

# PRESERVING A BROOKLYN TREASURE

## THE RESTORATION OF THE 1933 KILGEN ORGAN, OPUS 5163

### OUR LADY OF REFUGE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

John L. Speller



Some may view the current recession in trade as a disaster, but maybe it should also be seen as an opportunity—perhaps the best opportunity since the Civil War—for people to re-imagine their values and to decide what the worthwhile things in life really are. We might also learn from the past. When Our Lady of Refuge Parish in Brooklyn decided to build a new and larger church in 1933–34, it was at the height of the Great Depression. The building cost no less than \$400,000, which adjusted for inflation would be more than \$6,500,000 in 2009, a princely sum in those days of economic gloom when unemployment stood at 21%. The building housed a three-manual Kilgen organ, Opus 5163, designed by Charles Courboin, and one of the Kilgen firm's finest. John Bishop describes it as "a wonderful example of early to mid-20th-century American organbuilding. The emphasis on a variety of rich 8' tone provides the player with a colorful palette, the heavy construction of the pipes leads to steady tone, and the beautifully designed pneumatic actions allow for responsive music making." However, 75 years of wear have taken their toll on the leather and other parts of the organ, and for some years the instrument was completely out of commission, and an electronic was in use during services.

Enter Fr. Michael Perry, the cultured and sensitive parish priest of our Lady of Refuge. He believes that, despite the fact that few of the parishioners have much money, the church and organ are a legacy that needs to be handed on to the future:

The people who built Our Lady of Refuge were people of means who left a

legacy that far surpasses their imagination. That legacy was to provide for an immigrant population from the West Indies and the Caribbean, as well as a huge assortment of Hispanic countries, a magnificent church larger than most buildings in their home countries. And in this stone and brick edifice they placed our Kilgen organ.

Enter also Joe Vitacco, president of JAV Recordings, who is very clear that he values pipe organs above almost everything else. After Joe visited the church in 2005, he asked Fr. Perry if he might take a look at the organ, which he had not seen or played for more than ten years. Wondering how to find the resources to restore the organ, they cast around for those they knew who might be able to assist. So far as Joe Vitacco was concerned, the names that immediately came to mind were John Bishop, Michael Barone, Joe Dzeda, James Konzelman, Barbara Owen, Michael Quimby, Bob Schopp, and Stephen Tharp. He returned with Jim Konzelman, an old friend and a well-respected local organ technician, to evaluate what it would take to make the organ play again. They determined that two reservoirs were in very poor condition, and part of the Swell needed re-leathering. Jim did not think it was a good idea to patch the 70-year-old reservoirs, so Joe called Bob Schopp of A.R. Schopp's Sons Inc. to get a price for a complete rebuild of the two reservoirs. They were able to save on the cost of shipping the reservoirs to and from Alliance, Ohio, by making use of empty trucks in the return direction when Jim Konzelman was shipping chests and pipes between New York and Alliance in connec-

tion with his own business. While the reservoirs were under repair at Schopp's, with Jim's guidance and help Joe Vitacco worked on re-leathering the half of the Swell that he had not re-leathered while in high school 20 years earlier. Schopp's made jigs so that Joe could re-leather the Kilgen bottom boards. Schopp's also did repairs to the lowest two octaves of 16' Trombone pipes to enable them to play. The bellows came back and the organ was soon playing again. With all of the weekends of work, Konzelman, Vitacco, and Fr. Perry got to know each other well. At this point Joe got the University of Notre Dame Women's Liturgical Choir, Jennifer Pascual, and Stephen Tharp to come for the Saturday Vigil Mass in February 2007, which stimulated further interest in the project.

It was, however, at this point that the parish suffered a setback, as it became apparent that serious structural work needed to be done at the base of the tower where the organ was located. Fr. Perry and Joe Vitacco called in John Bishop for advice, and to their horror both John Bishop and the church's contractor advised that the organ should be dismantled and stored until the structural work was completed. What had been a relatively inexpensive ongoing restoration project had now become a major undertaking costing hundreds of thousands of dollars. Joe and Fr. Perry wondered what they had gotten themselves into, but both were determined the organ would return to play in the church, and that furthermore it would return in as-new condition.

After a little brainstorming, some very imaginative methods of fund-raising were devised. Fr. Perry said:

As I have found out, restoring an organ is expensive but worth it. Since we began our organ fund, people from all over who have never even been to Brooklyn let alone heard our instrument have written thanking me for not letting this particular organ lose its voice forever. And so we plod along but, as the Beatles sang in the '60s, I get by "with a little help from my friends."

