



# A joyful noise unto the Lord

Before



During Renovation



Upon Completion

## THE RENOVATION OF THE PIPE ORGAN AT ST. LOUIS CATHOLIC CHURCH

BY JAMES DOWD

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GRAGG HIGGINBOTHAM & DR. SCOTT ELSHOLZ

**“The one who sings, prays twice” — an adage often attributed to St. Augustine — artfully captures the spirit at St. Louis Catholic Church in Memphis, where parishioners are making a joyful noise unto the Lord.**

Thanks to fervent prayers, soulful giving and strategic planning, the church’s successful capital campaign funded a stunning renovation of its pipe organ along with an expanded choir space. Years in the making, the project has set the stage for glorious musical offerings for the St. Louis Parish family and the larger community as well.

“Mass is the summit of the Church’s work, and everything

starts there,” said Father Keith Stewart, Pastor of St. Louis and Vicar General for the Catholic Diocese of Memphis. “Music inspires people to become active in the parish, contributes to morale and provides inspiration to carry out ministry in the Church. It’s amazing how people have responded to this.”

Dr. Scott Elsholz, Director of Music at St. Louis, agreed. “When I arrived at St. Louis

in the summer of 2021, I could sense the energy and excitement and yearning around the music program,” Elsholz said. “It was after COVID and people were getting back out and ready to experience things again. Our music ministry underwent changes, and it has continued to grow thanks, in part, to this wonderful renovation and expansion.”

Built in the late 1950s, St. Louis offered worshipers a mid-century modern worship space for decades that featured an electronic organ. That instrument was replaced some 40 years later with a pipe organ that one day could be expanded to include more pipes.

The move to replace the original electronic instrument with a pipe organ opened

beautiful new avenues for music at the church, recalled Mary Jo Hoffsommer, former Director of Liturgy and Choir Director at St. Louis from 1981 to 2007.

“By that time the original electronic organ had been repaired so many times that an organist had to skip some keys because they just would not play,” Hoffsommer said. “We assembled a committee and toured churches around Memphis to hear how different organs sounded to determine what to purchase for our parish and I believe we made the right decision. Looking back, my proudest achievement during my work at St. Louis Church was the installation of our Casavant Frères pipe organ.”

Elsholz applauded the original committee’s choice.

“The original pipe organ, installed in the late 1990s, was built with the expectation that

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is a professional editor who enjoys discovering and sharing stories of faith and inspiration.

more pipes would be added to it, and that demonstrated great vision on their part,” Elsholz said. “It’s not a small undertaking and it took about 20 years to complete the next phase, but the result is amazing. When you walk into St. Louis, you immediately know that you are entering a sacred space, and the music you hear from the loft strives to reflect the divine presence in our liturgies.”

The timeline for the project was lengthy, with Elsholz and Father Stewart working with Casavant each step of the way to reimagine the organ as an instrument that would elevate worship at St. Louis. To begin with, the pipe organ had to be disassembled and shipped to organ builders Casavant Frères in Quebec, Canada.

That left St. Louis without an instrument for sacred music, so a grand piano was purchased. For more than a year, it was positioned in front of the Mary altar and Elsholz led music from that space.

As part of the renovation project, the choir loft underwent a significant expansion, further adding to the reimagined area. A floor-to-ceiling plastic wall was constructed to keep dust out during the construction and allow parishioners to continue using the worship space.

“Our music ministry has been growing so much, and having the right instruments to support singing is essential,” Elsholz said. “Our new Shigeru Kawai grand piano

has proven to be an integral part of this growth.”

In terms of refurbishing the instrument, most of the organ pipes were removed in the summer of 2022 and demolition began on the old choir loft. There were several construction delays, Elsholz said, before the organ was delivered a year later.

When the instrument was complete, representatives from Casavant came to the church and revoiced the more than 1,500 pipes to make them sound more beautiful and produce fuller, richer tones. A new section of pipes was added, and the grand piano was hoisted up and repositioned within the newly expanded choir loft.

“There were so many moving pieces going on all at once with a new grand piano, a renovated organ and the expanded choir loft,” Elsholz said. “Work was still being done on the choir loft less than a week before the dedication of the organ was set to take place and I thought it would take a miracle for it to be done in time. But it was all finished on time and the organ was dedicated and blessed by Archbishop Emeritus [J. Peter] Sartain right on schedule.”

Following the dedication on Oct. 29, 2023, St. Louis entered the season of Advent with inspiring musical offerings. During the Third Sunday of Advent, St. Louis offered a “Lessons and Carols” musical program that featured more than 60 adult and children singers.



Archbishop Emeritus J. Peter Sartain of the Archdiocese of Seattle, former pastor of St. Louis Catholic Church, blessed and dedicated the new pipe organ and choir loft at St. Louis on October 29, 2023.

The church was full, and it was spectacular,” Elsholz said. “This would not have been possible before, but now we have the instruments and the space to fully utilize the beauty and extraordinary acoustics of St. Louis.”

Music at St. Louis continues to grow, with dozens of adult and children choristers, more than a dozen members of a Gregorian chant choir and a contemporary choir.

And as part of its focus on community outreach, the church launched a concert series on Nov. 14, 2023, with an

organist from New York City playing the newly renovated instrument. Future programs will be offered free of charge and will include vocalists, instrumentalists and of course, plenty of organ music.

“We’re excited to offer quality music in the heart of the city,” Elsholz said. “This is something we can give to the community, bringing people through these doors to hear great music in a sacred space and hopefully be moved in some way. I see it as an outreach ministry.” †

### ► Part of St. Louis Catholic Church's inaugural concert series, the church will host the following upcoming recitals:

#### THE LENTEN RECITAL: LITANIES AND LAMENTS

Performed by Dr. Scott Elsholz and Violinist Marisa Polesky  
St. Louis Catholic Church  
203 S. White Station Rd.  
Memphis, TN 38117  
Monday, March 18, 2024  
7 p.m.  
Free Admission

#### UNIVERSITY OF MEMPHIS UNIVERSITY SINGERS

St. Louis Catholic Church  
Monday, April 8, 2024  
7 p.m.  
Free Admission