

A Tale of Three Kimballs
A Comparison of Three Historic Pipe Organs
By
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Central Indiana is fortunate to have three large Kimball pipe organs in close proximity to each other. All three of these organs are extant, and each is treasured by its owner. All three of these organs were built in the four years 1929 to 1933. Each organ is unique compared to the others, but all share a common historical thread.

Kimball Organ Company. Based in Chicago, the W.W. Kimball Company began as a manufacturer and seller of pianos and reed organs. By about 1890, Kimball was also producing small portable pipe organs, and by about 1896, was building stand-alone pipe organs.

Kimball is noteworthy for the very high quality of its pipes and the excellence of its voicers. By 1925, under the leadership of Robert Pier Elliot, Kimball had developed a pitman windchest that remains a standard for elegant and functional windchest design, rarely if ever excelled. With its fine pipework, excellent windchests, and under the tonal direction of George Michel, Kimball in 1929 was at the height of its glory. William H. Barnes, a noted organ authority, wrote, “(Kimball’s) pipe organs, theater, church, and concert, were some of the very best organs produced during that period.”

Although Robert Pier Elliot worked for several noteworthy American firms in his career, his name is usually associated with Kimball. He helped to transform the company during the period of 1914-1925, left the firm briefly, and returned from 1929 to 1933. It is interesting to note that all three of the large central Indiana Kimball organs under consideration were designed or built under Elliot’s direction.

Jonathan Ambrosino writes that Eliot was “perhaps the person who best had his finger on the pulse of American organbuilding. Elliot’s correspondence of the late 1920s reveals a rich string of insight, wisdom, (and) sensibility.”

Following the cessation of organ building during World War II, Kimball made the business decision to drop its pipe organ department, which, although prestigious, was never very profitable. As Barnes comments, “Their exit from the organ building scene is greatly to be regretted.”

Van Denman Thompson and DePauw University. “A Tale of Three Kimballs” must start with Dr. Van Denman Thompson. “Depauw University, A Pictorial History,” includes a wonderfully descriptive article about this gifted and influential musician, who served the university for 45 years, and whose influence continues to be felt to this day.

University organist and a teacher of organ, piano, and composition since 1911, he also directed the School of Music from 1937 until his retirement in 1956. He was a graduate of the New England Conservatory of Music and earned the

degree of B.Mus. from Lincoln-Jefferson University in 1919 and was elected a fellow of the American Guild of Organists in the same year. DePauw awarded him an honorary doctorate in music in 1935.

Outside of his work in the Music School and as organist and choir director at Gobin Methodist Church, Thompson was best known for his brilliant organ recitals and witty chapel entertainments. Diminutive in stature and painfully shy, he revealed a remarkable sense of humor in his public appearances. His colleague [Jerome Hixson](#) has described him as a



"lesson in the gentle art of not taking himself too seriously." Seated at the console of the Bowman organ in Meharry Hall he would improvise in the style of Bach, "My girl's a hullabaloo; she goes to D.P.U.," exhibit his mastery of Boogie Woogie to the delight of the assembled students, or hunt for the "Lost Chord," finally finding it at the end of the performance. One morning word spread that a second daughter had been born to his wife, and students shouted, "Thompson, speech!" Slipping from behind the organ bench and drawing himself up to his full height of about five feet, he confirmed the report with the explanation that "we had rather hoped for a boy, but we decided to name her Patience." (Patience Thompson Berg grew up to become a concert performer and teacher of violin and viola at the university.)



Van Denman Thompson was a prolific composer of hymns, anthems, cantatas, and oratorios, and a principal contributor to the 1935 edition of the *Methodist Hymnal* edited by Dean Robert McCutcheon of the Music School. Commissioned in 1934 to compose an oratorio in the honor of the 150th anniversary of American Methodism, he wrote the music for "The Evangel of the New World" (with words by a faculty colleague's wife, Ethel Arnold Tilden). Its premier performance was given on the DePauw campus by the university choir under Thompson's direction.

