

History of the Cathedral Organ

The first worship service was held at the Cathedral of the Incarnation on Trinity Sunday, 1911. At this time, only the undercroft was completed, and the building was designated the “pro-cathedral”, meaning the building was designated to someday be the Cathedral. No records can be found of what instrument was used between 1911 and 1931, when the upper church was finally completed. Neither can any record be found of the instrument used in our sanctuary between 1931 and 1941.

In 1941, the original Cathedral organ was purchased from the Möller Organ Company of Hagerstown. The instrument at the time had a total of fourteen ranks of pipes and chimes. The purchase price was \$5,825, for Möller Opus 7042 (about \$91,000 in 2014 dollars). Completion of the organ, envisioned to be 43 ranks, was planned as soon as funds were available.

In 1960, the Cathedral received a bequest by Ella Jarrett and Mary Helen Ziegler for additions to the organ. A contract was given to the Aeolian-Skinner Organ Company of Boston for the additions (Opus 1386). Six additional ranks were added to the swell organ and seven ranks were added to the choir organ. The cost of this work was \$15,200 (about \$119,000 in 2014 dollars). A proposal to add an additional 11 ranks to the great organ and five ranks to the pedal organ was rejected by the Chapter as too costly. The cost of these additions at the time was \$17,550.

By 1971, the organ was in need of an overhaul. The original leathers installed back in 1941 were failing and the organ chamber needed cleaned and painted. Flaking plaster and paint had infiltrated many of the pipes and the sound was, literally, choking off. Bids were received from three local organ builders for the repair work, but again, no record can be found of which firm eventually did the work.

Sometime in the 1970’s pipes and windchests were installed in the front of the chamber, probably by the Möller organ company of Hagerstown. These were used chests from an African Methodist Episcopal Church in Baltimore, and pipework from another, unknown, organ. Don King, the Minister of Music during this period, was the Möller representative in the Baltimore area. These form the great organ today, the most visible pipes in the organ.

By 1994, the original console, which dated to 1941, was failing. Since the decision had been made to move the choir and organ console down into the nave, it was a good time to replace the console altogether. The old console was replaced with a three manual console built by the Rodgers Organ Company of Hillsboro, Oregon. The contract was given to R.A. Daffer Church Organs of Jessup, Maryland. Funds were raised through the generosity of the Cathedral’s growing congregation.

With the new Rodgers console, computers were used to generate the ranks of pipes that had never been installed. Due to the hodge-podge nature of the organ’s growth, a few of the pipe ranks just didn’t fit tonally with the overall sound of the organ. These pipes were disconnected. The chamber was cleaned and much of the organ was re-wired. Speakers and amplifiers were hidden up among the remaining pipes.

The success of combining the best of the Cathedral’s pipework with the best computer generated pipework was indisputable. The dedication recital was performed by Fred Swann, director of music at the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California, and later the President of the American Guild of Organists. Subsequent recitals were given by the late Berj Zamkochian, organist of the Boston Symphony, and the late Bryan Rowe, the Cathedral’s director of music at the time.

In 1999, Robert Daffer, majority owner of R.A. Daffer Church Organs, donated a larger organ console with more advanced features and additional sounds to the Cathedral. The Chapter approved this upgrade and the console was installed in the fall of 1999. The 1994 console was sold by R.A. Daffer Church Organs to the First United Methodist Church of Stow, Ohio. Dr. John Weaver, head of the organ departments at both the Juilliard School of Music in New York and the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia gave the inaugural recital on the new console.

In 2005, the original Möller chests, dating from 1941, were replaced with new chests and an additional rank of 4’ principal pipes was added to the choir division. This work was done by R.A. Daffer Church Organs. In 2009, a contract was signed to re-leather the existing swell chests. Work was done on site, in the organ chamber, because of the difficulty of removing the chests.

By 2013, we were once again given the opportunity through Robert Daffer to upgrade the existing three manual organ console from 1999 with a new three manual Rodgers Infinity Organ. Through the generosity of the estate of the late Bert Wyatt-Brown, we were able to upgrade to a new four manual Rodgers Infinity Console. The fourth keyboard enables an entire division of digitally sampled pipe organ sound to be played in the back of our Cathedral. The trumpet stop in the back of the room was named “Bert’s Trumpet” in honor of the donor. The 1999 console was sold by R.A. Daffer Church Organs to the Northeastern Presbyterian Church of Washington, DC. The dedication program was performed by organ virtuoso Felix Hell on September 20, 2013.