind pressure was altered in any significant way. The console, operating on higher wind pressure than the rest of the organ, had its own blower, a Spencer Jr.

The organ was rededicated on November 30, 1930, with a recital by Constantino Yon, organist of St. Vincent Ferrer Church, New York City, a service of Solemn Benediction followed. In attendance were many dignitaries from the diplomatic community.

At the time of the fire-related renovation, the Roosevelt chests were not relathered; that was done about 1941. In 1953, Lewis & Hitchcock relathered the console. In 1954, Southwest Washington was swept clear in an ill-conceived frenzy of urban "renewal." It would be decades before the residential aspect of the area was reestablished, now a convenient neighborhood for those working downtown. The organ soldiered on.

By the 1970s, the organ was once again in need of renovation and, in spite of the best intentions of all, it would not emerge unscathed. Proposals to renovate and repitch the

9. T.C. Lewis of Lewis & Hitchcock to Fr. Meagher, New York City, June 4, 1929 as well as other correspondence from that time, courtesy of Lewis & Hitchcock Inc.
organ to A440 were prepared and submitted by both Lewis & Hitchcock and their major competitor, the Newcomer Organ Company. Newcomer’s bid was accepted by the pastor on July 7, 1970. The proposed work was extensive and the plan prepared by the late Robert Wyant for the Newcomer firm. The contract specifies a complete renovation of the Roosevelt-Lewis & Hitchcock organ (except console):

1. Remove all pipes of 8 ft. length and smaller and transport to Organbuilder’s shop at Smithsburg, Md. All pipes to be thoroughly cleaned, tuner slides installed, stopers repacked, repitched to A440, and voicing adjustments made to restore the original strength and timbre of tone. The Choir 8’ Concert Flute to be completely revoiced to secure more noticeable articulation of speech.
2. Factory revoice all reed pipes to restore original tonal qualities and stability, repitch to A440.
3. Thoroughly vacuum clean entire mechanism and structure of organ.
4. Completely repleather the entire organ action consisting of manual chests, pedal chests, stop action ventilers, stop action exhausts, primary stations, and reservoirs.
5. Electrification of Great offset chests to eliminate sluggish response.
6. Repack chest toeboards and bottom boards as required and install compression springs or lock washers wherever practical to reduce the effect of humidity variations.
7. Rearrange the layout of Pedal and Great offset chests to provide access for proper tuning and regulation of Pedal Organ pipework.
8. Furnish and install electronic Chimes (35 bells) to replace present electropneumatic unit.
9. Furnish and install all electric inertia Tremulants to replace electropneumatic units of Swell and Choir divisions.
10. Artistically tone-regulate and tune the organ to A440 pitch at 70 degrees.

In a letter of January 13, 1971, to Homer Lewis Jr. of Trivo in Hagerstown, Maryland, Bob Wyant writes regarding work to the reed ranks “The entire organ is being renovated mechanically, but there will be no tonal changes at all, except that the pitch is to be raised to A440 to accommodate using organ and instruments together. We are anxious to recapture the original timbre and strength in all these ranks and hope that raising the pitch will not make this too difficult. Despite the large scales, the chorus reeds have a lot of bite.” Wyant mentions that several reed pipes are missing and will have to be replaced.

The same day Wyant sent instructions to the Newcomer shop:

I have been forceful about not changing the sound of the organ as I can remember Ernest White’s comments when I took him to see the organ some years ago—he couldn’t believe something like it was left anywhere. We will ignore our usual practice of deslotting the strings, etc. and I can’t see any way to improve this organ at all.

He gave numerous directions to the shop and indicated that plugged-foot wooden pipes were to be refitted with modern lead-toe ‘feet’, being careful to keep some pipes unaltered initially so that the voicer could match them with the new toes. With regard to repitching the organ he complained:

He was particular that “The thermometer should read up in the area of the pitch rank not at the level of the voicing chests.”

Wyant was also concerned about the cone-valve regulators and their tendency to cause unsteady wind if not carefully renovated and regulated. An average wind pressure of 25/26″ was selected for the whole organ at this time. While the Pedal, Choir, and Great were within 1/26″ of each other, the Swell pressure stood at 13/26″ when the organ was taken apart. He mentions also that the only change to the voicing is to be the increased articulation desired in the Choir 8’ Concert Flute. The Swell Spitzflute was to be cut short when repitched, however, so that it might be tuned as an undulant with the 8’ Salicional.

The materials list for Newcomer Job 7031 indicates that the new chimes unit was by Schulmerich and that the new tremulants and associated relays were by Wicks. Tuning slides came from: Organ Supply, Durst, and Trivo. Ominously, there is no order for leather. An invoice dated January 14, 1971, places an order for 25 yards of Numalon and 16 containers of cement complete with five credit references.

