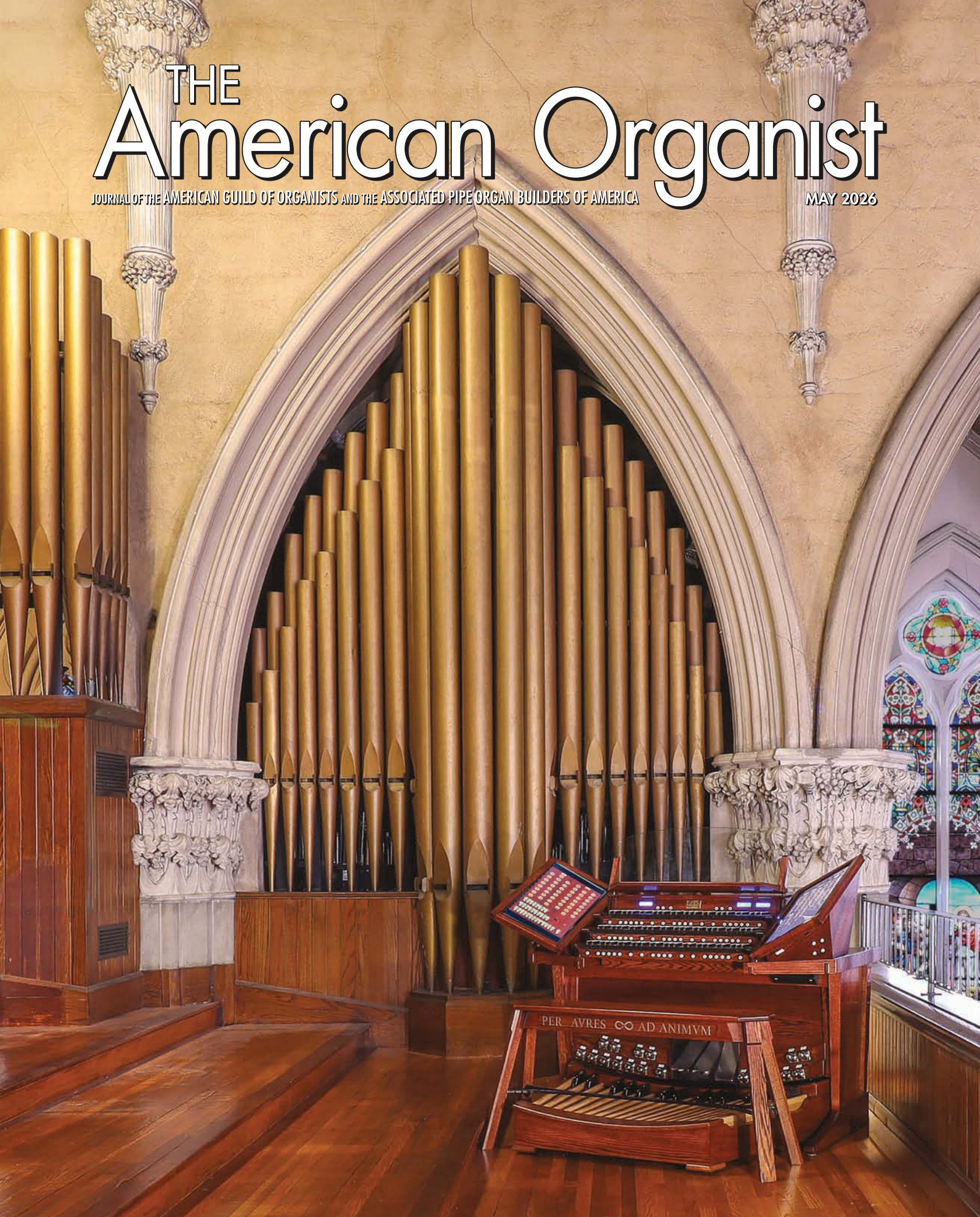


# THE American Organist

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# Coffee Break

with Tom Trenney

*Tom Trenney is a multi-talented church musician: choir director, organist, composer, arranger, and amateur. He recently led a choral workshop for my home AGO chapter, and I was amazed by the sounds he coaxed from the choir as well as the immediate appeal of his own music. But it was the profound intention and meaning behind his music and music-making that struck me most. It was a delight to speak to Tom subsequently, and to learn more about his life and work.*

ALEX HODGKINSON



Tom Trenney

**I'm in my 17th year** as minister of music at First-Plymouth Church in Lincoln, Nebraska, and it has always felt like a calling. This place fits my particular interests and gifts in a way that allows me to serve fully and joyfully. About ten or twelve times a year, I travel around the country leading hymn festivals, choral festivals, and other gatherings centered on church music. I used to travel more frequently to play organ recitals, but about a decade ago I took what I jokingly call an early retirement from that part of my career. As grateful as I was for those opportunities, I realized that if I was going to be away from home, I wanted it to be for something collaborative—making music with people. Around that same time, I began writing my own music in earnest, and that shift changed everything.