A devoted family man, vegetable gardener, and reader of encyclopedias, the versatile organist was also a gourmet cook, specializing in pastries. When he purchased a bright red convertible in his later years, he justified its acquisition by the typical Thompsonism, "We can only be young twice." He retired to his home in Greencastle, where he died in 1969 at the age of 78. His wife, Eulamai Bogle Thompson, who was blind and herself a musician and composer, as well as a celebrated seamstress and mother of six, died in 1954. Van Denman Thompson's portrait, painted by Harold McDonald, hangs today in the Recital Hall named for him in the Performing Arts Center on the DePauw campus.

The Lilly Memorial Organ at Gobin Church. According to Van Denman Thompson, "The original Lilly Memorial Organ was a generous gift to Gobin Methodist Church...

from the late Josiah Kirby Lilly, and later additions to the organ, as well as the present complete re-building (1957), are the gifts either of Mr. Lilly or the Lilly Foundation. The organ is a memorial to Mr. Lilly's parents, Eli Lilly and Emily Lemon Lilly¹."

It was Van Denman Thompson who steered Gobin Church toward the W.W. Kimball Company for their new pipe organ in 1929. Thompson himself was deeply involved in the tonal design of the organ, which was forward-looking for its time.

Through its impact on a local congregation, its use for instructional and recital purposes at DePauw, and the vast numbers of musicians who studied and performed on it (and continue serving churches across the country today), the Gobin organ must occupy a position on any list of influential American organs.

The original design of the Gobin Kimball is remarkable for its completeness. The unenclosed Great division included principal stops from 16' through a 2 2/3' Mixture of four ranks. The Great also included both wood and metal flutes at 8', one of which was harmonic. The First Open Diapason in the Great was based on scale 38; the Second Diapason on scale 42. These are the same Diapason scales that were used in the North organ two years later.

The Swell included an 8' Diapason (Scale 40), as well as a 4' Octave and a IV rank Dolce Cornet. There were two strings, each with its own celeste rank, open and stopped flutes, and three ranks of reeds.

In the Choir division, the Gobin organ contained an 8' English Diapason, as well as the usual assortment of flutes and strings. The Choir divisions of all three Kimballs are very similar. In each of these organs, the Choir division is somewhat buried acoustically. At Gobin and Zion, the choir expression shades are behind and speaking into the unenclosed Great division. At North, where the Great was originally enclosed, the Choir speaks through rather small shutters into the chancel.

The Gobin organ also included an 8' Tromba in the Great division and an 8' Tuba Mirabilis in the Solo that were voiced on 20" wind pressure.

The Gobin Gallery Organ (now in Meharry Hall). In 1941, Van Denman Thompson contacted G. Donald Harrison of the Aeolian-Skinner Organ Company to solicit a proposal for an antiphonal organ for Gobin Church. In Thompson's letter to Harrison, dated September 24, 1941, he indicates his thinking regarding the new gallery instrument.

¹ Josiah Kirby Lilly (1861-1948), who donated the Gobin organ, was the son of Col. Eli Lilly, founder of the pharmaceutical firm that still bears his name. During his first years, Josiah was raised by his grandparents in Greencastle, and entered the preparatory department of Asbury College, later DePauw University. Lilly apparently cared deeply about the Gobin organ, providing funding during his lifetime for repairs and the 1941 and 1947 expansions of the instrument. Josiah was Chairman of the Board of Eli Lilly and Company.

“We are considering a small organ in the gallery of our church to be planned somewhat after the Baroque manner and also intended to be used for the accompanying of a small gallery choir.

“Our organ in the chancel is a W.W. Kimball, four manual, built about twelve years ago. It is a fine instrument, yet since you have done so much with the Baroque type of organ, I naturally felt you should be taken into consideration.”

The contract for the new thirteen-rank gallery organ was concluded on December 11, 1941, three days after the attack on Pearl Harbor that led to the American entry into World War II. It is surprising that the instrument could even be completed, given the severe limitations on materials and labor that were placed on the organ industry (ironically, Möller, for instance, ended up making coffins for the war effort). In the event, though, the gallery organ was completed, although the connection of it to the Kimball console had to wait until the end of hostilities because of copper restrictions on wire.

The next addition to the organ, also by Aeolian-Skinner, was made in 1947. This consisted of an eight-rank Positiv division, as well as the replacement of the Great 8' Holhflöte with an 8' Gemshorn, and the replacement of the Solo 8' Stentorphone with a 4' Flute Conique.

