

# Opus 190

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In 1909, the rapidly growing congregation of Grand Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church in downtown Kansas City, Missouri, elected to erect a new building to house not only the church facilities, but also an adjoining 12-story office tower (west). Completed in 1912, the Greek revival design of the church later became known as "Grand Avenue Temple" and its office tower as the "Temple Building." The Temple's 1500-seat amphitheater-style church auditorium is almost square, with a 30-foot-high, classically ornate grid-type ceiling. This auditorium and the Ernest M. Skinner pipe organ which resides in it have never been significantly altered from their original designs. In 1995 any tonal changes to original ranks were reversed.

The Church lost ownership of the office tower during the Great Depression. After a series of transactions, today it is the Federal Reserve Bank which owns every other parcel of land on the block except the place where the Grand Avenue Temple remains. Although the Federal Reserve Bank has offered to acquire the Grand Avenue Temple for additional parking space, to date, no offer has been accepted, and the downtown church, one of only five churches in downtown Kansas City, lives on.

Like the congregation, so lives the Opus 190 pipe organ of Ernest M. Skinner. Its longevity is due, in great part, to the service and restorative repairs performed since 1971 by Mr. Michael Quimby of Warrensburg, Missouri. While many restorations of vintage pipe organs routinely update mechanical, tonal and cosmetic aspects of pipe organs, Michael Quimby and his associate, Mr. Eric Johnson, have only cleaned and re-painted as necessary, preserving the original instrument's looks, smells and, most importantly, its sounds. Although it would be less expensive in most cases to simply replace an old electro-pneumatic console with more efficient, new designs, all original console parts of Opus 190 have been painstakingly restored according to the 1912 specifications and designs. These efforts all ensure that the original E. M. Skinner sound, which is affected in a small way by the nature of the construction, is preserved, warts and all!

Opus 190 was dedicated along with the new *Grand Avenue Temple* building in a series of events from February 11-18, 1912. This instrument embodies, intact to this day, Mr. Skinner's early tonal ideals. Pipe chambers are constructed of pour-in-place concrete with hard plaster walls. The organ spans the entire 70-foot wall in the front of the auditorium. At the center of the instrument the chamber is only 3 feet deep and most of the organ pipework is located on the far left and right sides. Yet the impression of the organ in the room is remarkably cohesive. This is because the expression shades open towards the middle of the façade rather directly out into the auditorium.

Opus 190 has a typical early Skinner console - by comparison with his four-manual organs built after 1920. Opus 190 has a limited combination action. There are only two general pistons (neither of which affect couple rails) and no general cancel. Opus 190 gets its 26" static wind pressure from an original 15-horsepower D.C. Century-motor. The organ action is a very fast pitman design with double-stage primaries.

In 1948, Ernest Skinner, at age 83, returned to Grand Avenue Temple to replace the Swell division *Claribel Flute* with a fine two-rank *Flute Celestes*. Also, under Mr. Skinner's suggestion, minor additions were made, as follow: two ranks to the Great division, 4 mutations to the Choir division, and one mixture to the Pedal division. In 1949, Mr. Skinner urged the congregation to never let anyone remove or change his instrument.

In recent decades, many of Mr. Skinner's early organs have fallen victim to the wrecking crane, along with their respective church buildings. Others have been removed from their original locations, dismantled and distributed piece-meal for use in other instruments. Some others remain where they were originally installed, but have been mechanically or tonally modified. The Grand Avenue Temple organ is the oldest surviving 4-manual Skinner organ which has not been mechanically or tonally modified by anyone other than Mr. Skinner himself. It is truly a rare and exotic antique, but much more than that, it is a living testament to tonal philoso-

