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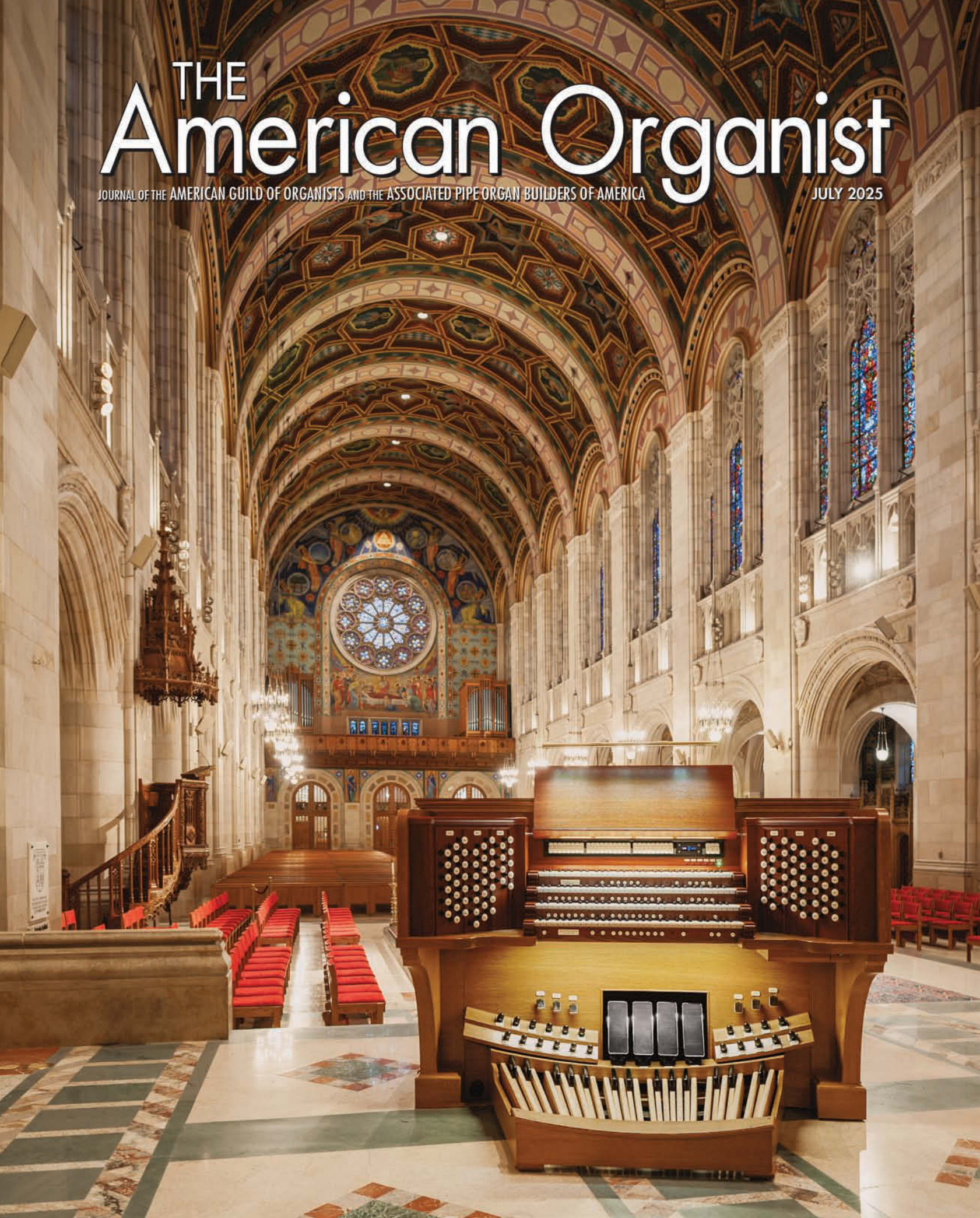

# Coffee Break

## with Jonathan Bading

Jonathan Bading

*Jonathan Bading's energy, enthusiasm, and complete conviction were abundantly clear from the very first moments of our interview. Jonathan is director of music at Sacred Heart Parish, Grand Rapids, Michigan. He studied organ performance at Hope College, winning first prize in the Annamae Rotman Young Organist Competition in 2018. He is the curator of Palestrina 500, an imaginative and ambitious musical-liturgical festival being held throughout 2025.*

ALEX HODGKINSON

**Sacred Heart Parish is a hidden gem.** It isn't grandly domed or spired; it's a big neoclassical box with a coffered ceiling and plaster and gilding, old wooden pews, beautiful stone, terrazzo floor; not an inch of carpet anywhere. It has a perfect acoustic for singing. Excitingly, our new pipe organ is being installed this fall. It's being built by Fratelli Ruffatti from Italy, a 39-rank instrument with five divisions over three manuals and pedal.

