

## WASHINGTON DC

The annual Spring Meeting of the European Chapter of the AGO was held April 17-22, 2017, in the Washington D.C. area. This was the very first time that this event took place in the United States. Ably organized and lead by American and longtime D.C. resident Roger Schumacher, a collegial group of Americans and Europeans enjoyed almost a week together, viewing beautiful churches, playing and hearing organs, eating together, and sharing adventures (both the planned, and the unplanned variety!).



Most of us met at the convention hotel in the Tyson's Corner neighborhood of Virginia, a suburb of D.C., where we were given the glossy, spiral-bound, very complete spring meeting booklet. (It was obvious when we saw this that Roger is a very organized person!) As attendees arrived, we had the chance to greet old and new friends and become acquainted on our walk over to our very tasty opening dinner at a nearby restaurant. After enjoying our meal and conversation, we were officially greeted by Dean Judy Riefel-Lindel, Roger Schumacher, and our special guest for that evening – James Thomashower, the Executive Director of the AGO.

James welcomed the members of the European Chapter and gave us all a glimpse into the inner workings of our AGO staff, including fascinating details on the progress recently made between the AGO and the Federal Trade Commission, and membership trends in the organization. It was fun for many of the Americans to finally put a face and personality (and a Brooklyn accent!) with the name we've read in our magazine for so many years.

Tuesday morning was a beautiful day, as we climbed on our bus and headed off to National Presbyterian Church, home to an Aeolian-Skinner from 1970. This splendid acoustic is a regular concert venue in the D.C. area, and the open, airy space with tall and narrow modern stained glass windows is striking. Principal Organist Bill Neil demonstrated the organ, especially the gorgeous solo sounds of the choir, added in 1991 with all vintage pipes. We enjoyed a very clean and lively Bach/Vivaldi concert, showing off the Baroque plenum sound. Especially moving was Elgar's *Nimrod* from the "Enigma Variations", displaying the strings of the organ and its facility for seamless crescendos and diminuendos. The demonstration ended with Walton's "Crown Imperial", demonstrating the power of the reeds. We enjoyed time to test out the instrument and ended our time by all standing in the chancel, singing a hymn together and appreciating the splendid acoustics and supportive sound of the organ.

After lunch in the Shirlington neighborhood, we headed to Virginia Theological Seminary and its stunning new chapel. The room is bright, filled with natural light and hard surfaces everywhere, a generous acoustic for singing and organ music. The Taylor and Boody from 2015, as is typical of their instruments, is built with attention to detail and housed in a case that is at home in a room with a beautiful sense of simplicity. Professor of Church Music Bill Roberts welcomed



us, the president of the seminary also stopped by to greet us, and a member of the Taylor and Boody firm was on hand to answer all our organ-building questions. Joby Bell (stepping in at the last minute to demonstrate the organ) surprised us with unexpected selections for this organ, showing off its lush English side. He first played the Adagio from Widor's Fifth Symphony, and then Dupre's "Cortège and Litanies", with expert (also spur-of-the-moment) stop pulling by Chelsea Chen and Katelyn Emerson. Later players from the group tended towards Baroque repertoire, which gave us a good sampling of the wide array of sounds available from this fine and fun-to-play instrument. We took advantage of the beautiful sunny weather for a sightseeing tour of nearby tourist attractions, including the rather new and abstract Air Force Memorial, and the iconic representational Marine Corps Memorial. We arrived early evening at the imposing Washington National Cathedral, where we had the opportunity to hear the boys choir sing Evensong as we sat around them in the choir, an experience most of us only associate with trips to England! After Evensong, Christopher Betts, former organist at the cathedral, explained in fascinating detail the history and various stages of the organ's installation (and eventual deterioration, as it now awaits restoration). His fiery demonstration of Boellmann's Toccata from "Suite Gothique" showed that despite its problems, the organ is

still capable of lots of excitement and sound. Chris also helpfully pulled stops and assisted those of us who chose to play, helping us navigate the large and overwhelming sea of stop knobs. It was a special treat to be locked inside the cathedral after all the regular tourists had left the building, and to have the large instrument all to ourselves that evening.

Wednesday began with a chill in the air and cloudy skies, helping all the Northern Europeans among us to feel right at home. Starting the day at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, Jason West, who lived in England for over 10 years and had been a member of our chapter at that time, demonstrated the organ for us. He described many features of the Schlueter organ for us before playing individual stops and sections of pieces for us, demonstrating Baroque sounds, various solos, and full organ. There was enough time for heady discussions on all manner of topics, as well as friendly conversations in the church that morning amongst participants, as we took turns playing for one another and listening to the organ. After lunch in small groups together, we were driven around various sections of downtown in our bus, with chances to see elegant architecture and the museums of the Smithsonian, and a stop for photos in front of the Congress building.