The Positiv organ, which was physically located in the Great organ chamber, projected well into the room, and gave the instrument a wide range of new capabilities, especially for the performance of Bach and other composers of the baroque period. This enhancement was done without eliminating or compromising the very colorful Kimball Choir division, which was especially useful in the context of worship.

According to Bob Schilling, who was a student of Van Denman Thompson, and familiar with the Gobin organ during this period, the new Positiv division was very effective.

Historically, it is useful to compare the Gobin organ with the two other large Kimballs in the area, at North United Methodist Church and Zion Evangelical church, both in Indianapolis. When viewed in comparison with other large Kimball organs, such as the 1925 Kimball Recital Hall instrument², all three of these organs show a more developed ensemble structure in each division.

It is likely that the success and prominence of the Gobin organ influenced the two Indianapolis congregations to also install large Kimball instruments. Although the three organs are mechanically very similar, there were significant differences in their original tonal designs.

² Kimball maintained a large and well-appointed recital hall in Chicago. Kimball Hall was equipped with a series (1925, 1933, and 1941) of recital organs that could showcase the firm's capabilities and most current tonal designs. The organ presently in Zion UCC is the 1933 Kimball Hall instrument, which was purchased by the church and installed there by Kimball in 1941.

The 1957 Gobin Renovation. In historical notes prepared in 1957 by Van Denman Thompson, there is a description of the condition of the Gobin organ at that time.

“Several years ago it became evident that a thorough rehabilitation of the original organ was badly needed. The pipe work of an organ will serve for many years, but many parts of the mechanism are made of perishable materials and need occasional replacement. A new console was almost imperative. Since major repair work and considerable renewing of mechanical parts had to be made at any event, this seemed the logical time to undertake certain tonal changes and additions to bring the organ abreast with the finest ideals of contemporary organ building.

“Several leading organ builders were consulted, and plans for the complete project were finally formulated. These recommendations were then submitted to the Lilly Foundation by officials of the Church and University, and were acted upon favorably.

“The work of rebuilding was begun in the early summer of 1956, and has continued steadily ever since (*ed. note: completed in 1957*), either in the church or the organ factory. Except for some repair work done in 1957 by Aeolian-Skinner, the entire project was undertaken and completed by the Moller Organ Company of Hagerstown, Maryland, who have built many of the largest and finest organs in this country.”



The Möller Console at Gobin

Although the organ has continued to function in the fifty years since this last project, the Möller renovation of the Gobin organ must ultimately be considered unsuccessful. While most of the Kimball organ remains, several elements, including the Great diapason chorus and many of the reeds, were removed by Möller.

The Aeolian-Skinner Positiv division was removed from its position in the Great, and relegated to a corner of the Choir chamber from which it is unable to project. This was done to make way for a pedal mixture that was made up mainly of salvage pipes, and is indicative of the tonal judgment Möller used in planning this project.

Perhaps the most positive contribution to the organ resulting from the 1957 project is the reed chorus voiced by Adolph Zajic or Möller. Although it is sad that several of the Kimball reeds were lost, Zajic’s reeds are impressive in the organ.

The greatest criticism of Möller’s work at Gobin must be their handling of the Kimball-Welte windchests. The leather used in the rebuilding of these chests has not held up well. The pouches themselves are actually Möller-type pouches, which are of a different design than those used by Kimball. The workmanship involved in this releathering was certainly not up to the standard of Kimball’s original work. That said, the original chests survive, and can be readily rebuilt today.

The Future of the Gobin Organ. Since the completion of the 1957 project, a number of smaller repair and rebuilding efforts have been done, including the rebuilding of the reservoirs, replacement of the combination action and relay, and several tonal changes. However, only recently has the church considered a comprehensive project to rebuild and restore its musical treasure.

The Gobin congregation has considered a number of possibilities including an electronic organ to replace the pipe instrument, a new pipe organ, and renovation and preservation of the existing organ.