The outcome of this project, well intentioned in all regards and executed by experienced, honest, and honorable parties was a catastrophe for the Roosevelt. Synthetic material enumerated in the previous paragraph, Numalon, was substituted for leather. There is no record of a conversation between Newcomer and the client regarding this matter.11

11. As in so many cases, “change work orders” in many organ projects are not confirmed in writing, leading to later confusion and controversy. Likely the matter was discussed and approved by church officials.
There were great expectations for new materials in this period. Other fine details important to the proper operation of the Roosevelt action motors may have been overlooked in the rebuilding as well. In the final analysis, the particulars are irrelevant. The action failed within the next decade. The writer visited the organ as a student in the mid-1970s and found new (to his ears) and enchanting sounds but an otherwise unplayable organ. Out of warranty and no longer playable, the organ fell silent.

Beginning in the early 1980s, discussions took place with an aim to reviving the Roosevelt, perhaps connecting it to a new chancel organ, and other possibilities. Action leather was clearly something that the client and many organists wanted to avoid at that time. After nearly a decade of study, a contract was awarded to R.A. Daffer Inc. to renovate the organ yet again. Apparently, a decision was made to reconstruct the manual chest action with Wicks Direct-Electric valves. A new drawknob console was fabricated and appointed with what appears to be both refurbished and new components: the manuals are now 58 notes. Couplers, activated by Roosevelt style drawknobs, are arranged in a single row over the Swell keyboard. The organ is equipped with a Peterson Duo-Set combination action and transmission is by means of a Peterson Multiplex system. Existing electropneumatic offsets, many dating from 1930, were retained. The 1½' rank of the Great Mixture was taken off the existing toeboard and placed on its own elevated electropneumatic chest on the inside wall of the Great/Choir chamber. Likewise, the 2½' Twelfth and 2' Super Octave were placed on their own elevated offset chest located on the back wall of the Great/Choir swell box.

The additions made to the specification in the course of this project are slight. A new 8' and 4' Pedal unit Principal has been installed on the outside of the Swell box. A Voix Celeste (t.c.) has been added to the Swell on its own chest, placed on an inside swell box wall. The added pipes are old and of unknown origin, but were probably made by Möller. More recently, the Spencer blower failed and it has been replaced with a new slow-speed Laukhuff blower of ample capacity. A static reservoir has also been provided to regulate the higher output of the new blower and stabilize the winding; unsteadiness has been eliminated.

The interest of the present organists of the parish, Ben LaPrairie and Jonathan Hellerman, coupled with the understanding support of music director, J.C. Cantrell, the pastor, Fr. Gregory Salomone, OP, and former pastor and organist Fr. Norman Haddad, OP, has resulted in some further refinement to the organ in 2010–11. The curators have corrected a number of minor mechanical problems, recovered pipe stoppers, and stabilized wind pressures. A number of speech problems have been addressed.

The reorientation of the divisions in 1930 may have had some slight impact on divisional balance but, in fact, the expression enclosures open toward the nave, as they did before 1930. Only the elevations have been altered, not the directionality of the divisions. No one can deny that placing pipes voiced on a slider windchest or the Roosevelt-Haskell type on new Direct-Electric actions will result in pronounced pipe speech changes. One can hear the result when close to the pipes. In the vast acoustics of St. Dominic's, the perception of this is diminished and difficult to hear. Regrettable as this change might be from the historical and tonal perspective, the Roosevelt organ can, happily, once again be heard in something approaching its original splendor. The new action is a durable one and has been installed with an aim to provide easy access for service and long-term economy.

There remain a number of questions regarding the ultimate extent of tonal and pitch revisions made during the work in 1971–1972. Even at a measured wind pressure of three inches, the organ tends to lie on the low side of A440 at 70 F. At the time of documentation, it was not possible to have a clear answer regarding this detail because work to the organ and its wind system was ongoing. There is no visible evidence of changes to the lovely Choir Concert Flute. The Swell Spitz Flute, however, appears to have been modified as planned. One second-hand report indicates that the reed stops were merely cleaned and repaired, and not otherwise
modified. Following the 1972 work, it was remarked that somehow the fine reeds had lost their "bite." The reaction of the organ in 1989 is said to have restored the vitality of the reeds and ensemble for which the organ was previously known. Rooted in the memory and perception of people with different hearing and tastes, the actual facts are difficult to pin down. Is it not fortunate that this organ can now be heard and enjoyed rather than languishing in silence? If the beauty of this musical instrument can be understood by those who cherish it, it is all the more likely future generations will be inspired by the builder's art.

