

# Holy Rosary Parish Organ: from Dream to Reality

Vicky Chen

2021 is the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the installation of our Casavant mechanical action pipe organ. We as a parish enjoy its enhancement of all our liturgies all year long. I feel that this is time for me to tell the narrative of its evolution before the story fades into oblivion.

In 1992 our pastor Fr. Ron Cote had two major proposals running in parallel – a parish centre and a new organ. The parish centre took one year for the building committee to study, one year to complete. In 1994 it was dedicated by Bishop Tonnos. The other proposal was to look at the feasibility of acquiring a suitable organ. During the 55+ years of existence the parish had limped along with donated keyboards which had been taking up needed space in homes. The organ project took much longer.

From the mid 1980s, I became dissatisfied with not knowing how to use the organ pedals when I played services for our parish. I decided to study pipe organ part time with Keith Hopkins, the music director and organist of Port Nelson United Church. As a member of the Royal Canadian College of Organists (RCCO) I was able to call upon the resource centre in Toronto for some guidance. The staff was very helpful. A number of well-written articles previously published in the RCCO magazine *American Organists* were sent to me. When I presented them to Fr. Ron, he formed an organ committee to seriously study the issue. Peter Weber, a parishioner without organ background, was chosen to be the chair to permit unbiased facilitation.

One of the first tasks was to contact some well-known local music directors to get their input. I wrote to 10 organists. Their responses were quite unanimous and clear. If the parish could afford it, the pipe organ would be the choice.

Next the committee contacted a number of available pipe organ builders and electronic organ companies. All the pipe organ builders (five in total: Casavant Freres, Gabriel Kney, Orgues Letourneau, Karl Wilhelm & Hellmuth Wolff) contacted made at least one site visit and came up with their respective organ design showing specifications suitable to the size of the church building along with a quotation of price. Casavant presented two versions, a mechanical action one and an electro-pneumatic action one. In a mechanical action organ, each key is directly connected to the valve that opens a pipe. The pipes are very responsive to the touch of the organist. This is the oldest time-tested way of constructing of pipe organs. Most organs today use a combination of electricity and pneumatics to link the keyboards to the pipe valves (electro-pneumatic actions), and so the player does not have a tactile connection with the wind being admitted to the pipes as the keys are played. A traditional mechanical action allows the most sensitive and subtle connection between the organist and the instrument.

A few electronic organ companies also showed the committee members their available models and costs. The members of the organ committee then went on a number of site visits of organs, both electronic and pipe versions.

I was fortunate to be in Montreal for a professional conference. Two organ builders are located in Saint-Hyacinthe near Montreal. A colleague took a day off after our meeting and drove me to visit the two organ factories there. I witnessed the labour-intensive nature and complexity of the design and building of a pipe organ, how each pipe had to be crafted separately and accurately by skillful workers. The metal pipes are cut from specially poured and solidified alloy. I took photos to show our committee. I also visited the workshop and home of Gabriel Kney in London, ON. He is the builder for the mechanical organ in Royal Thompson Hall.

The committee also invited Fr. John Mark Missio from the Toronto Archdiocese to serve as a consultant. Fr. Missio has a degree in Church Music from Wilfrid Laurier. He came for a few meetings and gave a very succinct analysis of the various pipe organ builders. While he was in favour of a mechanical action pipe organ for its purity of sound and lasting nature, he could see the advantage of having an electronic organ for financial reasons.

A few people favoured the choice of an electronic organ for one-third of the price, many more pipe sounds and quick installation. Around that time, the large electronic organ in a church somewhere in Brantford was damaged beyond repair by a power surge from lightning. It also became clear that the technology of most electronic organs became obsolete over time. After three years of debate, a choice could not be reached. Fr. Ron and the Parish Finance Council decided to put the organ project on hold for the parish to focus on paying off the loan incurred by the parish centre.

One year after the debt of the parish centre was paid off, the old electronic organ donated by a parishioner became rather mute suddenly. Despite hours of work by the technical person, it could not be repaired to sound clearly. Fr. Ron decided that it was time to decide on the acquisition of a mechanical action pipe organ.

When contacted, the Toronto Casavant representative Robert Hiller responded immediately. As anticipated, the estimated price from 10 years earlier had almost doubled. After an initial meeting with him, the company sent Didier Grassin, the director of the mechanical action department, down from Quebec for a site visit. Didier created a new design which was compact, functional and aesthetically pleasing. It stood independent from the shape of the wall of that corner and complemented the existing asymmetrical style of the sanctuary.

Fr. Ron called a meeting of the Parish Finance Council to discern whether the parish could tackle another major project. They decided that it would be wise to present the details and ask the parishioners if they would make commitments to one half the cost before proceeding.

A couple members of the Finance Council gave a brief presentation at the end of each mass one weekend illustrating some strategic plans in fund-raising.

