

What was I thinking?

March 21, 2021



Bach's birthday and the king of instruments

I'm going to do something a little risky this Sunday, something I've done maybe twice in my 35 plus years as a church organist. I hope it works. This Sunday is the birthday of Johann Sebastian Bach. He was born March 21, 1685. It's good to honor great composers and others who have made significant contributions to the church throughout history, as long as we keep that in perspective. God is the object and subject of worship, and my worship planning always begins with scripture. The music selected must be appropriate for the scripture of the day. With Bach, that's not too hard to do. He wrote five years' worth of cantatas (and that's a cantata every Sunday), other large and small scale choral works, and quite a bit of organ music, much of it based on Lutheran chorales (hymns) and also what we call "free" works, meaning preludes, toccatas, fantasias, fugues, etc. There is a lot to choose from.

I know Bach would agree that our focus in worship should be on God. At the beginning of many of his compositions, he wrote the initials "J.J." (Jesu juva = Jesus help), and at the conclusion of many pieces, he wrote "S.D.G." (Soli Deo Gloria = to God alone be the glory). So, we will be worshipping God with the music of Bach, including some preludes on chorales/hymns, and our soloist will sing an English version of a movement from one of Bach's cantatas. One of our hymns was harmonized by Bach. He isn't known for writing hymn tunes, but he is very well known for harmonizing them, and using them in cantatas and organ works.

When he was living, Bach was not known quite as much as a composer of organ music as he was a performer of it. He was considered an expert on the instrument

and was often called on to test and evaluate newly built organs. It is said that he would sit at a new organ and improvise for hours at a time, testing out the different sounds.

Since we're honoring Bach this Sunday (here's the risky part), I decided to play perhaps his best-known piece of organ music, maybe the most famous pieces of organ music ever written. BUT, there is something I want to make sure we understand first – this piece of music was written long before there were movies, especially horror movies, long before Disney's *Fantasia*, long before *The Phantom of the Opera*, long before it gained its many stereotypical associations. Unfortunately, it's hard for some of us to forget those things, thanks to our popular culture. THIS PIECE OF ORGAN MUSIC WAS WRITTEN TO BE NOTHING MORE THAN THAT – A PIECE OF ORGAN MUSIC.

Because of its many associations, its many transcriptions for orchestra, brass, piano, etc., and because of its frequent performance, it has become cliché. It can be hard to hear it and think of it as a piece of organ music, but, I will ask you to try, and I will take the risk, so that we can hear and use as a musical offering to God, Bach's famous *Tocatta and Fugue in D minor*.



Though I often shy away from this piece for the reasons given above, there are some reasons I do want to play it. It is a great and exciting piece of music, which is why it has become so popular. My son, Aiden, loves the piece. In fact, he's learned much of it on his own by ear. Kids love this piece. One of our special treats on Sunday afternoons when we have children's choirs is to take them into the sanctuary to see and hear the organ, and they always want to hear this piece.

Have you noticed that some compliments you receive over the years get stuck in your memory? Maybe it's the situation or the person giving it, something makes certain compliments carry extra weight. I remember playing an organ program for a group of school children in Indianapolis, and I included Bach's famous toccata. The children wrote "thank you" notes to me, which was wonderful, but one in particular got to me. One boy wrote, "I used to think all classical music written by old dead guys was boring. Boy, you sure proved me wrong!" It made me realize many of us pass our stereotypes on to children. If given a chance, they are smart enough to figure things out on their own. I also took it as a reminder that when I perform (especially "classical" music), to not be boring!

But one of my favorite memories of the *Tocatta and Fugue* is from an organ demonstration I gave not long after I came to First Presbyterian Church. It was for the SAM group, as part of a "get to know the new organist/director" campaign. I was expecting a group of maybe 10 people, but it turned out to be more like 100. John Kipp was the host of the event, and he was kind to give me a great introduction. We hardly knew each other then. John sat on the front pew as I gave my talk and performance. The last piece I played on that program was Bach's *Tocatta and Fugue*. As usual, it was a crowd pleaser, but when I finished and heard applause, I turned around to take a bow, and I happened to look at John Kipp. He had tears streaming down his face. I never thought the music would have that much of an impact on anyone, but it did. I soon had tears in my own eyes. Music is a powerful gift from God, and it has the power to move us beyond what words can explain. I was just the messenger that day, but I was reminded what a powerful message I had been given to deliver, and I am entrusted with that every week. That's quite a humbling vocation.

Antiphonal organ update

Early last Tuesday morning, a crew from the Schantz Organ Company in Ohio arrived and began work.

Equipment and parts were brought into the sanctuary.