On Sunday February 27, 2011 the Roosevelt organ was dedicated anew and presented in recital by talented parish organists Ben LaPrairie and Jonathan Helleman. This was a good opportunity for Washington organists to evaluate and hear an organ unfamiliar to most. The organ and excellent program were enthusiastically received. The artists presented the music of Bach, Mendelssohn, Franck, Saint-Saëns, Vierne, West, and Dupré. In dialogue between the Roosevelt and the parish choir organ, a four-rank Möller Artiste, Opus 9801 (1962), they played Gigout's Grand Chœur dialogue—an added treat.

St. Dominic's has an ongoing history that is at one with the changes that have swept the area of the city in which it stands. No longer physically an island, the area has, successively, been home to working class citizens, a relatively segregated African-American neighborhood deemed a slum and simply torn down in the 1950s and then transformed by urban renewal and surrounded by offices of the ever-expanding Federal Government. In this midst of this startling transformation, the Dominicans have kept a spiritual witness when many other churches in the area have vanished. Today there is a residence for members of the order adjacent to the church. The order also operates the Dominican House of Studies at the Catholic University of America.

SOURCES


Correspondence, Records, Contracts of Lewis & Hitchcock Inc. and Newcomer Organ Company on this organ, courtesy of Lewis and Hitchcock Inc.

Information provided to author courtesy of: R.A. Dafer Inc., Michael V. Hart, Ben LaPrairie, William Parsons.


"Church to dedicate organ next Sunday," The Washington Post (November 22, 1930): 5.


Survey of the organ by Carl Schwartz and Peter Crisafulli and with the kind assistance of Bill Teysier, senior pipe voice of R.A. Dafer Inc.

Roosevelt Organ, August, 1892. A dated, geographical list of organs built by the Roosevelt Organ Works from 1873–1892. Courtesy of the American Organ Archives of the Organ Historical Society.


Hilborne L. Roosevelt, Manufacturer of Church, Chapel, Concert and Chamber Organs, catalog pub. by Roosevelt Organ Works (December 1888). Courtesy of the American Organ Archives of the Organ Historical Society.

Documentation: Carl Schwartz, Peter Crisafulli, and Ben LaPrairie.

17. One wonders if this had to do with the sluggishness of the rebuilt action or simply the regulation of the pipes after they were installed.

18. It has been heard from time to time, but is not well known to Washington, D.C., organists and less so to audiences.

19. This is a recent arrival.

20. As in London or even more poignantly, Rome, ancient streams now flow underground in man-made sewers. Washington's Tiber Creek still exists underground.
HILBORNE L. ROOSEVELT
OPUS 290 (1885)
LEWIS & HITCHCOCK (1929)
NEWCOMER ORGAN COMPANY
(1971–72)
R.A. DAFFER INC. (1989 AND LATER)

COMPASS: Manuals, 58 notes
Pedal, 30 notes
WIND PRESSURE: 3"
PITCH: A440 @ 44 F

GREAT (enclosed with Choir)
16 Double Open Diapason
1–29 zinc, rest common metal, slotted, medium nicking. CC at rear of organ between pedal chests with original diapering, 2–15 in facade
8 Open Diapason
1–17 zinc, rest slotted, common metal, some offset including on top of expression enclosure, originally in facade, removed 1930
8 Doppelflöte
wood, double mouths throughout, 1–58
8 Viola di Gamba
1–12 zinc, roller bridges to #31, fine nicking, slotted, tin
8 Gemshorn
1–12 zinc, 1–29 slotted, slight taper, medium nicking, spotted metal
4 Octave*
1–12 zinc, 1–24 slotted, 13–58 common metal, medium nicking
4 Flute Harmonique*
basses 1/4m, slotted to 36, harmonic
25–58, single node hole front and back, 1–24 1/4m, 25–58, (wide) 3/8m, arched lips, medium nicking 2/3 Twelfth,*
1–19 slotted, ears 1–28, slight taper, slightly arched upper lip, fine nicking, narrow in bass, slow halving
2 Super Octave*
1–29 slotted, ears, common metal
1% Mixture V (original composition)
290 pipes, Slotted basses, common metal, 17th has slightly arched upper lip 17th has been removed to offset chest on Choir–Great expression box side wall
1–12 17 19 22 26 29
13–24 15 17 19 22
25–36 12 15 17 19 22
36–48 8 12 15 17 19
49–58 1 8 12 15 17
1½ Quint Mixture IV (same, less Tierce)*
8 Trumpet*
zinc stems, spotted metal bells, 49–58 flues, large scale
SWELL
16 Bourdon
wood, right diagonal nicking on languid, lower lip nicked
8 Open Diapason
1–17 zinc, rest common metal, slotted, medium nicking
8 Stopped Diapason
wood, right diagonal nicking, sharp upper lip
8 Spitz Flute
zinc butts 1–12 with spotted metal slots, rest common metal, medium nicking, arched upper lip, narrow mouth
8 Salicional
1–12 zinc with spotted metal slots, 1–32 roller bridges, fine nicking, slotted, tin
8 Veix Celestes (c.c., new 1989)
on own chest on Swell box wall, pipes of unknown origin (Möller?) 13–44 roller bridges, spotted metal, slotted
4 Octave
5–5 zinc rest common metal, 1–24 slotted, medium nicking
4 Hohlflöte
4–48 wood, right diagonal nicking, sharp upper lip, inverted mouths, metal tuning flaps, 49–58 tapered metal trebles
2 Flageolet
slight taper, arched upper lips, light nicking, common metal
Cornet III–V
210 pipes, common metal, slotted
1–24 12 15 17
25–36 8 12 15 17
37–58 1 8 12 15 17
8 Cornopean
1–27 zinc stems, spotted metal bells, harmonic at 44, 49–58 flues, tapered shallots, 6” bell at CC, 18 is replacement pipe
8 Oboe
1–27 zinc stems, spotted metal bells, 28–48 spotted metal, 49–58 flues, flared bells, tapered shallots