At the ornate and massive Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, another large worship space rivaling European cathedrals in terms of scope and decoration, we were met by Assisting Organist Nathan Davy. We first took a requisite coffee break not far from the Basilica, and then headed up to the organ loft, high above the nave.

There, Assistant Director of Music Benjamin LaPrairie met us and explained some of the unique features of this space and instrument. The Moeller, really two organs, one in the back balcony and the other closer to the front, is able to be operated by two separate consoles, one in each location. He also demonstrated individual sounds and explained how the acoustics affect the sound in the space, as well as explaining various humorous quirks and unique features of this organ in its present state. As our evening of open console time began, Matthew Provost played a masterful rendition of Messiaen's "Apparition de l'eglise eternelle". While I'm not necessarily a fan of the "bigger is better" school of organ building, hearing an epic, powerful work like that in such a live space, with a massive organ sound was certainly impressive, and helped me appreciate what is special about such an instrument.

After a couple hours in the main church and lots of players excited to get their hands on the grand instrument, we headed downstairs to the basement, where a mechanical action Schudi organ stands in the stone-lined crypt. Built in 1987, it is inspired by the style of Gottfried Silbermann's works, and fits very well in the intimate yet reverberant space. Particular highlights that evening included Beth Harrison's Pachelbel Variations on "Was Gott tut, das ist wohl getan" and Rene Louprette's rendition of Böhm's Partita on "Freu dich sehr" – both showing off many of the lovely solo and small combination sounds of the organ, and a complete contrast to the instrument we had heard upstairs.



Thursday morning started bright and early, as we loaded the bus before 8 AM for our drive down into the heart of Virginia. We traveled through gorgeous farmlands and over and past the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains, before finding ourselves less than a mile from the Taylor and Boody workshop, but unable to pass with our large bus under a low railroad bridge. This afforded us the perfect opportunity for a pleasant stroll through the countryside, past cows, fields, wildflowers, and a neighboring cemetery. George Taylor, who had made most of the arrangements for our visit, woke up sick the morning of our visit and so we were met at the shop by John Boody and members of the organ building staff at Taylor and Boody. They treated us to delicious pastries, and then we enjoyed an extensive tour of the various rooms and sections of their shop, located in an old renovated school building. Thorough explanations were given, and questions were asked by some of the more knowledgeable among us about

specifics of the organ building craft. In my group, John Boody was a fascinating tour guide, and showed us the areas for working with wood, metal, design, and voicing. A special treat for all of us was watching live the casting of a metal pipe, as the shop is in the midst of preparing a large new organ for the Catholic Student Center at the University in Madison, WI, and has many pipes to cast in the next weeks and months.

After lots of time for questions, we enjoyed a plentiful box lunch in the shop, and then headed out to hear two instruments in Staunton built by Taylor and Boody. Our group split in two, so we could make the most of our time and have opportunities to hear and play at both Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church (organ from 1994) and Trinity Episcopal (2000). At Christ Lutheran, the organist, Florence Jowers demonstrated individual stops and sounds through a Bach partita, and then opened up time for members to play. At Trinity, chapter member Rhonda Edgington played a Buxtehude Praeludium that she was preparing to perform on the same organ later that weekend on the



church's concert series. Members especially enjoyed the opportunity to try their Baroque repertoire on both of these very successful mechanical action instruments influenced by Northern European organ building. The action of both instruments is sensitive, and the tonal colors are vibrant and exciting. This morning was definitely a highlight of the tour (at least for mechanical action nuts like myself . . . ) ! After another bus ride through the Virginia countryside, we landed in the lovely small southern town of Winchester, Virginia, where beautifully restored Southern homes and genteel Southern hospitality welcomed us. Dean of the Winchester Chapter, Dr. Steven Cooksey had gone far beyond the call of duty in helping to organize our visit here. In the elegant and historic Christ Episcopal Church, the music director for 47 years, Dr. James Kriewald, demonstrated the organ, an unusual combination of a Moeller redone by Taylor and Boody (unlikely bedfellows). Designed and voiced originally by European chapter member Christoph Linde in neo-Baroque style, it was renovated and revoiced in 2015 by Taylor and Boody. Dr. Kriewald showed off its new capabilities with a piece by Howells, rather unthinkable in its previous life! Members enjoyed the chance to play a bit, as well as sing a hymn together, and then we walked down the street to Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church. The Winchester AGO chapter dean regaled us in both churches with stories of local

church musicians and music programs in their town. I especially enjoyed hearing that at Grace Lutheran, the longtime previous organist had the church's carpet removed for the benefit of the acoustic, and soon almost all of the churches in town followed suit! Their hard-wood floors were certainly the envy of many organists like myself, who have to endure carpeted worship spaces.

