

# Greater than the sum



Surveying the rise of Montreal organ builder Juget-Sinclair,  
*Jonathan Ambrosino* examines their largest work to date

When we consider organ building in Canada, we think primarily of activity in Quebec, whose thread of development aligns with, but is distinct from, broader North American trends. Beginning in the 1880s, Samuel and Claver Casavant in Saint-Hyacinthe, east of Montreal, established a small shop and slowly built it into one of the great 20th-century North American concerns. The firm's early successes grew out of good taste and conservatism. As the orchestral style reached its zenith, Claver Casavant retained (perhaps unfashionably) much strong content of the previous century, from colourful foundations, flutes and strings to clean, blending chorus reeds and mild but telling mixtures. Eschewing the exorbitant pressures of other builders, Casavant's

manual departments were rarely on more than four and a half inches of wind, and yet contained enough orchestral flavour to avoid anachronism. The brothers courted fine players, such as fellow countryman Lynnwood Farnam, and remained open to collaboration; the great 1914 organ for St Paul's, Bloor Street, in Toronto was worked out with Colonel George Dixon and included chorus work supplied by Carlton Michell.

Thus, among the large North American builders in the 1910–25 period, Casavant remained the premier holdout for traditional ensemble. Certain organs sported progressive stoplists geared toward the music of Bach, though still capable of the atmospheric qualities required for, say, the impressionism of Karg-Elert. In truth, these designs were

*above* **Juget-Sinclair's latest instrument, for St Andrew's Episcopal Church, Wellesley, MA**  
Photos courtesy of Juget-Sinclair



probably driven more by individual clients than any corporate philosophy, and thus Casavant's oeuvre is more one of receptive orthodoxy than progressive thought. This manner continued almost unbroken through the mid-1950s.

When Lawrence Phelps arrived in 1958 as Casavant's new tonal director, the event was as jarring and significant to Canadian organ building as the 1954 Royal Festival Hall organ was to the British establishment. What US builders had evolved over two decades, Phelps delivered in a matter of months.

By 1960 Casavant had become dramatically mild and unabashedly American Classic, voiced on low wind pressures, with open toes and nearly nick-free narrow flues – the embodiment of Phelps's impassioned writings from 1954 forward, told out in a style distinct from G. Donald Harrison, Walter Holtkamp or Hermann Schlicker.

In 1960 Casavant established a mechanical-action department, and in this endeavour several German-trained craftsmen were brought over. Out of this lineage has flourished four decades of identifiably

**St Andrew's Episcopal Church, Wellesley, Massachusetts  
Juget-Sinclair, 2006**

<b>Grand-Orgue</b>		<b>Récit expressif</b>		<b>Pédale</b>	
Bourdon	16	Bourdon	8	Principal	16
Montre	8	Viole de Gambe	8	Soubasse	16
Flûte Harmonique (1-12 from Bourdon)	8	Céleste (from tenor C)	8	Bourdon	8
Flûte à Cheminée	8	Principal	8	Principal	8
Salicional	8	Principal	4	Octave	4
Prestant	4	Flûte Octavante	4	Trombone	16
Flûte Conique	4	Nasard	2 <sup>2</sup> / <sub>3</sub>	Trompette	8
Quinte	2 <sup>2</sup> / <sub>3</sub>	Octavin	2		
Doublette	2	Tierce	1 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>5</sub>	II/I - I/P - II/P	
Fourniture (5 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>3</sub> when 16ft is drawn)	IV-V	Plein-jeu	IV	Tremblant Récit	
Cornet (from tenor F)	V	Basson	16	Tremblant Grand-Orgue	
Trompette	8	Trompette Harmonique	8	Keyboards have bone naturals and ebony	
Clarinette	8	Clairon	4	sharps, pedalboard is oak with rosewood	
		Hautbois	8	faced sharps	



Canadian organ building. Where Aeolian-Skinner, Möller and Austin dwindled away in the States, Casavant continued strong, keeping moderate pace with the times and remaining prolific. Now under the new management of André Gremillet, and with the arrival of Didier Grassin as visual designer, Casavant shows promise of once again breaking out along truly distinctive lines. In the same town of Saint-Hyacinthe, ex-Casavant voicer Fernand Létourneau has slowly established a significant organ factory, turning out a large body of work for Canada, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Austria and England. Having been brought over to work in Casavant's mechanical-action department, Karl Wilhelm and Hellmuth Wolff have each made significant contributions to the emerging revival of tracker organs, with instruments all over Canada and the United States, as well as training many of today's younger generation of influential builders. More recently, Hal Gober in Toronto has crafted charming and original organs in Ohio and around Toronto.

Juget-Sinclair is the partnership of Denis Juget, a Frenchman, and Stephen Sinclair, a Canadian; Juget worked for Wilhelm and both worked for Wolff, as well as French and English builders. Their staff of eight occupies old warehouse space in Montreal, all with little fanfare. Speaking with colleagues while writing this piece, most people's reaction was 'Who?'