**People sometimes ask what kind of music I write.** It's a surprisingly difficult question to answer! I don't think all my pieces have the same style or sound alike. But what I hope, more than anything, is that the music feels good to sing and helps people think more deeply about why they're singing it. For me, composition begins with the text. What is this scripture or poem trying to communicate? I'm always asking: What can the music draw out? Can it bring something to light that might otherwise go unnoticed? Not necessarily something brand new, but perhaps something seen from a different angle. A shift in harmony, a thinning of texture, a moment of silence—any of these can turn our attention toward a particular phrase and help it resonate differently. Those are the discoveries I hope singers and listeners will sense.

One Christmas Eve, that curiosity led to a new arrangement of "O Come, All Ye Faithful." We have eight or nine services here at First-Plymouth, and somewhere around the sixth or seventh, I found myself powering through the beloved David Willcocks arrangement. I adore it—its grandeur, the thrilling descant—but as we sang "O come, let us adore him," I was struck by how big and angular the sound felt. I realized I had never really paused to consider what those words were inviting us to do. I was simply accustomed to the triumphant sweep of it all.



So I created an arrangement that begins joyfully but changes at “Come and behold him.” I imagined what it would feel like to approach the infant Jesus. The joy doesn’t disappear, but it softens. We become gentler. Awe enters the room. The strength remains, but it is offered tenderly. Not everyone comes to Christmas in a triumphant mood. For someone carrying quiet grief, that turn toward intimacy might open space for wonder without requiring a parade of exuberance. Music can create that kind of possibility—a new way of hearing familiar words.

Accessibility matters deeply to me. Some of my pieces are more challenging than others, but I never want to write music that feels like an obstacle course. Music in the church should be an expression of the faith and humanity of the people singing it, not something they barely survive! I didn’t begin composing until I was well into my thirties, and one of the most important lessons I’ve learned is that simple can be profoundly beautiful. That doesn’t diminish my awe for monumental works like Bach’s Mass in B Minor, which we’re preparing here at First-Plymouth. There is room for grandeur and intricacy. But there is also room for clarity and simplicity. Different expressions meet different needs, and all have their place.

**Last summer marked a milestone for me.** I took my first sabbatical in 17 years. I missed the daily rhythms of church life more than I expected, but it was a gift to let writing become my primary work for a few months. During that time, I completed the piano-vocal score for the largest project I’ve ever undertaken: a multi-movement work called *Love’s Lantern*, commissioned by choirs in the Twin Cities and premiering this summer before touring Norway and Sweden.

The piece spans eight movements and is scored for choir and chamber orchestra—string quintet, flute, clarinet, piano, and percussion. Before this, I had never composed anything longer than five or six minutes. The scale felt daunting, but exhilarating. My first task was to find texts worthy of being sung—words that could be carried on people’s lips, looped in their minds, written on their hearts. I chose scripture passages, hymn texts, and

eventually a poem by World War I poet Joyce Kilmer titled “Love’s Lantern.” Though it was the last text I selected, it became the pivot around which the entire narrative turned.

The opening movement cries out, “How long, O Lord?”—a lament over injustice and violence. It feels painfully contemporary. Then a single voice sings the first verse of “Children of the Heavenly Father” in Norwegian. One lone, innocent voice to remind us of God’s faithfulness, even in the most troubling times. The following movements explore how love and light are born within us, with moments where the audience joins in song.

In the penultimate movement, Kilmer’s poem suggests that the brightest lantern is the one God has already lit inside us. I believe that each of us is uniquely crafted to love and serve in ways no one else can. When we share that light, conflict and despair do not vanish, but they are diminished. The final movement offers God’s response: “I will make a way in the wilderness. . . . I will make rivers in the desert.” God’s not saying, I’m going to get you out of all that difficulty, but instead he’s saying, I’m going to make a way for you. I’ll be there with you. Remember, my love and light shine in you.

**A piece of advice I often share**—because it mattered to me when I heard it—is that you need to be you and let the people you’re working with be them. We all carry music within us. The courage to share it—and the generosity to receive it from others—is sacred work. And I often think of Maya Angelou’s words: People may not remember what you said or did, but they will remember how you made them feel. In the end, that may be the truest measure of church music. Not how impressive it was, or how flawlessly it was executed, but whether it helped someone feel seen, steadied, or gently drawn toward the light.

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