The result of this study and discussion is that the congregation has decided to preserve and renovate the instrument, and has accepted our proposal to undertake the work. Presently, the congregation is working to fund the project, boosted by a very generous contribution by DePauw alumna Vera Farber, a former student of Dr. Thompson. Mrs. Farber had studied on the Gobin organ, and wishes to see it preserved and renovated.

We are delighted to be involved in this very important project, and look forward to a magnificent result in the very near future.

North United Methodist Church. In some ways, the original specification at North Church in Indianapolis was less progressive than that of the earlier Gobin organ. It was also smaller – 36 ranks compared to Gobin’s 47. Although Robert P. Elliot participated in the North design, credit for the tonal scheme went to John A. Bell, an organ “architect” and consultant. Bell was noted for his adherence to older design styles, preferring wide, heavy scales and higher pressures, and one can imagine the design disagreements he must have had with the forward-looking Eliot. Although Van Denman Thompson was very much a part of the Indianapolis organ scene³, and, of course, of music in the Methodist Church, there is no indication in the records that he was formally consulted about the tonal design of the new organ at North.



Robert Schilling, AAGO, at the console of the organ at North United Methodist.

The North organ was originally the most foundational of the three – more a creature of the 1920s than the 1930s. A series of additions to its tonal resources have given it a better developed ensemble and more registrational flexibility, while retaining most of the integrity of its original tonal design.

During the music ministry of Rev. Robert Schilling at North, the Kimball organ was carefully developed in ways that show the influence of the very successful Gobin organ. The original organ had been three-manual instrument, with the heavier solo-quality

³ Thompson was the first Dean of the Indianapolis Chapter of the American Guild of Organists from 1919 to 1922. The North organ was a featured instrument at the 1931 AGO National Convention, held in Indianapolis. The contract was signed and the organ completed within the first seven months of 1931.

voices (such as the French Horn and Tuba), included in the Great. Under Schilling's direction, these voices were separated out to the solo manual of a new four-manual console. This was done without changing these voices or their windchests. Other additions, such as mixtures in the Great and Swell, and additional pedal stops, were also made, again without compromising the original Kimball material.

The development of the North organ is fascinating historically because it shows both a realization of the need to expand and "update" the organ's resources, as well as a profound sensitivity to its original style and design aesthetic. There are those who feel that an organ must be preserved in its original form to be historically significant. However, the point can and should be made that historically-sensitive changes and additions to an organ are also part of its history, and should be embraced as well.⁴

A gallery instrument at North was added in 1965. This organ, built by E.H. Holloway Corporation sought, in many ways, to emulate the Aeolian-Skinner gallery organ at Gobin. The gallery organ was built during the years that Ernest White was associated with Holloway, and the gallery organ demonstrated Mr. White's concept of the Harrison tonal design.

Renovation of the North Organs. The 2002-2003 renovation of both organs by Reynolds Associates, Inc., sought to retain the Kimball presence in the chancel organ, with some appropriate additions, while revoicing and remodeling the later additions and the gallery organ to better complement the original Kimball work. The project included the complete renovation of the Kimball pitman, offset, and pedal chests, a full rebuild of both consoles, and new solid state control system.

In the chancel organ, we moved the 2/3' mixture from the Swell to the Great, where it serves as a sharp mixture over the IV Fourniture. In its place in the Swell, we installed a new III-IV Plein Jeu, pitched at 2'. The mixture is designed to allow the 2' pitch line to run across the entire compass. The reason for this is that the 2' Fifteenth in the Swell is derived from the original III Dolce Mixture, and its sound is rather soft and gentle.

We also made the 16' Double Diapason in the Great (actually a medium scale Violone) available at 8' as a Third Diapason, and added electronic 32' extensions to the 16' Trombone and the 16' Bourdon.

The redesign of the Holloway organ in the gallery was much more extensive. We rebuilt and retained the pallet and slider windchests, and redesigned and replaced the entire winding system.

Tonally, we sought to make the gallery organ a better stand-alone instrument, capable of playing a wider range of literature and of leading a worship service on its own. To do this, we added a 16' Bourdon to the Pedal division, and completely refashioned the tonal

⁴ As we will see, the North organ under Bob Schilling's care fared far better in this regard than did the Gobin instrument when it was "updated" by Möller in 1957.

structure of both manual divisions, giving more emphasis to foundation tone. We added stronger and more articulate flutes to both divisions, as well as an 8' Gemshorn to the Great and an 8' Viola to the Positiv. The Great mixture was also replaced, and the entire organ extensively revoiced.



