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K. C. Marrin: Profile of a Minnesota Organbuilder

Organbuilders [1]

Organbuilder Kevin Christopher Marrin was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1949, the sixth of seven children. His family called him “Casey,” an Irish nickname drawn from his initials. He also incorporated his initials into his business name, the K. C. Marrin Company.

Marrin’s father was part owner of a small family brass and iron foundry (whose legacy includes 36 miles of ornate street lamps scattered throughout St. Paul, Minnesota). His mother was a naturally gifted vocalist, who before her marriage sang on the road for three years with the Bernie Cummins (big band) Orchestra.

During high school, K. C. boarded at St. John’s Preparatory School in Collegeville, Minnesota, as did his father a generation earlier, part of a long association and friendship with the central Minnesota Benedictine community. Marrin continued at St. John’s University and earned a double major in philosophy and music in 1971. While at St. John’s, he witnessed firsthand the construction of the renowned Abbey Church and other notable academic buildings designed by Marcel Breuer, the modernist Bauhaus architect.

Marrin was greatly influenced by Brother Hubert Schneider, O.S.B., a member of the St. John’s Benedictine community who worked in the abbey’s woodworking shop for over 60 years. Br. Hubert was a gentle and gifted craftsman who taught as much through his manner of living as by his mastery of craft. Marrin wrote of Br. Hubert:

He was the ideal of a monk who understood what balance in life is about. I asked him if I could help out in the shop and learn woodworking. . . . Brother Hubert had a Shaker-like work ethic—respect for materials, respect for tools, simplicity and honesty in design and execution—qualities that are at the heart of the Benedictine lifestyle as implied appropriately in their motto, *Ora et Labora* (Pray and Work).

Brother Hubert’s mentoring helped Marrin realize that aspiring to be a craftsman, as many of his uncles and aunts had been, could be a fulfilling path to pursue, one especially suitable to his aptitudes and interests.

After graduation, Marrin lived briefly in the rectory of nearby St. Joseph Church in St. Joseph while considering the possibility of becoming a permanent deacon in the Catholic Church. He took a summer job helping two local organbuilders (Eric Fiss, active in Fargo, North Dakota, and Arthur Kurtzman, then active in St. Cloud, Minnesota), who were moving and enlarging the St. Joseph Church’s Wicks organ from a rear balcony location to a cantilevered position behind the altar. This was his introduction into the world of organ building.¹

After work on the St. Joseph organ concluded, Marrin continued briefly with Kurtzman and Fiss, rebuilding local instruments and learning what organ building involved. He then went out on his own, doing service work and tuning. (Eric Fiss died shortly thereafter, but Marrin maintained a lifetime association with Art Kurtzman, who assisted with voicing on many of his instruments.) Marrin’s first project on his own was rebuilding a small Wicks organ in his home parish of St. Boniface, Cold Spring, Minnesota. Just prior to building the St. John’s studio organ, Opus 6, Marrin visited Europe in 1986. Kim Kasling, St. John’s professor of music, then on sabbatical studying with Harald Vogel, guided Marrin to important and interesting organs in Austria and Germany.

As Marrin began to build his own instruments, he endeavored to engage in all aspects of the work himself. Operating a one-man shop was not an ideal business model. This inevitably meant slow production and delivery schedules, as well as under-utilized workspace and equipment, but more importantly for him, allowed time to learn the trade and rediscover older ways of approaching technical problems and to develop hand skills at his workbench.

K. C. Marrin Company organs

Opus 1, St. Augustine Catholic Church, St. Cloud (1978)

St. Augustine Church took a chance on Marrin, giving him his first contract to build a new organ. It was completed in 1978, a two-manual, mechanical-action instrument of fifteen stops, balanced key action, and a freestanding oak case. Marrin built the case and winding system, but the pipework and chests came from German supply houses. In recognition of the German heritage of central Minnesota, an inscription was carved around the keydesk: “Zur grösseren Ehre Gottes” (For the greater glory of God).

Opus 2, St. Cloud State University, St. Cloud (1979)

Marrin built a one-manual portative organ, with three divided stops (8’ Gedeckt, 4’ Rohrflute, 2’ Principal) and a short octave (C, D, E, F) in the bass, for the music department at St. Cloud State University, St. Cloud, Minnesota.

