



CARVING AN AWARD-WINNING ORGAN CASE IN SAINT PAUL, MINNESOTA

by Ian Agrell

I've always said that you can consider a job well done if, on the last day everyone shakes hands and says they look forward to working together again. That's especially meaningful when you've just worked on an extremely challenging project with a world-renowned and highly respected architect.

In this case the project was constructing, carving and installing a new organ case for the Beaux Arts-style Cathedral of Saint Paul, the National Shrine of the Apostle Paul, in Minnesota, USA. The architect was Duncan G. Stroik, a professor of architecture at the University of Notre Dame and a modern-day expert in the classical tradition.

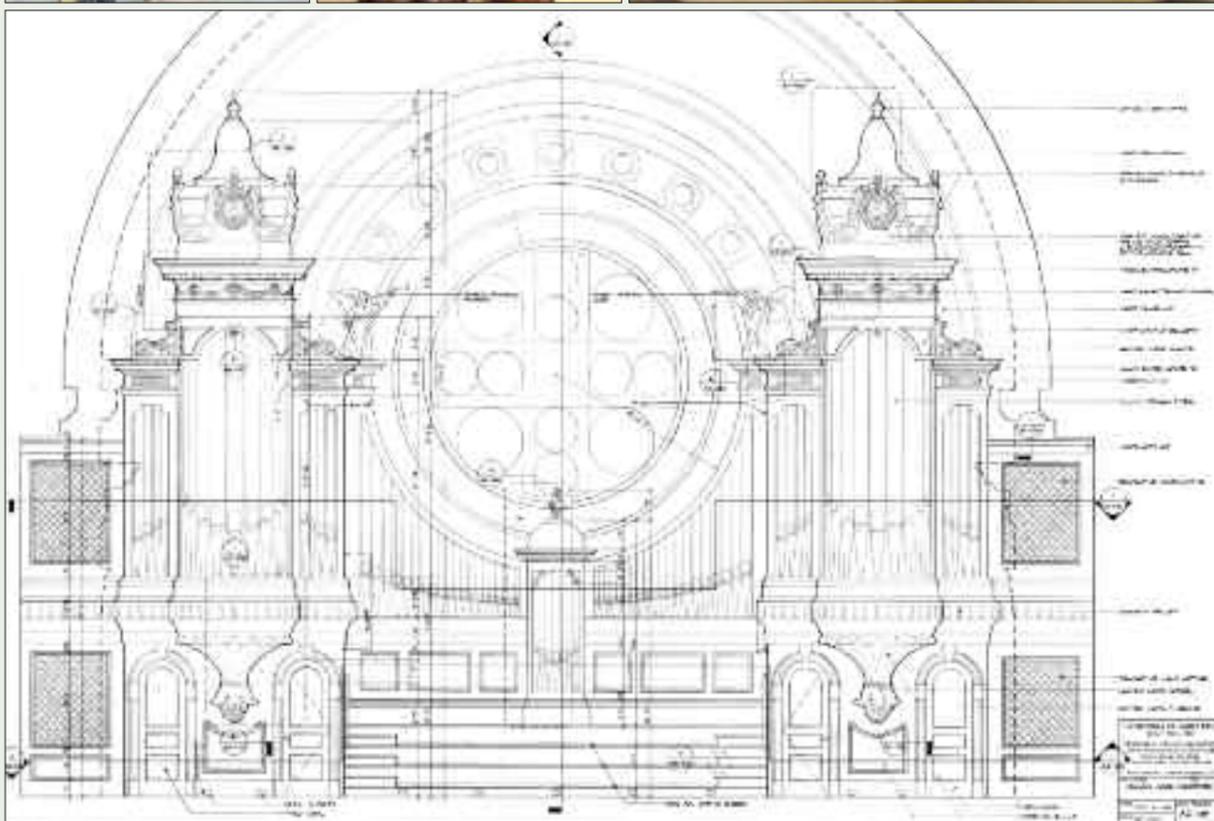
The 2,200-seat Roman Catholic cathedral is the third largest in the United States and is on the National Register of Historic Places. However, its organ case needed a serious facelift. So, to commemorate the cathedral's 2015 centennial, the congregation commissioned new cabinetry to house the newly refurbished 3,917-pipe Aeolian-Skinner organ.

Stroik designed casework to complement the cathedral's modern French classicism. Inspired by sketches done by French architect Emmanuel Masqueray, who designed the cathedral in 1915, the walnut and gold-leaf casework included 40-foot-high cantilevered towers decorated with huge hand-carved corbels and swags and topped with bell-shaped domes. A pair of human-sized angels playing musical instruments flanked returns into massive stain-glass windows behind. The entire structure was 60 feet wide and 20 feet deep, and it stood on a platform some 30 feet off the ground. Obviously this project would present some challenges.



Though we had worked with Stroik's team on other smaller projects, we were very keen to show off our advanced construction and woodcarving skills as well as our ability to deliver and install a complex and high-profile project to the other side of the country – all within the budget and time frame. We worked with a cabinet shop run by Geoff Arko and Scott Richter in Richmond, California, with whom we have 20 years experience collaborating. We liaised with Quimby Pipe Organs, the organ building company, to iron out any construction, packing, shipping, and installation issues ahead of time. After all, this was an extremely heavy >

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multi-piece walnut structure that needed to be installed in a restricted space without disrupting the cathedral's everyday events.

Getting our heads around the size of the carved elements was a challenge. When Arko delivered the unwieldy blanks for the 6-foot swags that draped around the top of the towers, my first thought was, 'Wow, we had better get to work.' Each swag was to be individually carved with no repetition in design. After all, the advantage of carving by hand is that you don't have to repeat everything like a machine does. But the real monsters were the 8-foot-wide brackets that visually supported the towers. The sheer size and weight meant they were extremely difficult to move around, let alone carve by hand.

For me perhaps the most interesting part of the job was carving the two angels. We always work with sculptors who specialise in the human form to supply us with models or maquettes for us to copy. In this case Stroik recommended



Cody Swanson, an American sculptor living in Florence. He and Stroik created an appropriate design and then supplied us with half-sized plaster models. As a bonus the process gave me the opportunity to visit Florence.

After the carving and casework was complete, the gilder, Peter Werkhoven, covered the carved elements, including the giant corbels and swags, in pure gold leaf – again, no easy task considering the size of the parts.

All told, my team of woodworkers, woodcarvers, and gilders spent around 18,000 hours over the course of a year in completing the project.

We loaded the parts into a truck on a mild winter's evening in Northern California and then drove them 2,000 miles to Saint Paul, the bitterly cold and snow-laden capital of Minnesota. It took us five days to install the casework, just in time for Quimby to bring in the pipes and all their magical musical workings. A local scaffolding company helped us hoist the parts into place using cranes borrowed from a shipping yard on nearby Lake Superior. On the last night, I remember the feeling of relief as I listened to electric drills securing the casework into place while we trudged into the snow for a hot meal and a cold beer.

The organ case went on to earn Stroik and his team numerous well-deserved national awards. More importantly for me, I got a handshake and a promise that we'd all work together again soon. And we did. ■

Ian Agrell is CEO of Agrell Architectural Carving, a custom woodcarving company based in California, New York, and the UK.