Organ Dedication Hits High Note

by Tom Couillard

A tradition of European craftsmanship that spans some 1,000 years debuted at the College of St. Thomas in September. A handcrafted mechanical action pipe organ, similar to those found in the ancient cathedrals of the Old World, is now in place in the chapel.

A gift from Robert S. Asmuth Sr. '43, the organ rises majestically under the chapel dome behind the altar. The organ cost $350,000 and required 7,500 hours to build. It reaches skyward 33 feet, measures about 13 feet at its widest, and weighs 24,500 pounds, awing visitors in both sight and sound.

The builder, Gabriel Kney, says the organ projects a "very exciting sound. It has lots of fire and brilliance without being hard on the ears."

Visually, with three round towers and flat fields in between, the organ presents "sort of a classic design; in essence, a design that you find in many historic instruments in Europe," Kney remarked.

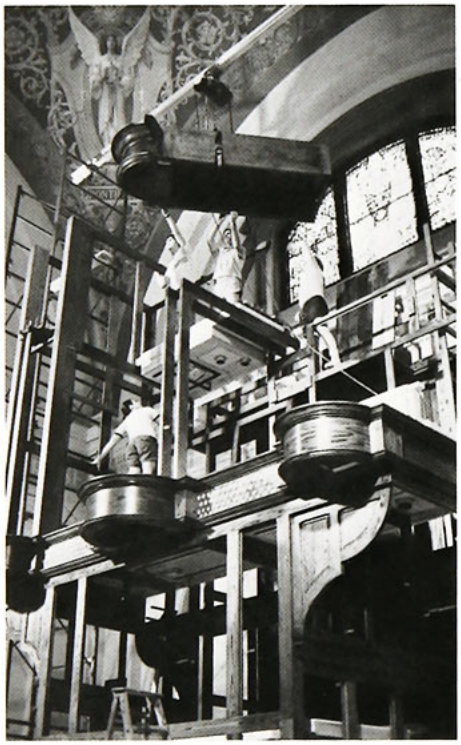
Kney, 56, traces that classic design back in time and place to his hometown of Speyer, West Germany, located on the Rhine and known for its Romanesque cathedral, "which is some thousand years old." Over the centuries, the city also has been home to organ builders. He grew up next to a builder's shop and at age 16 became an apprentice.

He also studied church music. "For a while I wasn't sure whether I was going to be a church musician or an organ builder, but my father persuaded me that it might be better to do something more practical than be a church musician. So I ended up as an organ builder instead of an organist."

Kney left Germany in 1951 with hopes of eventually building mechanical-action pipe organs, but first he became tonal director for an organ builder in London, Ontario.

"Then they moved away to a place near Toronto, and I wanted to stay behind for the purpose of building mechanical organs, which they did not. So this was the early beginning of establishing my own business in 1957. The problem was, at the time the idea of the mechanical organ really was premature in Canada and also here in the United States. The time was not just right," Kney said.

Mechanical-action instruments had a bad reputation, he explained, because instruments built by local builders around the turn of the century began to dry and fall apart after churches installed central heating. He was regarded as "some kind of nut" when he began to build them.



When completed, Kney's organ was 33 feet high and about 13 feet at its widest. It weighs 24,500 pounds.

Kney built his first organ in 1956. He couldn't sell it, and he couldn't generate much interest in mechanical-action pipe organs, either. His first organ remains in his home today.

His early organs were other than mechanical-action (electrical or electrical-pneumatic action) organs, and it wasn't until recordings by the late E. Power Biggs were distributed in the U.S. and Canada that interest in the mechanical-action pipe organ was rekindled. "He was really the impetus to many to look again at the musical melody of the mechanical organ, which only the mechanical organ can provide," Kney said.

It's a more musical approach. "There is a mechanical connection from the key to the pipe valve. So therefore, when the organist presses a key, a bunch of levers move and actuate the actual valve," Kney explained. "On account of that, the player has much greater control over the way the pipe begins to speak and also over the way it stops speaking. So in terms of what we call musical phrasing, it can be executed much more exactly than you would on any other kind of action where you have no control — it's either on or off but nothing in between."

His organs eventually caught on, however. The organ in the chapel is the 105th and the third largest he has built. His largest is in Thomson Hall in Toronto, home of that city's symphony, and "considerably larger, almost twice as large" as the chapel organ. An organ in Kansas City is "only marginally larger."

The dedication in September culminated a project that began in 1984 when Monsignor Terrence J. Murphy, president of the college, appointed an organ committee from the Department of Music to select a builder and design a new instrument for the chapel.

The committee, Dr. Merritt Nequette, chair of the Department of Music, Dr. James Callahan, composer and organ instructor, and Robert Strusinski, director of the Liturgical Choir, agreed that a new organ would serve a number of uses. An organ, they noted, would serve a liturgical function by supporting worship services. The organ would serve an academic function in teaching organ students. It would serve as a model for organ music in Catholic services and in workshops and conferences designed for parish musicians. It also would be used for recitals and concerts.

"As an archdiocesan college, I think the new chapel organ can be symbolically important to parishes that are and will be deliberating the issue of musical leadership in their liturgy," Strusinski said recently. "Already, our organ has infused a spark and invigorated the singing of our student congregation."

The organ replaces a two-manual Kilgen organ that was installed in the rear gallery when the chapel was com-