

An Interview With Ken Cowan

The organist on the St. James' Bicentennial Organ

On Sunday, October 17 at 3:00 p.m., Ken Cowan will present the inaugural concert of the St. James' Bicentennial Organ built by Schoenstein & Company organ builders. Ken has a long list of credentials, but is well known by this congregation from his tenure here as Assistant Organist from 1999-2002. He has become one of the busiest and most popular concert organists in the world, making him the perfect artist to officially introduce the St. James' Bicentennial Organ. Ken paid a visit to St. James' this past June to see and play the organ for the first time. Here are some excerpts from his conversations with Music Director Davis Wortman:

DW: What sets the St. James' organ apart from other instruments built in the last ten years?

KC: The St. James' organ is quite different in many ways, the most obvious that it was created exclusively for this space. Beyond that, there is the huge scope of the tonal palette for both solo color and chorus sounds. But that's not to say it was a case of "let's throw everything we can into this organ" just for effect, or of making the instrument as large as possible because there was room for it. In fact, this organ is actually smaller than the two previous organs that were in here, in 1956 and then in 1986, so it's not that "bigger is better" was the goal with this organ. The sounds were chosen first to represent the finest traditions developed throughout the history of organ building, and then balanced to give enough versatility to make playing music for church easy for the musician who has to play music from all kinds of styles. Having played both recitals and services where my job was supporting congregational singing during worship here, I can tell you that this instrument's number one feature is its versatility. I can't think of any kind of music that cannot be played convincingly on this organ, whether it's a hymn accompaniment, an improvisation or a complex transcription of a familiar orchestral piece.

DW: Are there any particular colors or stops which you find to be your favorites?

KW: I'd have to say that's a very hard question to answer, because each stop has been so carefully voiced and scaled so perfectly for this room that it is difficult to pick a favorite from so many great choices. Let me answer the question a different way: it's not one particular sound or color that I really love on this organ. I can say that there are three or four things that stand out to me: First, the most striking effects lie in the extremes of soft and loud. This organ excels at this, because the swell organ has the unconventional ability to smoothly fade away into inaudibility. It's really amazing to have such great control! I also love that creating a

dialogue between the chancel and gallery organs, between the front and the back of the room, is dramatic and gives a stunning effect, especially on the major reed stops. Because of its comprehensive design, this organ possesses vast tonal resources, which may be combined in virtually limitless ways. The final point, but one that is really important, is that no matter what the combination of sounds, this organ always remains "polite" in contrast to so many modern organs, which occasionally show their fangs!

DW: How did you choose the repertoire for this concert?

KC: Oh, that was a tough choice! It would be easy for me to put together a program for this organ that could go for three hours or more! I tried to narrow it down to showcase as many tonal colors as possible, and cover the widest dynamic spectrum, in about an hour and a half. In one sense, this is easily accomplished, as the organ's versatility lends itself to all kinds of literature. On the other hand, I need to accomplish this in a single program appealing both to those who may not be familiar with the organ at all and the professional organists who are in the audience. Let's just say I could have created a couple of different programs with completely different pieces, and they all would do a wonderful job of showing off this organ.

DW: I know you have played many dedicatory recitals for new organs in churches of various denominations. Why is this event important in the life of a congregation?

KC: First, I want to express my admiration to St. James' and every church that is willing to spend the time, effort and money to invest in a pipe organ. They do it to provide the best musical support possible to their liturgy, and that means they are thinking beyond the simple dollar figure of how much this will cost, into something deeper: the history, meaning and importance of music within the liturgy. They have to examine their traditions of worship and music, which is an educational and spiritually engaging experience all by itself. Then they have think about the building, the heating and cooling systems, the maintenance of the instrument: it's a huge investment, and I hope they realize that there is a larger payoff than just having this wonderful organ to listen to—when they are paying attention to it. It's amazing to watch people actually see and hear what they have built, most of which is not easily visualized from blueprints and artistic renderings. So what I find most exciting about introducing an organ, especially one as magnificent as



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DW: Is there anything else you might want to say to the St. James' parishioners?

KC: Yes. The renovation of the church (with its improved acoustic) and the new organ are spectacular. Since I was the Assistant Organist here a few years ago, I remember well this congregation's love and great support for music. Schoenstein & Company Organ Builders have built an organ that will quickly become known as one of New York's "landmark" instruments and I am sure it will be a treasure for generations to come. Congratulations!