The first idea, which raised a good deal of money, was a YouTube video of Fr. Perry asking for help with an organ pipe on his shoulder. A recording, made by Joe Vitacco, of Stephen Tharp playing Vienne's *Carillon de Westminster* before the organ was removed, was used as background music. This was such a novel way of raising money that *The New York Times* wrote an article about it.

The next idea that Joe Vitacco came up with was to use the contacts he had made over the years running JAV Recordings to produce a compact disc that nobody could resist buying. The result is a two-disc set entitled *Resurrectio*, featuring no fewer than 13 well-known organists playing twelve different organs. The first ten tracks are devoted to Our Lady of Refuge itself, and feature remarks by Father Perry, and by Craig Whitney, assisting managing editor of *The New York Times* and author of *All the Stops*. The compact disc also includes a couple of hymns, and some organ music including a stunning performance of the *Carillon de Westminster* played on the Kilgen organ by Stephen Tharp. Besides Tharp, the pantheon of organists featured on the compact discs reads like a Who's Who of the organ world: Craig Cramer, Ken Cowan, David Briggs,

Peter Richard Conte, John Scott, Thomas Murray, Léon Berben, Christoph Frommen, Daniel Roth, Olivier Latry, Philippe Lefebvre, and Jean-Pierre Leguay. The list of organs is also impressive, featuring among others the Quimby organ at First Baptist Church in Jackson, Miss., the Wanamaker organ in Philadelphia, the Woolsey Hall organ at Yale University, and some famous French instruments including Saint-Sernin in Toulouse and Saint-Sulpice and Notre-Dame in Paris. A particularly unique feature of the recording is the series of improvisations by David Briggs, Daniel Roth, Olivier Latry, Philippe Lefebvre, and Jeanne-Pierre Leguay. These improvisations can be found only on this recording. By a happy chance Daniel Roth could not decide which version of *Salve Regina* to improvise on, so he improvised on both! The compact disc is available only from the church and not through JAV Recordings, so all proceeds will benefit the Kilgen organ project. For further information, contact the Rev. Michael Perry, Our Lady of Refuge Church, 2020 Foster Ave., Brooklyn, NY 11210, or visit [www.olrbrooklyn.org](http://www.olrbrooklyn.org). Funds have been coming in and the goal is in sight, but there is still quite a way to go. Bob Schopp commented thus:

Over the years I've seen many churches struggle with making a decision on whether to replace or rebuild their pipe organs. For those without strong leadership, the decision flounders and eventually spirals downward until a desperate decision is made to purchase an electronic keyboard. But there are many small neighborhood churches, like Our Lady of Refuge, that take on major projects and have the tenacity to succeed. After visiting Our Lady of Refuge and meeting Fr. Michael Perry, I immediately knew that I wanted to commit our company to their organ project. The plan for rebuilding their instrument was beautifully organized, and I felt confident that with the strong leadership of Fr. Perry and Joe Vitacco the project would be done right.

Currently the plan is to clean all of the pipes and have their voicing cleaned up by

Schopp's. The mixture, which was changed in the 1960s, was replicated by Schopp's, using measurements taken by Foley-Baker of the identical mixture in the Kilgen organ at St. Justin's in Hartford. Michael Quimby kindly donated kangaroo leather for Schopp's to re-leather almost the entire organ. Michael Quimby also donated an almost-new Peterson relay that will be modified to suit the Kilgen organ's specification. The replacement of the Kilgen electro-pneumatic relay is the only change being made to the organ, since the cost of restoring the original would have been both difficult and prohibitively expensive. John Bishop and the Organ Clearing House will come back to re-install, regulate, and tune the organ following its restoration.

Why is it important to preserve a pipe organ like this? Joe Vitacco's experience from meeting organists from all around the globe in the course of his recording career has convinced him that many of the world's finest organists came to the instrument through the inspiration of good, solid instruments in the churches where they grew up. Good pipe organs provide the inspiration responsible for everything creative in composing and playing organ music. Or, as Barbara Owen put it, organs make friends:

Good organs make good friends. And if an organ has a special meaning for someone in particular, that person becomes a special friend. (I see the teenagers now have a name for that—"Best Friend Forever.") Well, Joe has become a BFF for the organ at Our Lady of Refuge, and is doing what a best friend should do in looking after this special organ's welfare. But it is even more than this, for in working toward its restoration, he is setting an example for others, as well as ensuring that this organ will make more friends in the future—not just for itself but for all real organs.