CHOIR
8 Gelgen Diapason
1–18 zinc, rest Spotted Metal, slotted, fine nicking
8 Concert Flute
1–12 stopped wood, 13–58 wood, harmonic from 31, right diagonal nicking, inverted mouth, arched upper lip, one node hole
8 Quintadena
1–12 zinc with wood stoppers, box beards to 36, solid canister tops from 13, slightly arched upper lip, fine nicking, spotted metal
8 Dolce
1–12 zinc, rest common metal, slotted to 35, fine nicking
4 Fugara
spotted metal, 1–37 slotted, roller boards to 29, medium nicking
4 Flute d’Amour
1–48 wood, inverted mouth, high cut up, solid stoppers, medium nicking, 49–58 open metal
2 Harmonic Piccolo
common metal, 1–12 slotted, arched upper lip, medium nicking, harmonic from 13–48, one node hole, rest normal length
8 Clarinet
short flared zinc butts, cylindrical heavy common metal resonator with sharply flared moveable caps, tapered shallots, 49–58 open metal flues

PEDAL
16 Open Diapason
Wood, 15¾” x 17¾” OD
16 Subbass
Stopped Wood 9¾” x 13¾” OD
10¾ Quint
Stopped Wood
8 Violoncello
Metal, slotted
8 Octave (new 1989)
old pipes, 1–12 zinc, slotted, heavy nicking, ears, 13–44 spotted metal, no slottting
4 Octave (ext., new)
16 Trombone
full length, wood boots, zinc resonators

Expression shades: two frames fronting each enclosure, six vertical shades each, opening 60 degrees.
Wind system: new floating plate static, rest Lewis & Hitchcock cone valve regulators (1930). New low speed Laufkuff blower

LYKELY ORIGINAL CONSOLE ACCESSORIES (1885)

COUPLERS
Swell to Great
Swell to Great 8ves
Choir to Great

1. This assumes the standard mechanical console. The Roosevelt adjustable system provided four pistons to Swell and Great, three to Choir and two pedals adjustable, to the Pedal division. It is unlikely that Theodore Lewis would have suggested installing a combination action in the original console if such a feature were present. At that time Lewis & Hitchcock consoles were provided with only divisional pistons and not in much greater quantity.

HILBORNE L. ROOSEVELT ORGAN

PEDAL MOVEMENTS
Great Organ Forte
Great Organ Piano
Swell Organ Forte
Swell Organ Piano
Great to Pedal Reversible Coupler
Balanced Swell Pedal
Balanced Choir Pedal

CONSOLE ACCESSORIES (2011)
Drawknobs with divisional canceller tabs at top of each divisional array

COUPLERS (by drawknot above Swell)
Great to Pedal
Swell to Pedal 8, 4
Swell to Pedal 4
Choir to Pedal
Swell to Great 16, 8, 4
Choir to Great 16, 8, 4
Swell to Choir 16, 8, 4
Crescendo and Tutti indicator lights

Swell 4, 16
Choir 4, 16
Great 4

GENERAL COMBINATION PISTONS
(also duplicated by toe studs, r.h. side of Choir/Swell/Crescendo shoes) 1–10
For each division: pistons (toe studs for pedal, r.h. side of shoes) 1–6 and 0
Great to Pedal reversible
Tutti
Selector Switch for Memory Levels A,B,C,D (1–4)
Selector Switch for Memory Levels 1–4

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