

THE American Organist

JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN GUILD OF ORGANISTS AND THE ASSOCIATED PIPE ORGAN BUILDERS OF AMERICA

DECEMBER 2025



Coffee Break

with Jennifer Pascual



Jennifer Pascual

For over two decades, Jennifer Pascual has led the music at the iconic St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City. During her tenure, she has brought her artistry to audiences far beyond Manhattan in a variety of ways, not least through masterminding the music at the papal visits of Benedict XVI in 2008 and Francis in 2015. She took some time to speak to me about Christmas on Fifth Avenue as well as the current renovation of the cathedral's Kilgen organ.

ALEX HODGKINSON

Christmas is very busy here! We're on Fifth Avenue, and we have a lot of tourists year-round, but especially at Christmastime. Rockefeller Center, just a city block from here, has the huge Christmas tree, and Saks Fifth Avenue, right next door, will have a magnificent display with music and lights.

At the cathedral, we have a big crèche on the 51st Street side of the building. A lot of tourists see the tree, shop on Fifth Avenue, come to the manger, and light the candles. The inside of the cathedral can look a bit like a shopping mall! People are holding their shopping bags, and they leave coffee cups all over the stairs outside because they're not allowed to bring them inside. It's a busy time!

There are many musical highlights in the Christmas season. We have a big Christmas concert on the Thursday closest to Christmas itself, and it's standing room only every year. We call it "A City Singing at Christmas," and it is sung by the Cathedral Choir alongside the Young People's Chorus of New York (conducted by Francisco Núñez). They have been participating in this event even before my time, so they're one of the pillars of the concert. We also invite another choir from somewhere in the city to join us. We're actually going to have four ensembles this year, as we're welcoming both the Catholic gospel choir of St. Charles Borromeo Church in Harlem and the choir of Glen Cove High School on Long Island.

It's about a two-hour program, and at the very end of the concert we anticipate the most special thing. We always sing "Gesù bambino" by Pietro Yon, who was organist here from 1926 to 1943—it's his big hit!—followed by "O Holy Night" and then the Hallelujah Chorus, with all the choirs singing together. Then the lights go out, everybody's holding a candle, and we all sing "Silent Night." During "Silent Night," the choirs process toward the bronze doors, which open to reveal the Atlas sculpture and Christmas lights across the street, and the procession continues up the nave until every chorister disappears behind the altar. It's a magical moment. Then the lights come on again for the big organ postlude.

Midnight Mass is nationally televised every year. It's preceded by a prelude concert and features an acclaimed soloist from the Metropolitan Opera singing "O Holy Night" during Communion. But our biggest Mass attendance, believe it or not, is 5:30 the night before, on Christmas Eve. They call it the Children's Mass. A huge number of families come to that Mass, to the point where it is standing room only. One year we had to



shut the doors and turn people away because the crowd grew beyond capacity. It's the highest Mass attendance of the year. There are about 3,000 people, some standing all along the walls.

We have several masses between Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. On Christmas Day alone we have eight masses, six of which have music. It's a glorious time! I'm here for many of the masses, but not all. We have a great team here: I have two full-time associate directors of music and organists who work with me, Daniel Brondel and Mark Pacoe. They're fantastic. And we also have an assisting organist, Stephen Fraser. Between the four of us, we make sure that all of the masses are covered. And one of us will be back to play for the 7:00 A.M. Mass on December 26!

We have three organs at the cathedral: a chancel organ, which has recently been renovated, and the nave organ and gallery organ, which are currently out for renovation by Casavant. It's a complete renovation—not a restoration, but a renovation. We're not trying to bring it back to its original state, because there have been so many alterations in the 95 years since it was built by the Kilgen Organ Company.

It's been over 50 years since the last major work was done to the deteriorating windchests. The instrument was riddled with leaks and dead notes, outdated wiring was still present, tuning would not hold, there were broken pipes, the SSL system was failing, the blower was shaking, and the instrument was not safe to access. Casavant has taken all the pipework to its workshop, except for the largest pipes.

Everything is being cleaned, anything broken fixed, and everything that needs replacing will get replaced. We won't be reinstating the loud *en chamade*—we're going to have a different type of reed, less "party horn" and more elegant. The entire organ will be revoiced—every pipe voiced to its full potential. Casavant has reconfigured the layout of the instrument so that it is easily accessible and safe, and in a manner that is more cohesive and makes more tonal sense. The keyboards and console will be rebuilt. They are 30 years old and have played four or five masses a day since then! It's an exciting renovation, and we're looking forward to having the organ back in 2027.

We're also happy with their renovation of the chancel organ. It was tinkered with far less than the gallery organ, but sometime during its early history the whole instrument was voiced softer. It has returned completely blossomed!

One of the best pieces of advice I have ever received came from a colleague outside my cathedral "bubble." As we all know, so many musicians in fast-paced places of worship can burn out or get ill. The advice was to see the bigger picture and be sure to take care of yourself. Above all else, focus on God and the people of God who come to worship.

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

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