Joe Vitacco wants to restore this instrument to give something back to the organ community, so there will be one more instrument to inspire a future organist, organ-builder, or organ CD label, and to keep the



Joe Vitacco, Bishop DiMarzio, and Fr. Michael Perry

pipe organ alive for future generations. He said,

I didn't ask to do this, I wish I didn't have to get involved in it, but at the end of the day I couldn't let the organ be destroyed. I have been lucky to have the strong support of the pastor, staff, and finance committee of the parish in these efforts, as well as so many people in the organ world. I just hope other people will duplicate my efforts. I believe ordinary people can raise money to fund organ projects like this if they are persistent, can build teams of dedicated people, have a long-term vision, and not give up.

This is why raising money to build or preserve a good organ is a worthwhile project, worth all the trouble of raising large sums of money even in difficult financial times. And this is simply what we have to do if the organ is to have a future in the 21st century.

#### Online resources:

Parish Web site: [www.olrbrooklyn.org](http://www.olrbrooklyn.org)  
A Facebook group called "Friends of the Our Lady of Refuge Kilgen Organ"  
Tracks from the CD are available on iTunes. Search for "Our Lady of Refuge." All funds received from Apple go to the organ restoration fund.

### ORGAN SPECIFICATION

#### GREAT (10" wind)

16	Spitzflöte (36 to 3/4 flat) (metal)	73 pipes
8	Open Diapason (42 flat 3/4) (metal)	73 pipes
8	Violin Diapason (46 flat 3/4) (metal)	73 pipes
8	Flute Harmonic (46 flat 3/4) (slotted tin)	73 pipes
8	Dulciana (ext. from Ch.)	
4	Octave (56 flat 1/4) (1-5 slotted)	73 pipes
4	Spitzflöte (ext. of 16' Spitzflöte)	
2 3/4	Twelfth (66 flat 3/4) (metal)	61 pipes
2	Fifteenth (68 flat 3/4) (metal)	61 pipes
8	Tromba (5 1/2" scale) (reed)	73 pipes
	Chimes (loud) (Deagan A)	25 pipes
	Chimes (soft)	

#### SWELL (7" wind)

16	Lieblich Gedeckt (No. 1 Flute Unit) (wood)	73 pipes
8	Open Diapason (42 flat 3/4 slotted) (metal)	73 pipes
8	Stopped Flute (ext. of Lieblich Gedeckt) (wood)	12 pipes
8	Salicional (56 flat 3/4) (metal)	73 pipes
8	Voix Céleste (56 flat 3/4) (metal)	73 pipes
4	Octave (58 flat 3/4) (1-5 slotted)	73 pipes
4	Flûte d'Amour (ext. of Lieblich Gedeckt) (wood and metal)	12 pipes
4	Flautino (ext. of Lieblich Gedeckt) (wood and metal)	61 pipes
2	Mixture III (same as Op. 4828)	186 pipes
16	Posaune (ext. of Cornopean)	12 pipes
6	Cornopean (4" scale) (reed)	73 pipes
8	Oboe (reed)	73 pipes
8	Vox Humana (reed)	73 pipes

#### CHOIR (7" wind)

8	Violin Diapason (Gt.)	73 notes
8	Spitzflöte (Gt.)	73 notes
8	Dulciana (58 flat 3/4) (metal)	73 pipes
8	Unda Maris (56 flat 3/4) (metal)	73 pipes
4	Flute (Gt.)	73 pipes
2 3/4	Rohr Nazard (67 flat 3/4) (metal)	61 pipes
2	Piccolo (Gt.)	12 pipes
8	Clarinet (regular) (reed)	73 pipes

#### PEDAL (10" wind)

32	Resultant (Sw. Lieblich Gedeckt)	32 notes
16	Contra Bass (No. 3 slotted) (Gt. box)	32 pipes
16	Spitzflöte (Gt.)	32 pipes
16	Bourdon (No. 1 Tibia Clausa) (Sw. box)	32 pipes
8	Lieblich Gedeckt (Sw.)	32 notes
8	Octave (ext. of Contra Bass)	32 pipes
8	Spitzflöte (ext. of Gt. Spitzflöte)	32 pipes
8	Flute (ext. of Bourdon)	12 pipes
4	Super Octave (ext. of Contra Bass) (wood and metal)	12 pipes
2	Doublette (ext. of Contra Bass) (wood and metal)	12 pipes
16	Trombone (ext. of Tromba; 10" scale) (Gt. box) (metal)	12 pipes
16	Posaune (Sw.)	32 notes
	Chimes (loud) (Gt. box)	25 notes
	Chimes (soft) (Gt. box)	25 notes