Opus 3, Sacred Heart Catholic Church, Sauk Rapids (1981)

Marrin built a two-manual, 11-stop organ with suspended-mechanical action and a freestanding white oak case for Sacred Heart Catholic Church. He made his first large windchest, continuing the process of learning to make components in-house. Originally located in a rear balcony, the organ has been moved to a new parish home a few miles away. Strikingly beautiful carvings distinguish the case—the art of the late Joseph O’Connell, regional sculptor and artist. This includes mahogany Brustwerk doors (with Fats Waller and a jazz band of angels surrounded by singing choirboys) and pipe shades (with angels and various musical instruments). A batik tapestry, now removed, created by area artist Judith Goetemann, added a splash of color to the upper case doors.

Opus 4, Cathedral of St. Mary, St. Cloud (1982)

The Catholic cathedral in St. Cloud features an excellent acoustic. Marrin’s 27-stop organ is installed in the apse behind the altar and cathedra (bishop’s chair), where it serves as a visual focus to the sanctuary. Positioning the organ high off the floor created a “balcony” for the pipes to speak, and with the help of the curved dome behind, the organ projects a majestic and unified sound efficiently into the nave. A simple timber frame structure carries the weight much like a medieval *Blockwerk* organ case, a reference to earlier design influences at St. John’s. The case is constructed from over 6,000 board feet of laminated rift-cut white oak (cut at an angle to minimize the grain that is visible). Structural beams were assembled with Br. Hubert’s assistance, and the traditional joinery was cut by hand.

The organ design employs features new to Marrin’s thinking in 1982, which was in tune with a small group of American builders led by John Brombaugh, who sought to return to earlier organ design principles and building methods. The organ has a 16’ plenum, flexible winding (a single large wedge-shaped bellows supplies wind to the manual divisions), wooden ductwork (with a Great divided on separate bass and treble chests to help stabilize the wind), three “double-draw” stops, high lead-content pipework, Clicquot-style reeds (made by Roland Killinger in Germany), a five-rank mounted Cornet (all open pipes, beginning at tenor G), and unequal temperament (Werckmeister II). Over 200 Catholic bishops, archbishops, and cardinals, gathered for a meeting and retreat at St. John’s Abbey in June of 1982, attended the dedication of the organ.

Opus 5, Immaculate Conception Catholic Church, Columbia Heights (1985)

This installation is a 23-stop organ with a Positiv division located on the balcony rail and a partially enclosed Great. In 1987, the organ was joined electrically to an Allen digital organ by another builder. The Marrin organ retains much of its original layout and tonal design.

Opus 6, St. John’s University, Collegeville (1988)

This 22-stop practice and teaching instrument is located in a dedicated room in the music department and has a three-tower case and a graceful ten-degree flare forward at impost level—just enough to distinguish the ornate but playful case design. It includes more of Joseph O’Connell’s work: dozens of wrought-iron figures of Benedictine monks peeking out of the case shadows into the room. Many of the figures resemble living and deceased members of the monastic

community—purely coincidence, according to O’Connell.

Opus 7, Gethsemane Lutheran Church, Dassel (1990)

The two-manual, 15-stop tracker organ is positioned on the balcony rail and is playable from the side of the case. The stop knobs connect directly to the ends of the sliders, a concept K. C. observed in a small rural church in northern Germany. Both manual divisions and pedal share a single divided chest. The case has neo-Gothic elements, connecting it to period decorations in this century-old country church.

Opus 8, St. Scholastica Monastery, Duluth (1992)

The organ was installed as part of a renovation project of the monastery chapel. The instrument is positioned in a reformatted library space in a most tasteful and workable way, with suitable height for the organ to develop tonally. It has the appearance of a one-manual organ, with hidden Swell and Pedal divisions in a wall opening behind the case and with the bellows and blower beneath the floor. It has proven to be a flexible liturgical organ that is suitable for the needs of the Benedictine community’s life of prayer and sacred song.

Opus 9, Good Shepherd Catholic Church, Golden Valley (1995)

The organ has a central balcony location with limited height, which required positioning the Great in front of the Swell. The mechanical pedal chest permits stops to be played both at unison and an octave above. There are 23 stops housed in a solid mahogany case.

Opus 10, St. Augustine Catholic Church, St. Cloud (2002)

Marrin returned to his Opus 1, expanding and relocating it behind the altar, adding a third manual (Swell of 12 stops) and four new Pedal stops (including a 32’ resultant) in towers to the right and left of the old case for a total of 35 stops. The stop action is electric and has a solid-state combination action.