Ductwork to supply wind to the organ



Windchests and racks for pipes



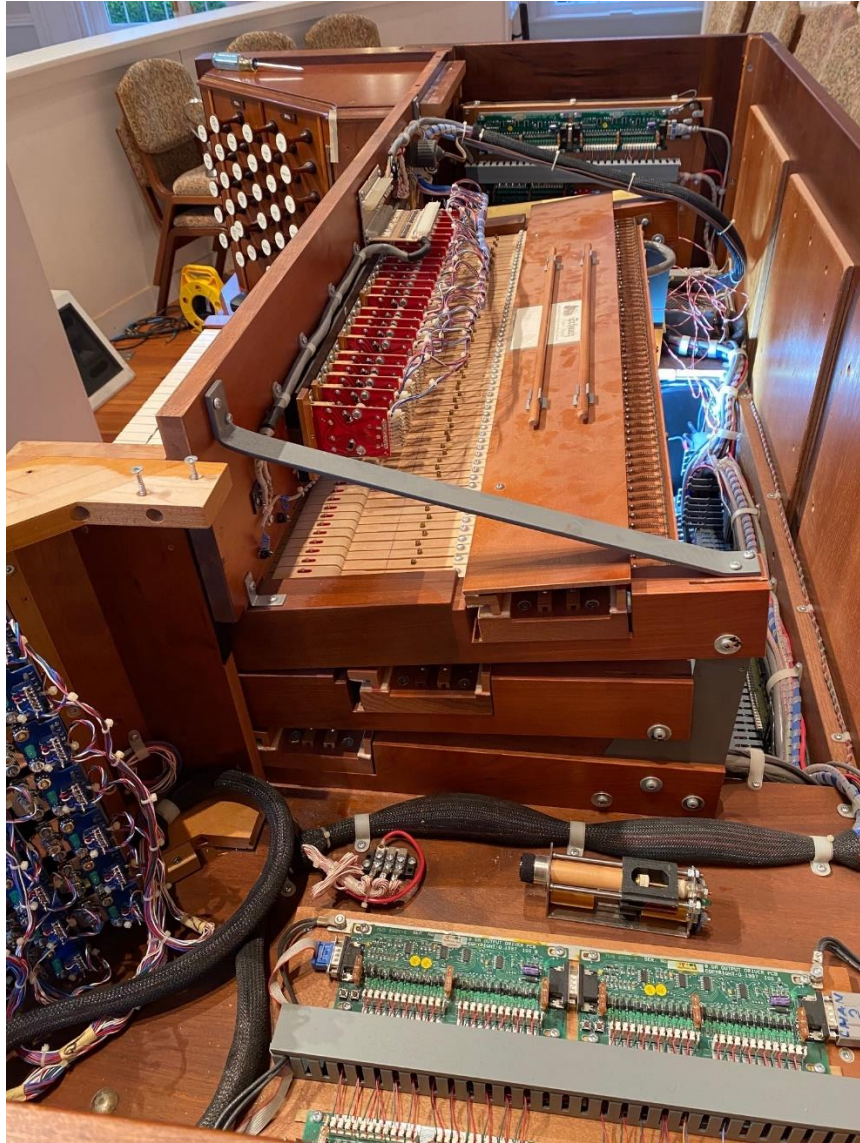
Flute pipes



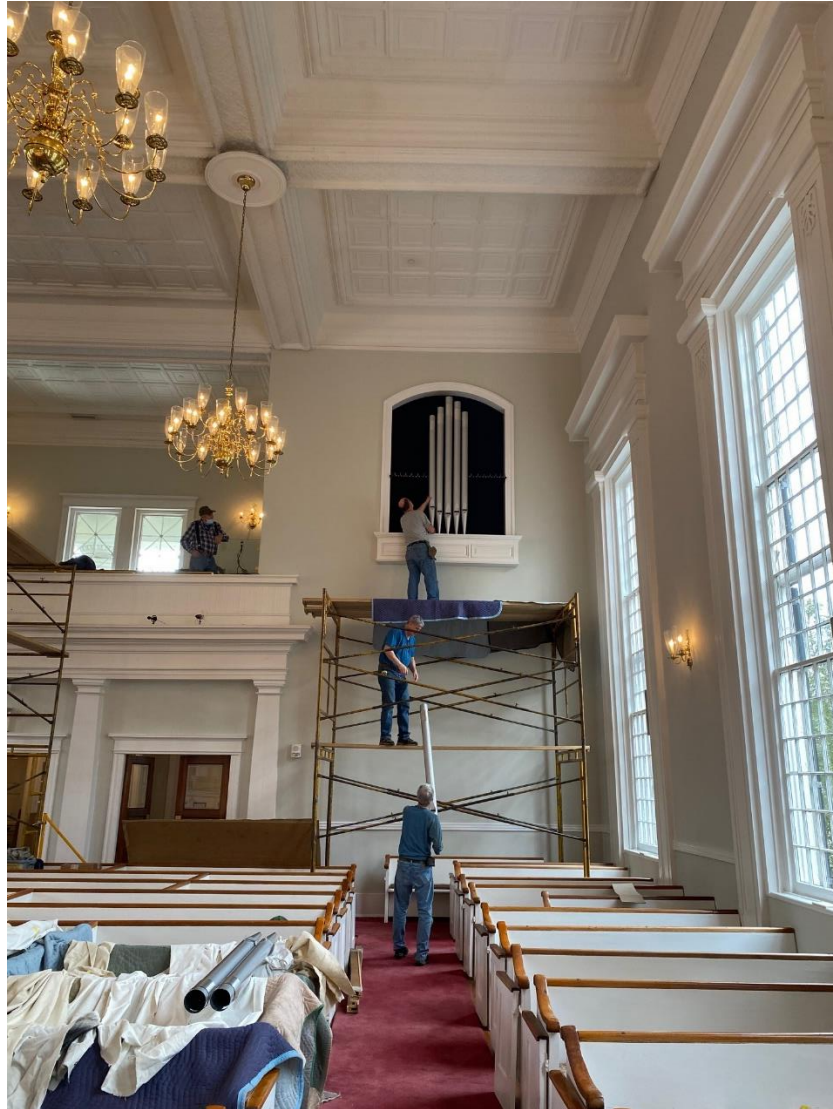
Trompette Harmonique pipes (and more flute pipes)



Scaffolding put up to get pipes and other parts up to the balcony



The organ console was opened and taken apart to make connections



Scaffolding was put up to get pipes up to the façade

And our formerly blank stops were given their names.



We're not finished yet. You won't hear any of these on Bach's birthday. This coming week, tuners and voicers from Schantz will come to get the Antiphonal Organ in tune and voice it to sound perfect in our sanctuary. If all goes according to the plan, we'll hear the Antiphonal Organ on Palm Sunday. I can use some Bach to test it out then.

Stay tuned (pun intended)!

God be with you till we meet again.

John