We also have some religious sisters who live here and minister in the parish and at our school. One of the sisters is a wonderful singer and has a lot of choral experience. We were talking, and I mentioned I was planning a special Mass or perhaps a concert to mark Palestrina's 500th anniversary in 2025. She encouraged me to think bigger. From that, the idea evolved into a yearlong festival, with a particular event every month of the year. With the help of a generous donor, we locked in the Tallis Scholars for April, and it took off from there.

From the outset, we decided we didn't just want to throw a concert festival; we wanted to hear Palestrina's music in its proper context, the Mass. I firmly believe that sacred music, when it's heard in the context of the liturgy—there's nothing better, right? It's kind of like when you're looking at the stars. If you look directly at a star, it fades. But when you look past the star, it glows! When you reorient sacred music to its origin, which is the worship of God in the public liturgy of the church, it shines all the brighter.

Because I knew I'd be catching a lot of the groups on their tours, I wanted them to be able to sing their full tour program too. So each group sings an hour-long choral meditation, and then they sing the Mass. It's totally free, and people from all over come and hear this amazing music sung by the best groups in the world.

Typical concert audiences—and the ensembles themselves—are used to the music being sung right in front of the audience. Here, the choirs sing from the choir loft at the back of the church. We've liberated this music from an anthropocentric orientation, giving the listener a more profound experience. It's not handed to you on a plate, directly there in front of you, like a TV show. It's more like you have to do some of the work yourself, and you have to actually engage with it.

One of the great things about the festival: we have this amazing music sung by all different types of ensembles, from the Gesualdo Six (an all-male, one-to-a-part group) to Schola Antiqua from Chicago (a small, mixed consort) to the Hope College Chapel Choir (a large collegiate choir). I wanted to have a nice mix of international groups, really good domestic groups, and some local ensembles too. This month is exciting because we're welcoming the London Oratory Schola, directed by Charles Cole. This group, made up of boy trebles and younger altos, tenors, and basses, is not a concert choir; singing this music within the liturgy is their bread and butter. What's also great is that we have a very active parochial school here, the Sacred Heart Academy, so it will be good for both sets of students to interact.

**One of the biggest challenges of the festival** has been raising the required $150,000. This has been totally grassroots. Many of our parishioners have been very generous, and we've made a real effort to develop connections in Grand Rapids. Community engagement has been a major factor in the project.

Another challenge has been to look past this festival, to 2026 and beyond, and to think, How is this going to affect our parish? How can we maintain this quality and quantity of music without the grassroots fundraising every year? How can we continue to reach out into the community?

It's amazing how well the festival's gone so far with all the logistics. We had a toilet overflow on the opening night, but other than that, we've had no disasters!

**Palestrina is one of the pillars of Western musical development.** He was the pope's musician during the Council of Trent, when the Catholic Church was seeking liturgical unity. And he was a major force in codifying imitative polyphony, ensuring that the meaning of the text was comprehensible without sacrificing the grandeur or complexity of the music.

For those less familiar with Palestrina's music, I would say try his motet *Sicut cervus* (Like as the hart). The subject of the piece is so simple, but it's a perfect motet: it's a beautiful setting of the text, and it demonstrates Palestrina's masterful imitative polyphony. In April, the Tallis Scholars sang his *Missa Papae Marcelli*, which is a very significant piece because it was sung at every papal coronation for 400 years. It's absolutely stunning, one of those desert island pieces.

For something perhaps less well known, I would say try his *Tu es Petrus*, for six voices, which is joyful and exciting. There's also an *Alma Redemptoris Mater* for four or eight voices, depending on whether it's sung by a double choir or a single choir. It's mainly homophonic, and very doable for parish choirs. We began the festival with this piece, and we're going to end with it in December.

**The best piece of musical advice I have ever received** came from my organ teacher at Hope College, Huw Lewis. In one lesson, I held the final chord of a piece for a long time, too long. He stopped me, saying we have to be very intentional about how long we hold the final chords of the pieces, because we are not the creators of music. He was referring to Boethius and the music of the spheres, this ancient idea that music is something that already exists in the cosmos, that governs the cosmos. The point he was making is that as soon as you're done with that last fermata, you should, in rhythm, be able to begin the piece again, and send it back into the cosmos. And that's in line with everything we're doing here with this festival and at Sacred Heart—with this idea that we are not the creators but the facilitators. We remove this cult of performer personality and become servants of the music. We're simply tapping into the music of the spheres, the music of heaven.

**Alex Hodgkinson**, FRCO, is director of music at St. Theresa's Church, Trumbull, Conn., and sub-dean of the Greater Bridgeport AGO Chapter.