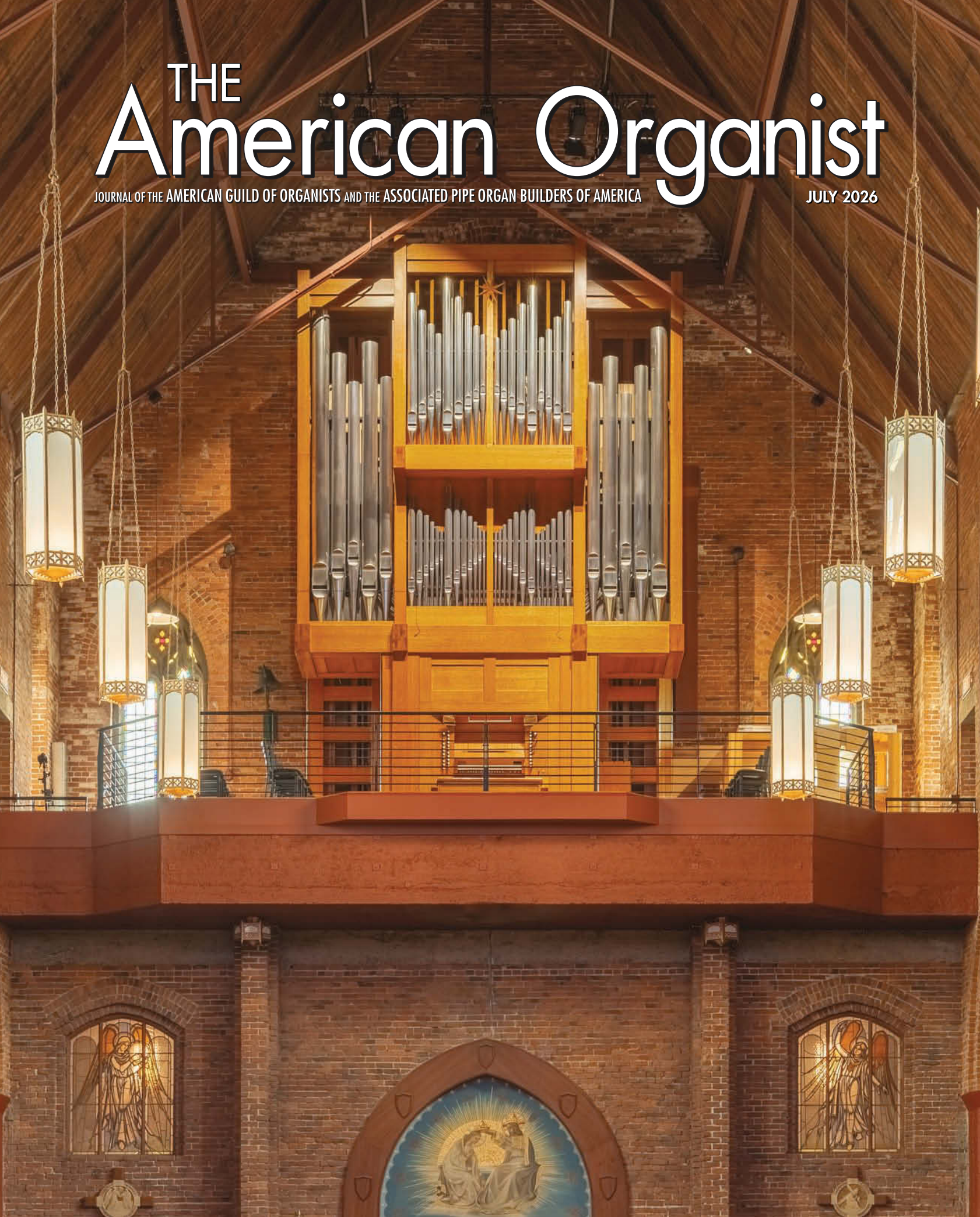


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Coffee Break

with Anne Laver



Anne Laver

Anne Laver is a concert organist, scholar, and teacher who has performed across the globe. She is university organist and associate professor of organ at Syracuse University and is passionate about encouraging young organists and promoting the instrument to the next generation. It was fascinating to hear about two projects she has been working on recently: an album of the music of Natalie Draper and—particularly in this U.S. sesquicentennial year—a documentary titled The Organ in America.

ALEX HODGKINSON

I've just completed my twelfth year at Syracuse University, and I genuinely love the variety the role brings. At its heart, my job is about helping young organists find their way—guiding them toward the next step in their musical lives. My days are a mixture of individual teaching, skills classes, organ literature seminars, concerts, and performances with the choir at Hendricks Chapel, the non-denominational chapel at the center of campus. Outside of my university role, I travel all over the country and beyond to give recitals and masterclasses, which is equally enjoyable.

One of the great gifts of working in a university environment is the encouragement to pursue creative projects and research. There's real support for collaboration, and that's how my partnership with composer Natalie Draper began. She joined the faculty in 2018 and we immediately clicked creatively. It was partly her musical voice that drew me in, but also her personality and approach to work.

