

The Historic Restoration of the Casavant Organ Opus 1130: A Fascinating Journey

Casavant Frères has occupied a prominent position in the organ building profession since the late 19th century. The installation of a repurposed four-manual Casavant organ at St. John Cantius Church in Chicago marks the first truly historic restoration of a large, unaltered Casavant organ designed and built under the direction of the founders of the world-renowned firm.

Historical Background

The organ at St. John Cantius Church was restored and installed as a collaboration between JL Weiler, Inc. and Casavant Frères, and is the 1130th commission received by Casavant Frères since its founding in 1879. The organ was originally installed in 1926 in the then newly built St. James M. E. Church, located at the corner of Ellis Avenue and 46th Street in Chicago. The organ contract, for the sum of \$28,890, was signed the previous year for a four-manual, 56-stop instrument, plus a 61-note Deagan Harp and 25-note Deagan Chimes (both operated by Casavant-made actions). Interestingly, the former St. James Church, which was destroyed by a fire in April 1924, was the home of a four-manual Casavant organ built in their South Haven, Michigan shop in 1915.

Opus 1130 is intimately related to Tina May Haines, organist at St. James Church. A former student of the famous French organist, Alexandre Guilmant, Ms. Haines was a respected church musician of her time. She was instrumental in having the church select Casavant for this important project.

Historical Significance

How many unaltered four-manual, 85-year old pipe organs can we visit nowadays in large urban areas? For Casavant, Opus 1130 was the 37th four-manual organ installed in the United States (first installation at St. Francis Xavier Church in New York City in 1903). To our knowledge, there are very few unaltered four-manual organs left from the Casavant brothers' years in the United States, and certainly none for hundreds of miles around Chicago.

Of note is the use of electro-pneumatic, pitman-type windchests for the entire organ, which was an uncommon practice for Casavant at that time. The Casavant brothers were fond of their patented ventil-type windchests, which the firm used routinely until 1933, the very year Claver Casavant, the founding president, passed away.

What We Found at St. James Church

For a number of years, we wanted to work together on a project involving a large Casavant organ from the brothers' years, celebrating and preserving their mechanical and musical aesthetics. The perspective of restoring Opus 1130 represented a remarkably exciting opportunity from the outset.

We made a comprehensive evaluation of the organ at St. James Church in February 2011. This enabled us to determine 1) the exceptional value of this Casavant organ;

2) that, with carefully planned work, it was possible to restore the organ to its original condition; and 3) how to divide the work between our two firms to achieve the best results possible.

Basically, we found the organ as it was installed in 1926. We were amazed to see that all the original material was still there. The pipework, which was in excellent condition, was still equipped with its original tuning devices (scrolls, etc.). However, the organ, which had probably never been cleaned in 85 years, was terribly dirty and had not been maintained for many years. There had been significant water damage in the Swell division coming from a leaking roof.

At St. James Church, the organ was installed in two chambers on either side of the chancel (Great, Choir and Pedal divisions in the south chamber; Swell and Solo divisions in the north chamber), with the Echo located in an elevated chamber on the south side of the back gallery. A visit to St. John Cantius to take complete measurements of the back gallery and the north transept enabled us to do a space study, which confirmed that the organ could be reinstalled successfully.

Restoration Process

After reaching an agreement with St. John Cantius in July 2011, our crews worked together to remove the entire organ from St. James Church. This huge task was made even more daunting by the fact that the ceiling of both organ chambers threatened to collapse—it had to be supported temporarily during the removal process.

In order to undertake this historic restoration with a common understanding of the goals, approach, and techniques to be used, Jeff Weiler made a special trip to Saint-Hyacinthe for a full day of productive discussions with all the Casavant craftspeople involved in the project.

The JL Weiler team was responsible for restoring all the pipework (repair damaged pipes, recondition all reed stops, repack stoppers, etc.), the original Casavant “Supremo” blower, the Harp, and the Chimes.

The Casavant team was in charge of restoring the organ chassis (windchests, wind system, expression), replicating the Swell windchest that had been heavily damaged by water, reconfiguring the organ layout for installation in the back gallery at St. John Cantius, which involved modifications (consistent with the original construction techniques) to the framework, expressions enclosures, and windlines, building new casework for both the main organ in the gallery and the Echo organ in the transept, and rebuilding the original console.

After the organ chassis was assembled in the Casavant *ateliers*, the JL Weiler and Casavant teams met in Saint-Hyacinthe in April 2013 to plan the upcoming installation at St. John Cantius.

Our crews worked together to install the organ at St. John Cantius Church, in June and July 2013. While the hot summer days made this complex task even more demanding, the work was done very efficiently, thanks to the careful planning and ongoing dialogue with the good people of St. John Cantius.

After the installation was completed, Jeff Weiler did the tonal finishing of the organ on site, a painstaking process that involves cautious listening to make sure every pipe speaks well in its new home. In other words, recapturing the organ's original voice. In the sumptuous acoustics of St. John Cantius, Opus 1130 sounds better than ever!

Conclusion

Restoring Opus 1130 has been a fascinating journey for our teams, who shared their respective expertise, and have complemented each other admirably in this multifaceted mission. We humbly believe that the outcome of this historic restoration speaks for itself.

We want to salute the vision of St. John Cantius Church's leadership, especially Fr. Frank Phillips and Fr. Scott Haynes, for making the decision to save this historically significant Casavant organ, and for their much appreciated confidence in our abilities. We also want to express special thanks to Mr. Thomas Diez, Project Manager at St. John Cantius, for his outstanding guidance and exceptional collaboration throughout the entire restoration process.

This restored Casavant organ, which is a one-of-a-kind example in North America, if not worldwide, has already proven to be a wonderful complement to the awe-inspiring liturgy and music at St. John Cantius Church. This is our greatest reward. It is our desire that this remarkable installation will mark the beginning of a new appreciation of the work of the Casavant brothers and continued collaboration restoring other grand instruments that have marked the glorious history of pipe organ building in North America.

Simon Couture, Casavant Frères



Jeff Weiler, JL Weiler, Inc.