Opus 11, St. Boniface Catholic Church, Cold Spring (2013)

Marrin’s *magnum opus* is found in his home church, only a half-block from his shop. Forty-four stops are divided between three manuals and pedal, with suspended mechanical key action and electric stop action. Eleven of the stops came from the Eric Fiss organ at St. Mark’s Catholic Church in Shakopee, Minnesota, which Marrin had helped install in 1974. The organ was partially destroyed by fire in 2005.

Opus 11 faces three directions on three chest levels and speaks from a rear-corner of the room. A single-wedge bellows supplies wind to the manual divisions. The 32’ Bourdon extension, located behind the children’s “cry room,” has been known to quiet young children and infants. A 16’ Openbass (wood, in the Pedal), a 16’ Trombone (wood, modeled from a 19th-century Pfeffer organ in Iowa), an 8’ oak Doppelfloete (two mouths), and an independent 1 1/7’ on the Positiv add to the eclectic tonal design. The organ’s tonal spectrum is suitable for most of the standard organ literature. Key cheeks are inlaid with polished granite taken from the Cold Spring quarry. The music rack has a hand-lettered text attributed to St. Teresa of Avila: “Yours are the feet with which He goes about doing good. Yours are the hands with which He blesses us now.”

This opus list does not contain other projects and restorations that have filled the time between construction of Marrin’s new instruments. Among these projects are restorations of Jardine (1864) and Joseph Lorenz (1887) organs. For over 40 years Marrin has kept busy in a small shop behind his house, advertising only by word-of-mouth, working as a craftsman, designing, building, and engaging in auxiliary woodworking activities that have kept him active and productive. “Working at home has saved me from three years of commuting on the interstate. No snow days. No excuses for not showing up for work. But time for family, a garden, and *Ora et Labora*. I have been blessed all around.”

Notes

1. Marrin also became engaged that year, and later married Carol Eiyneck from nearby Albany, Minnesota. They made their home in Cold Spring, Minnesota, about 12 miles from St. John’s University. Marrin and Carol had two children, Matthew and Annie. Carol died of cancer in 2011. Marrin recently married Anne Studer, a high school and college friend of both Marrin and Carol, adding six more children and seven grandchildren to his family circle.

Firsts for Marrin Organs

Opus 1: Mechanical action and slider chests; Embossed display pipe

Opus 2: Short octave; divided keyboard

Opus 3: Hauptwerk (Great) the upper manual, Brustwerk the lower manual; Use of suspended key action; Decorative carvings; Case shutters decorated with batik tapestry

Opus 4: Single large wedge-shaped bellows which supplies wind to the manual divisions; flexible winding; 16’ plenum; 16’ Principal on Great; separate winding for pedal division; first Swell division; use of “double-draw” stop knobs; unequal temperament (Werckmeister II modified); mounted five-rank Cornet beginning at Tenor G; Clicquot-style reeds

Opus 5: Positiv division; partially enclosed Great; Marpurg temperament

Opus 6: Transmissions from manuals to Pedal; Dom Bedos style tremulant; decorative figures of singing monks cast in wrought iron; Rosignol; Kimberger III temperament

Opus 7: Key desk on the side of the case; stop knobs attached to the end of sliders

Opus 8: Bellows and blower beneath the floor; full-length resonators for 16’ Trombone

Opus 9: Windchests of Great and Swell at the same level; mechanical Pedal chest permits stops to be played at both the unison and the octave above

Opus 10: First organ with three manuals; first 32’ resultant; first electric stop action and computer-controlled combination action; Crescendo pedal; programmable tremulant; Zimbelstern

Opus 11: Speaks in three directions; electric Swell shutter control; use of salvaged pipes (from St. Mark’s Church, Shakopee, Minnesota); Glockenspiel of 30 cast bells; 32’ Bourdon; stops modeled after successful historical Midwest examples

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Charles Echols has a doctor of musical arts degree from the University of Southern California. He is retired from St. Cloud State University (Minnesota), where he taught organ, piano, and music history. In 2016 he edited the first volume of Organ Music of James H. Rogers, published by Wayne Leupold Editions. Raven Records issued a compact disc of his performance of music of Rogers in 2016.

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