In 2020 I asked Natalie to write her first organ piece. At the time, we were planning a workshop introducing composers to the organ—helping them understand the instrument and feel less intimidated by writing for it. Then, of course, the pandemic arrived and everything moved online. Oddly enough, that turned out to be a blessing in disguise because the project, *Composing for the Organ*, reached a much wider audience than we'd anticipated.

Natalie's first piece, *Three Meditations*, was beautiful, and that collaboration became the start of something much larger. Since then she has written eight works involving organ—solo pieces, chamber works, and music for choir and organ—and this summer we'll release them together on the Acis label. It's been an incredibly meaningful process for me. I'm not a composer, but I feel I've had an active role in bringing these works to life, shaping them through performance and discussion with Natalie.

Natalie describes her style as "post-minimalist." There are repeating patterns that slowly evolve over time, but also a fascination with blending sounds and timbres. In some works she uses vocal glissandi; in another she explored pitch-bending effects on a mechanical-action organ by manipulating the wind supply. What excites me most, though, is that this collaboration contributes something genuinely new to the organ repertoire.

That question—how we keep the organ relevant today—is always at the forefront of my mind. I think we have to keep inviting composers into the organ



world rather than treating it as a closed, insular tradition. Many composers find the instrument intimidating, which is understandable: it's vast, complicated, and unfamiliar. But if we can welcome them in, help them understand it, and encourage them to write in their own voice, the instrument comes alive in fresh and exciting ways. That's really been central to my work over the last decade, and it's something I intend to continue pursuing.

Our album is titled *Interlaced*, after the opening track for organ and violin, performed with my colleague Will Knuth. The piece beautifully captures Natalie's fascination with sonic blending. There are moments where you genuinely can't tell where the violin ends and the organ begins. The two instruments share textures and figures so closely that they seem to dissolve into one another. It's a striking piece.

I've also embarked on a documentary film project called *The Organ in America* with Will Fraser of Fugue State Films. The idea really grew out of years of outreach work. As a graduate student at the Eastman School of Music, I regularly gave Sunday afternoon organ demonstrations at the Memorial Art Gallery in Rochester, home to a magnificent 18th-century Italian organ. The audience was usually made up of non-organists who had simply wandered into the gallery and suddenly found themselves confronted with this extraordinary instrument. They were fascinated and full of questions.

There's something wonderful about introducing the organ to somebody who knows almost nothing about it. And it struck me, over and over again, just how curious people are about the instrument—and how little most people actually know about it.

The film is really an attempt to reintroduce the organ to the public: to give the instrument a kind of biography through great visuals, engaging music, and human stories. I hope that the film can shine a light on the richness of an organist's life and the possibilities it offers, especially because I'm concerned that a declining number of young people are choosing to become organists.

The focus is specifically on American organ culture. America, of course, is geographically enormous and remarkably diverse, so we decided to focus on Upstate New York as a kind of microcosm of American organ culture. The region contains an astonishing variety of instruments and traditions. Eventually, we hope that the project can expand into a larger digital platform with contributions from around the country.

What excites me most is that the film isn't simply a history documentary. It also follows a cast of students—some organ majors, others simply curious members of Syracuse's Organ Club—as they encounter the instrument and ask what its future might look like. How can the organ remain relevant

today? How do we engage new audiences? What does it actually mean to live the life of an organist in the 21st century?

During filming we've visited some extraordinary instruments. One of the most visually stunning was the organ at St. Joseph Cathedral, built by E. & G.G. Hook & Hastings for the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia and recently updated by Andover. The instrument is magnificent—lavishly stenciled pipes, glorious acoustics, and a wonderfully rich sound.

We also filmed at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Rochester, home to a beautifully restored 1927 Skinner organ, and at Cornell University, where Munetaka Yokota and the GOArt team built a modern instrument in the style of early 18th-century North German organs. The sheer variety has been fascinating—from monumental cathedral instruments to much smaller rural organs dating from the early 19th century.

One of the most unexpectedly enjoyable filming days took place at the stadium for the Rochester Red Wings, a Triple-A baseball team, where we met longtime organist Fred Costello. He's been playing there for 40 years and is the longest-serving sports organist in American history! Watching him work was a reminder that the organ exists in far more places than people often realize. We hope to finish filming by the autumn, with post-production continuing into early 2027, though much depends on fundraising.

When I was a child, I had a family friend who made a little block out of wood with the words "try again" carved on all sides. It was for one of his kids who was my age and who was learning a musical instrument. The idea was that when you make a mistake, you turn the block over and do as it says—try again. We have a "try again" block on our piano now for my sons.

As with most creative projects, there have been difficult times and stumbling blocks. When I was trying to get the *Organ in America* project off the ground, I applied for a big grant from a major funding body. The application took so much work—and we didn't get it. I wanted to give up. I remember having a conversation with my mentor, Hans Davidsson, and he just said, "Well, you usually don't get these on the first try. You've got to try again." And eventually, with enough trying, we got the project off the ground.

If something's worth doing—big or small—and you know in your heart it's worth doing, you just have to keep going. When you stumble, get up, dust yourself off, and try again.

For more information on these projects, please visit [Anne Laver.com](http://AnneLaver.com).

Alex Hodgkinson, FRCO, is director of music for the Cathedral and Diocese of Madison, Wis.