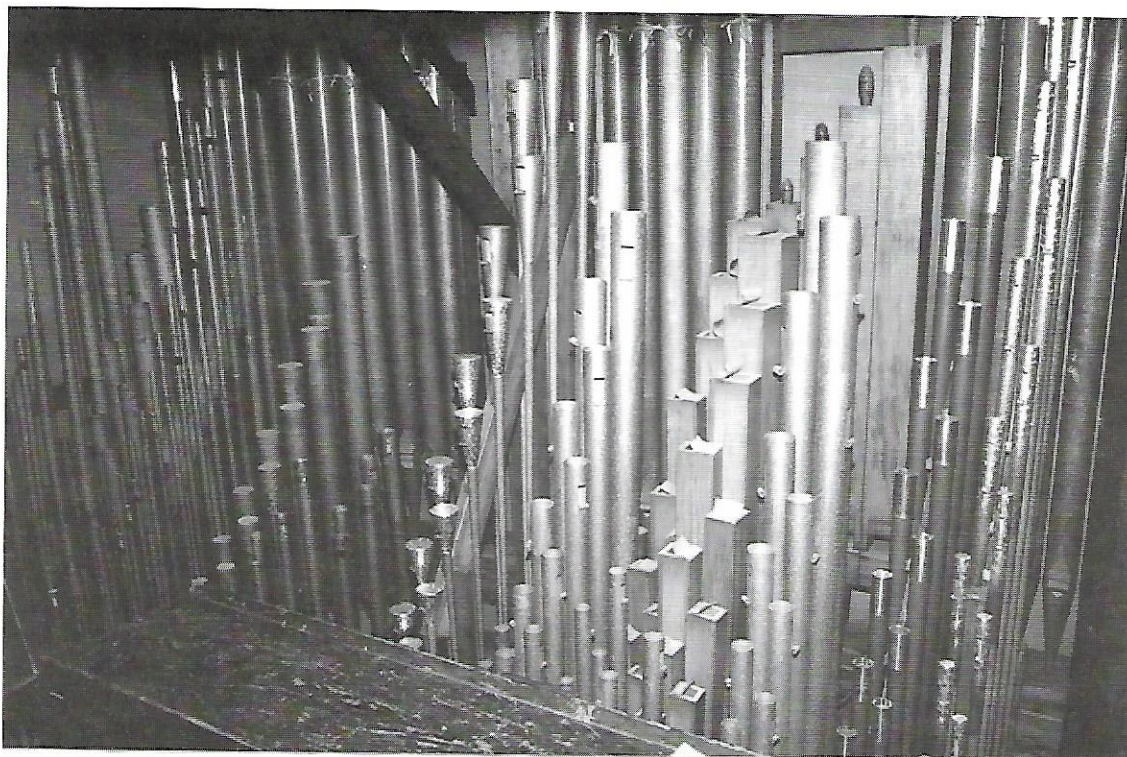


phies of an American organ-building legend. Through Opus 190, with its distinctive blend of colors, we can realize the organ music of its age in a way not possible with organs founded upon other mechanical and tonal designs. Put the vintage music and the vintage musical instrument together, and what emerges is an aural glimpse into the musical psyche of our grandparent's or great-grandparent's day, from the age of the Model T and the Wright Brothers, and from a time prior to U. S. Federal Income Tax and the First World War.

As already mentioned, the Opus 190 organ has limited console devices to assist in registration changes. Luckily, Ernest M. Skinner's organs have a clever design which allows the performance of complicated pieces with relative ease. This design centers around five elements: (1) swell chambers with thick, sometimes double, swell shutters, possessing superior dynamic range capable of nearly silencing even the loudest registration, (2) a well-conceived crescendo pedal, with stops set to engage in a sequence which maintains balance between all divisions at all times, (3) a judiciously-chosen tutti combination, which, in conjunction with the swell shutters, serves as a "third" general piston, (4) a full complement of inter- and intra-divisional couplers, some of which allow one to use the portion of the stops which are located beyond the com-

pass of the traditional 61-note keyboard, and, lastly and most importantly (5) a set of wind pressures, scalings and placements among the pipes which allow them to easily blend and balance to the ear. It is this fifth and final element, that of universal tonal balances, which still challenges and eludes organ-builders today. Skinner's genius in this area, regrettably, was never documented in plain English. Although we analyze and marvel at his work, few are capable of reproducing it. Through some fine investigative work by Michael Quimby, the original wiring plan for both the crescendo pedal and tutti was located, and these have been restored to their original specifications.

Whether or not one has the training and experience to understand the technical discussion above, one thing is certain: the music which this type of pipe organ inspired is dramatic and it appeals to the very core of human emotion and instinct. In this day and age where the driving beat and deafening sound levels prevail, it becomes all the more refreshing to visit the music of this strange and exotic time where soothing melody, ever-changing tone color and ultra-wide dynamic range (more often quiet than loud) beckon us forward.



Photography by Eric D. Johnson, Warrensburg, Missouri.