To test the response of our community, Fr. Ron wrote a column 'Musical Thoughts from the Pastor' explaining step-by-step this project in the church bulletins over a few weeks. A separate pamphlet of organ project was inserted in the weekly bulletin inviting parishioners to make a non-binding pledge to cover the cost of items such as casework, wood pipes, pipe shades, consoles, pedalboard, organ bench. The number of items and respective costs was guided by the estimate from Casavant. He committed publicly to sponsor 10 metal pipes.

The organ project received more than half of the total amount in pledge in a few months. As Fr. Ron was about to retire, he invited and consulted the incoming pastor Fr. Frank Trzupsek. It happened that Fr. Trzupsek was a firm believer in the place of a pipe organ for solemn liturgical celebration. He was instrumental in putting a Casavant pipe organ in St. Stanislaus in Hamilton some 20 years previously. Fr. Ron also discussed the idea with Bishop Tonnos of Hamilton. Finally, the Casavant representative was contacted again. This time a contract was drawn and signed in April 2004. Fr. Ron retired from our parish at the end of June. The organ would take about 20 months to build. The cost (\$283,000) was paid by installments, the final one being paid after full installation of the instrument.

Each year three collection envelopes for the organ fund were inserted in the regular donation envelopes for the parishioners.

On the third Sunday of Advent in 2004, the choir of Cathedral of Christ the King in Hamilton helped generously by performing the first fund-raising concert at Holy Rosary Church in Burlington. Their music director and organist Rob Corso planned a full program of choral music alternating with communal singing. This concert marked the beginning of a series of fund-raising events. An Oktoberfest in 2005 organized by a group of parishioners raised a significant sum. More importantly the process of preparation and execution was community-building. Both adults and children of the parish enjoyed that event tremendously, as did the working committee. Rob MacIsaac and his friends offered entertainment on the stage. After this the Dofasco Choir, followed by St. Michael Choir School took part in giving fund-raising concerts. They were very well received.

Meanwhile Didier Grassin, who had designed the current organ, returned to the church a couple more times to refine the measurements, and to match the hues of the pews and the wood frame of the church ceiling to the organ casing. The organ was first assembled in the factory. It was then taken apart for transportation to our church. When the organ was due to arrive in Lent 2006, all communal activities using the parish centre had to be cancelled for a few weeks. The pipes and parts were stored in the centre. The installation of parts was done by two to five people daily including Mr. Grassin himself. They worked 10 to 12-hour days for six days. The following week the pipes were voiced and tuned by two skillful technical staff. The tonal director of Casavant, Jacquelin

Rochette, flew down from Quebec mid-week to supervise the staff for two days. It took another six 10-hour days before the organ was ready for playing.

I will never forget this anecdote. When I contacted John Tuttle, professor of organ, university organist at the University of Toronto, he told me that he literally slept in the church while the organ of his church was being voiced. The step of voicing is highly skillful and crucial to the subsequent quality of the organ.

In 2006 the traditional celebration of Holy Week and Easter season was graced by the new 15 ranks, 14 stops, 816 pipes, mechanical action pipe organ (Opus 3851) custom designed and built for our church by the Casavant Frères from Saint-Hyacinthe, Quebec.

The experience of playing on this instrument alone and for the first time the evening before Passion Sunday was sacred. It was a combination of profound gratitude and awe. The first piece I played and prayed was a hymn - 'Oh God Beyond All Praising'. The memories of events that took place in the previous 12 years flashed back and crystallized to one single point. Glory be to God, Alleluia!

After Passion Sunday, Easter Triduum and Easter celebrations, the response from the community was enthusiastic and their excitement infectious. A few young children came up to ask for lessons. These properly guided would be the seeds of future organists.

In the summer of 2006, Randy Mills, a well-known organist from Port Hope, gave an inaugural concert.

Fr. Ron Cote, Fr. Frank Trzupsek and the community of Holy Rosary ought to be complimented. The acquisition of a pipe organ is counter-cultural in a money-oriented society with a mentality of instant gratification. It is well worth its effort. However, it takes time, patience, organization and collaboration from everyone in the parish to work on a project that promises to bring lasting enhancement to our liturgical celebrations for generations to come. In the Vatican II document Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, it is stated: In the Latin Church the pipe organ is to be held in high esteem, for it is the traditional musical instrument which adds a wonderful splendor to the Church's ceremonies and powerfully lifts up the human mind to God and to higher things. (#120)

Epilogue: Under the leadership of Fr. Frank Trzupsek, the debt of the organ was paid off long before he left the parish in 2011. In addition, he was responsible for choosing a more enduring tile floor to replace the worn-out carpet, and he invited an acoustic expert to put in some echo buffer at the back of the church proper. I am grateful for his decision which helps enhance the singing and organ music of our parish.

2021 October - Month of the Holy Rosary