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THE RATORY

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Year of Faith. Why ?

Restoration of the Beckerath Organ

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Restoration work on the Beckerath organ

Interview : In March 2012, Sylvie BESSETTE met with Denis JUGET, director of restoration work on the Beckerath organ at Saint Joseph's Oratory

Please tell us a bit about yourself and describe your mandate at the Oratory.

DJ : My name is Denis Juget and I'm the president of Juget-Sinclair Company. My business partner's name is Steve Sinclair. Our Montréal-based organ business builds and restores instruments. We've been working on the restoration at the Oratory since September, 2011, and we're scheduled to complete it in June, 2012.

Is this the first time the organ has undergone a major restoration?

DJ : Yes. It's been cleaned and tuned, and it's maintained regularly. But, this is the first time that all the pipes have been removed and the inner workings rebuilt. The windchest, which underlies all the pipes, was restored from top to bottom.

Restored? Does this mean rebuilt?

DJ : No, the windchest was in good condition, but it had to be adjusted. The wood and valves were worn and were no longer airtight. We had to realign all the sliders, add new paper, rescrew certain parts, reglue the leather... Now, the organ is like new.



Denis Juget (second from right) and team in front of the Oratory



Its sheer size makes it special. It's rare to see 32-ft. pipes on the façade of an organ.





We also took down
all the front pipes.



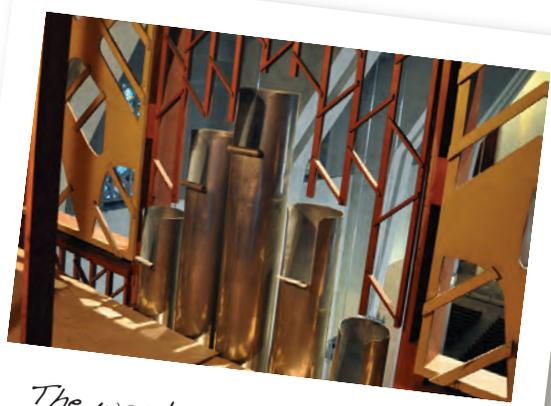
*It's a huge organ playing
in an immense basilica.*

This restoration necessitated an impressive amount of work. Scaffolding was erected around the organ. Why did you do this and what exactly was involved?

DJ : It was an incredible challenge to put up the scaffolding, and a specialized company was hired to do the work. It's sixty feet high! To make sure it was stable, the scaffolding was braced against the basilica walls and on the instrument itself. It had to be high enough to reach the top of the organ — it's dizzying! The team members all wear a harness while working. We're kind of hopping back and forth between the inside and outside of the organ. We're a sizeable team, but we take our time. Surprisingly, it's heavy, dangerous work. The 16-ft. pipes (actually more like 20 feet if you count the extension and foot) weigh 90 kg. (200 lbs.) each. So, when we are strolling around in the air with these big pipes, we need to be careful! We have to move gingerly.

The scaffolding was erected near the sides of the organ so we could clean it; the woodwork was very dusty. We also took down all the front pipes, except for the 32-ft. ones. The entire middle façade section which is made of tin, was disassembled, cleaned and restored. There were some minor problems, like the fact that the feet were starting to collapse under the weight of the pipes.





The woodwork was very dusty.

Does this change the sound of the instrument?

DJ : No, but the pipes start to collapse. The feet collapse in on themselves and block the wind (pressurised air) from passing through. It was really a dangerous situation! Some of the 20-ft. pipes were on the verge of toppling over. The fasteners holding onto the pipes at the rear were ripped out. Before even starting the restoration work, the pipes had to be strapped in place to prevent them from falling over. It was emergency surgery! Tonal and physical properties of the pipes endure, but some alloys don't stand up over time. Large instruments are very delicate.

What's the next step, after the pipes have been cleaned and, in some cases, completely restored?

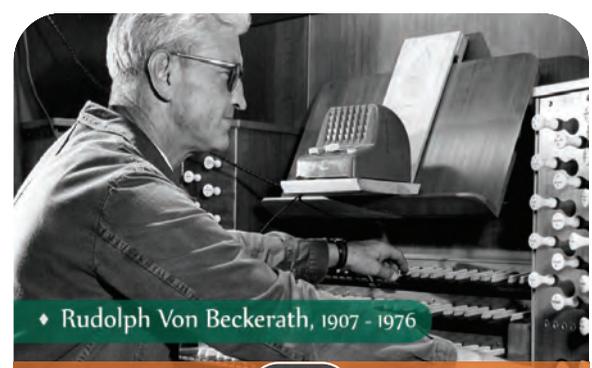
DJ : Then, we will harmonize the timbres, equalize and tune the pipes to make sure they blend in with the rest. They are tested on what's called a "mannequin," which is a small windchest, a kind of miniature organ to which we attach each pipe individually. We test the pipes to make sure they sound beautiful and that their tone blends in with the ensemble. Once this is done, we put them back in place. At the very end, we do what we call a general tuning. At this stage, we test the pipes one at a time and compare them to their neighbours who are at a tone or a half tone. Tuning is done over a span of six or seven weeks.

What do you think makes the Oratory's organ special?

DJ : Its sheer size makes it special. It's rare to see 32-ft. pipes on the façade of an organ.

Is this the only feature that makes the organ different?

DJ : It's the overall architecture. Because the organ builder Beckerath had envisioned a massive 32-ft. instrument, and because the basilica is so enormous, he could really let loose. He didn't have to make any compromises. He commandeered a huge amount of space and height, with impressive results. Sometimes, the organ can be rather serene and calm but it has what it takes. It doesn't need a lot of power behind it. It's simply a very loud sound that gushes from the organ loft — it envelopes you. It's a huge organ playing in an immense basilica. So, you have to give careful consideration to the repertoire you play on it.



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PRESENTS
the process of restoring the organ