The Kimball Organ at Zion Evangelical Church.

The Zion Organ. The Zion organ, the latest of the three (1933), was perhaps the most modern in tonal concept, and probably for that reason has been altered the least. Scales and wind pressures are very moderate (Great pressure is 3 1/2"), and the stoplist includes well-developed ensembles, particularly in the Swell, Great, and Pedal.

The organ was originally built for Kimball Recital Hall in Chicago, and replaced the 1925 Kimball Hall organ (extant?). It was purchased by Zion Evangelical Church in 1941, and installed there with apparently very few changes.

Dr. Mallory Bransford, who served the church for 43 years as organist and music director, presided over the Zion Kimball. Dr. Bransford taught organ at Butler University, and the Zion organ served the school in much the same way

the Gobin organ served DePauw.

The organ was also said to be a favorite of Virgil Fox, who would often stay overnight in the church to practice there. Fox was a personal friend of Bransford, and would at times practice in the church alone all night, taking sandwiches with him for sustenance, and napping on the pews in the church. A story (possibly apocryphal) is told of Fox arriving in Indianapolis to play a recital on another large and important instrument, but insisting on doing his practicing at Zion, only going to the other church to prepare his registrations. This story, of course, probably tells as much about the pride this German congregation feels for its great organ as it does about Virgil Fox!

The pipe scales of the Zion organ are somewhat closer to the modern norm than those at either Gobin or North. The 8' Second Diapason in the Great is based on a *normalmensur* scale 44, compared to the larger scale 42 pipes on the other two Kimballs. The First Diapason at Zion is a full three scales smaller than on the North and Gobin organs. Even more telling, whereas the Diapasons throughout the North and Gobin organs are common metal with the linen side out, those at Zion are made of a fairly tin-rich spotted metal. The diapason pipes at Zion, although heavily nicked by today's standards, show much less nicking than the pipes in the other two organs. This, of course, is also consistent with the lower pressure in the Zion Great division.

Since the Zion organ contains the most complete original ensemble, the changes to it over the years have been less than in the other two organs, and have largely involved the addition of voices, with virtually no original Kimball work removed or extensively

revised. Most notably, a rather powerful 8' Rohr Schalmey was added to the Swell division in about 1955.

In 1955, the church contracted with Casavant to add an antiphonal division that includes an 8' *Trompette en Chamade*. This division operates solely as a division of the main organ, rather than as a separate stand-alone organ in the gallery, as was the case at North and Gobin. Additions over the years (some rather poorly executed) enlarged the resources of the antiphonal division.

Renovation of the Zion Organ. In 1999, Reynolds Associates completely restored the original Kimball chests, winding system, and pipework, and replaced failing mechanical relay system with a new solid-state multiplex relay.

During the renovation process, we added a 4' 1/2' Principal to the Choir division, as well as a 2' Flute and 1 3/5' Tierce to the Swell. We also reassorted the mixtures in the Great and Swell to their original Kimball format.

In the Gallery organ, the Casavant pipework was cleaned and reconditioned. The later additions to the antiphonal, which were on chests in front of the stained glass window, were replaced with new chests and new pipes, including a new 8' Bourdon.

It is worth mentioning that since their renovation projects, the organs at Zion and North have proven themselves to be extremely reliable. In fact, within our company, the Zion organ has been nicknamed "the brick," because of its stability and dependability. This is a testament to the marvelous Kimball-Welte pitman windchests in these organs. If these chests are properly restored, they are extremely dependable and lightning fast. Valves in the main pitman chests of the Zion organ have been shown to repeat dependably at 23 Hz.

Organbuilding in the United States circa 1930.

The period in which the Gobin organ was designed and constructed was pivotal in the emergence of the modern American pipe organ. During the first three decades of the twentieth century, organists and organ builders had embraced the new technologies that, in their view, freed them from the tyranny of mechanical (tracker) action and the need to raise wind in an organ by hand. As they explored the wonders of higher wind pressures, detached playing consoles, and labor-saving devices, it was perhaps inevitable that these developments would lead to certain excesses.