The firm's American presence began through a connection with Roberta Gary, longstanding chair of the organ department at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music. She met Denis Juget in 1996, saw one of his home instruments and ordered a studio organ and eventually a practice instrument as well. There are now four Juget-Sinclair organs in Cincinnati. The firm's practice instruments all include full-compass 8ft Principals, carried in the façade as far as height permits, with the balance

inside as open wood pipes. I've played two of these organs, and they are more charming than dazzling: elegant cases, crisp actions, refined and non-aggressive tones, and flexibility of registration through the either/or system. The reserved tonal quality is probably what such an organ is all about: practising for hours without fatigue to either muscle or ear.

The organ for St Andrew's Church in Wellesley, Massachusetts, is Juget-Sinclair's largest to date, with 34 stops over two manuals. It replaces a 1964 Casavant, something of a local landmark in its day, with the eminent Donald Willing as consultant. (Through the Organ Clearing House, the Casavant is being relocated to a church in western

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Massachusetts, to be installed by Czelusniak et Dugal.) The new organ occupies two symmetrical cases well clear of a central window, with Great and part of the Pedal on the left, Swell and remaining Pedal at the right, the console detached and centred in the loft. The cases are reminiscent of 19th-century French organ cabinetry, and are beautifully executed. But they are hardly the organ's most interesting feature.

Boring organs are often blamed on bad rooms – despite the hundreds of characterful historic instruments in rooms no more live than woodsheds. Moreover, we tend to think a good room essential to the French Romantic style, with flues that grow from mild warm basses to ravishing trebles, reeds that descend from girlish treble

*opposite* the detached console of the Wellesley organ, above an instrument for Hatsudai Catholic Church, Tokyo (2 manuals and pedal, 18 stops)



sweetness to sheer terror in the bass, and upperwork and cornets that fill the gaps. A kindly acoustic lends body to the *fonds d'orgue*, while smoothing out the treble fire of the tutti.

At Wellesley, the organ and choir space has been improved a little, but it remains an acoustical Bermuda Triangle. In addition to the very low reverberation time, a chapel fully as long as the nave extends perpendicularly from the altar: imagine a boomerang with an organ at its midpoint speaking down one arm. Despite the removal of a significant chancel archway, the organ's power remains considerably attenuated in the nave, and the room does little to help tone of any kind. Cries of 'French Romantic' would not automatically ring from the voice of an organ builder contemplating this space.

This instrument doesn't announce itself as a copy of any French organ, or of any organ for that matter; the low-key manner of the builders extends to an absence of rhetoric. But the design and language is clearly French Romantic in inspiration and much of the voicing. Of course, in 2005 an organ of French leaning is hardly revolutionary. While the firm's house organs prepare one for a high level of quality, they give little hint that the builders might embark on so bold and orthodox a tonal approach here, much less acquit it with real taste and flair, and under such unhelpful conditions.

Apart from the common bass on the Great flutes, there are no borrowings or extensions, no pneumatic assist, no special couplers, no fuss. The manuals are only a stop apart in size, and, joy of

joys, the Pedal has seven of its own, an admirable proportion to the manual material, and more than some new organs of twice the size. The key action is light, crisp and perhaps a bit deep; repetition is there, but it requires a bit of finger motion. Full organ, however, is easy to manage without feeling anachronistically light.

All the clues indicate a seriousness of approach, and the solid, muscular and deeply impressive musical result carries the day. A certain 'freshness' to the flue voicing suggests either a hint of lingering neo-classicism or simply a desire to get some life beyond the altar table into the room. Certainly no chuff or articulation is heard from the room, and the slight cowboy feel at the console is for the organist alone to experience. But if the sum is great, the parts have a useful innocence. You draw the 8ft Montre, certainly pleasant but hardly room-filling, and many other stops follow suit, even those tending to ostentation such as the Flûte harmonique. There is agreeable parity between manual foundations, the Great's being perhaps a notch above the Swell's. A divided organ requires equality of effect from both sides, and that balance is handled with particular finesse here.

From this admirable egalitarianism, things add up to more than first seems possible. The massed foundations are plenty stirring, without any colour being exaggerated. The Great's plenum dominates the Swell's, but the Swell reeds supply their fair share of the brawn; in particular, the darkly aggressive quality, with ferocious, prompt and fully-curved basses and demure trebles, really seems to capture an authentic spirit. The more classical Trompette and powerful Cornet on the Great even up the balance, leaving the ultimate drama to the full coupled Pedal, which is a force to reckon with. The independent Pedal Trompette makes all the difference, transforming the solid, dark Trombone into something quite racy, but leaving the Trombone as a milder voice for lesser use. In the tutti, however, one hesitates slightly before playing the pedals, since a single note fairly jumps out in meeting and octaves are formidable. Despite all that Americans have studied in France, few modern French-inspired organs capture an essential balance structure this organ has down cold.

And then you push cancel, draw the Montre again and think, 'How does all of this quite add up to all that?' One might wish for a touch more colour in the stopped flutes and a bit more finesse in a few pipes here and there, while admiring the overall elegance, excellent chorus work, superb strings and harmonic flutes, handsome capped Clarinette and other fine points; but the details seem secondary. In architecture, balance and execution, this is the first serious modern Romantic organ to arrive in Boston. If the acoustics don't welcome the instrument, organ lovers ought to. ■

above a practice organ for the home of Gorman Jones, Birmingham, Alabama (2 manuals, 8 stops)