On the cusp of retirement after many years, Lutheran organist Daniel Hannemann demonstrated the 1994 Schantz organ with a program of American hymn tune preludes chosen especially for our European visitors and then opened up the console for members to play. The church youth group served us a southern-style dinner in the church's fellowship hall (fried chicken, biscuits, sweet tea, and many varieties of pie!), before we walked a few blocks further to Braddock Street United Methodist Church. Dudley Oakes, a representative of the Letourneau Company, welcomed us to a recital by J. Thomas Mitts, Organ Professor at nearby Shenandoah University and Choirmaster and Organist in D.C. at Augustana Lutheran Church. The 2013 Letourneau at Braddock Street has many fine colors and a highlight of Mitts' concert was the Saint-Saens "Dans Macabre", which showed them off well. Despite the fact that we felt like we'd been eating all day, at their reception afterwards the warm and hospitable folks from the AGO chapter sent us away with cookies and drinks for the bus ride back.

Friday morning felt suddenly like Summer, sunny and humid, a treat for some of us who had come hoping for some real southern weather! We began the morning at St. John's Episcopal on Lafayette Square. The director of music, Michael Lodico, welcomed us and played a lovely Jacques van Ortmersson piece for us to demonstrate colors of the instrument. We were then handed over to Assistant Director of music Dudley Oaks, who helped facilitate our time playing and listening in the church. Members enjoyed the kneeling cushions in this church, which have embroidered on them the names of past presidents, as this is known as the "President's Church", being so close to the White House. Comments were made (among both Americans and Europeans) about which particular presidential cushion we'd like to give a piece of our mind. Unfortunately, it was not to be found! After a leisurely lunch and time to stroll around the Mall and White House area, we found ourselves at First Baptist of Washington D.C. Adam Brackel from Florida was on hand to demonstrate the organ for us. He began with a beautiful Cantilena by A. Fletcher which showed off the lovely solo stops of this massive Austin organ, built in 2013. He ended with a version of the Mendelssohn Wedding March, a transcription he had done himself borrowing ideas from Horowitz and Liszt. Director of Music Lon Schreiber was on hand to welcome us, as well as to explain what challenges and considerations had influenced the final design of the instrument. Carl Schwartz, the local Austin representative who had been with our group for a couple of days, as well as Michael Fazio, the Austin President, were also there to answer questions, help members of our group navigate the large console, and give tours of the inside of the instrument. Some adventurous souls even ventured back into the fabled Austin Universal Airchest – an idea unique to Austin organs, essentially a windchest the size of a small room, large enough for a few people to stand inside. Those who aren't claustrophobic and don't mind having their ears pop, can sit inside it while the organ is being played. Of course, I took advantage of the opportunity Members enjoyed the chance to pull out all the stops (so to say) on this large and powerful instrument.

After a bus ride to our final stop of the tour, Director of Music Ministries Anne Timpane introduced the Berghaus organ at St. John's Norwood (Episcopal) Parish to our group. She explained how the previous layout of the chancel had changed with the organ project, and how they came to choose and design their Berghaus organ from 2008. She then played Mendelssohn Sonata 2, as well as excerpts from various repertoire, to show a variety of sounds. The room was full of natural lighting, acoustically very successful, and the handsome case in the front of the sanctuary allowed the organ to speak well into the room. After her helpful demo, members excitedly transitioned both to playing the organ,

and moving to the buffet table. All three D.C. chapters (Potomac, D.C., and Northern Virginia) hosted a "Champagne Reception, Meet and Greet" for the European Chapter, Carl Schwarz, a member of the Potomac Chapter is to be especially thanked for this! There was a great time of meeting new colleagues, reminiscing with old friends, and enjoying the tasty refreshments. (I'm not sure when the last time was that I had a glass of champagne and a plate of snacks in the sanctuary!)

Our final event, held in the same church's fellowship hall, was the closing dinner. It was a splendid ending to our week, when members relaxed together and enjoyed both the food and one another's company. Judy gave her usual warm and grateful thank you speech to our ever diligent host, Roger, and the entire group thanked both Roger, for the many hours he'd invested in our spring meeting, as well as Judy, without whose hard work and dedication, this group would certainly not exist. The location of the Spring Meeting 2018 has not yet been finalized, so members left wondering where we might see each other again next spring, but looking forward to more opportunities to play beautiful instruments with old and new friends. Hope to see you next Spring!

*Rhonda Edgington*