By the end of the 1920s, however, the organ world had largely assimilated these new marvels, and thoughtful organists and organ builders had begun to view the instrument in terms of its ability to play both modern and historic literature for organ, and to recognize the importance of a tonally architectural approach to organ design.

The organ industry at this time was highly competitive, and each of the major builders took careful note each others' work, and how it was received by the musical public. By 1930, new instruments retained strong Romantic elements, including robust wind pressures and pipe scales, assertive tone coloration, and a strong foundational tone, and many imitative stops. However, they also began increasingly to include a developed ensemble structure within each division, including the reappearance of mixtures and a more developed, albeit not completely independent, pedal department.

Transcription literature, derived from orchestral works, was prevalent at this time, although organists were becoming increasingly aware of the vast repertoire of works written specifically for, and idiomatic of, the pipe organ. This trend tended to move tonal design in the direction of smaller scales, lower wind pressures, and more articulate pipe speech.

What ultimately emerged from this time of transition was a type of instrument known as the American Classic Organ. Although many musicians and builders contributed to this new design concept, the most important figure in its development was an English immigrant, G. Donald Harrison.

Organs during the prewar period owe perhaps more to English tonal concepts than to those of Germany or France, due to the influence of Harrison, and, through him, of Henry Willis III, the most influential English builder of his day. However, the organs of the late 1920s and 1930s are perhaps the most uniquely American instruments ever built, combining American mechanical ingenuity and resourcefulness with a melting pot of tonal design. Like the melting pot that is American culture, these organs, while often criticized, were successful *because* of their eclecticism, rather than in spite of it. American worship is, after all, an eclectic musical experience, drawing as it does on an enormous range of forms, styles, and national traditions.

Trends Following World War II.

Following World War II, prompted by the increasing popularity of the works of J.S. Bach and earlier German composers, American organs tended to embrace more Germanic tonal concepts. To some extent, this trend toward a more spare, streamlined concept for the organ reflects the same aesthetic that led Frank Lloyd Wright to eschew the gaucheries of Victorian architecture for more spare and streamlined designs.

Almost inevitably, American organ design came to be dominated by European tonal architectures, in a trend known as the Organ Reform Movement (*Orgelbewegung*), with an emphasis on mechanical action and a severe and more or less colorless ensemble structure.

Many of these "reform organs" are beautifully constructed instruments, carefully conceived to play a more or less specific literature. Their transparent sound is particularly successful in contrapuntal music. This same transparency of tone, however, can also make them seem cold or aggressive to the lay listener, and for many

congregations they are an acquired taste. The Romantic organ, on the other hand, with its warm colors and embracing, powerful sound, is possibly a more accessible instrument to the person in the pew, and perhaps more immediately thrilling.

“Full Circle.”

In Craig Whitney’s book, *All the Stops – The Glorious Pipe Organ and Its American Masters*, organ virtuoso Ken Cowan explains why he feels the colors and tonal flexibility of the Romantic organ are so appealing. “How can any human being sustain interest through fifteen minutes of *organo pleno* (full ensemble) sound? There may have been a time 300 years ago, before people had heard synthesizers, marching bands, radio, television, and rock concerts, when audiences might have been captivated by a loud, commanding sound a bit longer than they are today. But I don’t think variations only in touch and rhythm can compensate for some kind of dynamic control.”

Many of today’s organists have rediscovered the American Romantic organ, and instruments such as the big Kimball organs at Gobin, North, and Zion are highly prized for their sheer beauty of tone and the magnificent and worshipful atmosphere they can create in the church, especially when played by organists that are sympathetic to their sound. The Romantic composers are “in” again. In a recent concert at North United Methodist Church by Cowan, fully half of the program was transcribed from works for other instruments, integrated with organ works by Bach, Mendelssohn, and Marcel Dupré.

The history of American organ building has now come full circle, with a strong and renewed interest in the American Romantic and American Classic organs. With this has come the realization that great American instruments have been built in all periods, and that these organs represent an artistic treasure that is more than simply historic.