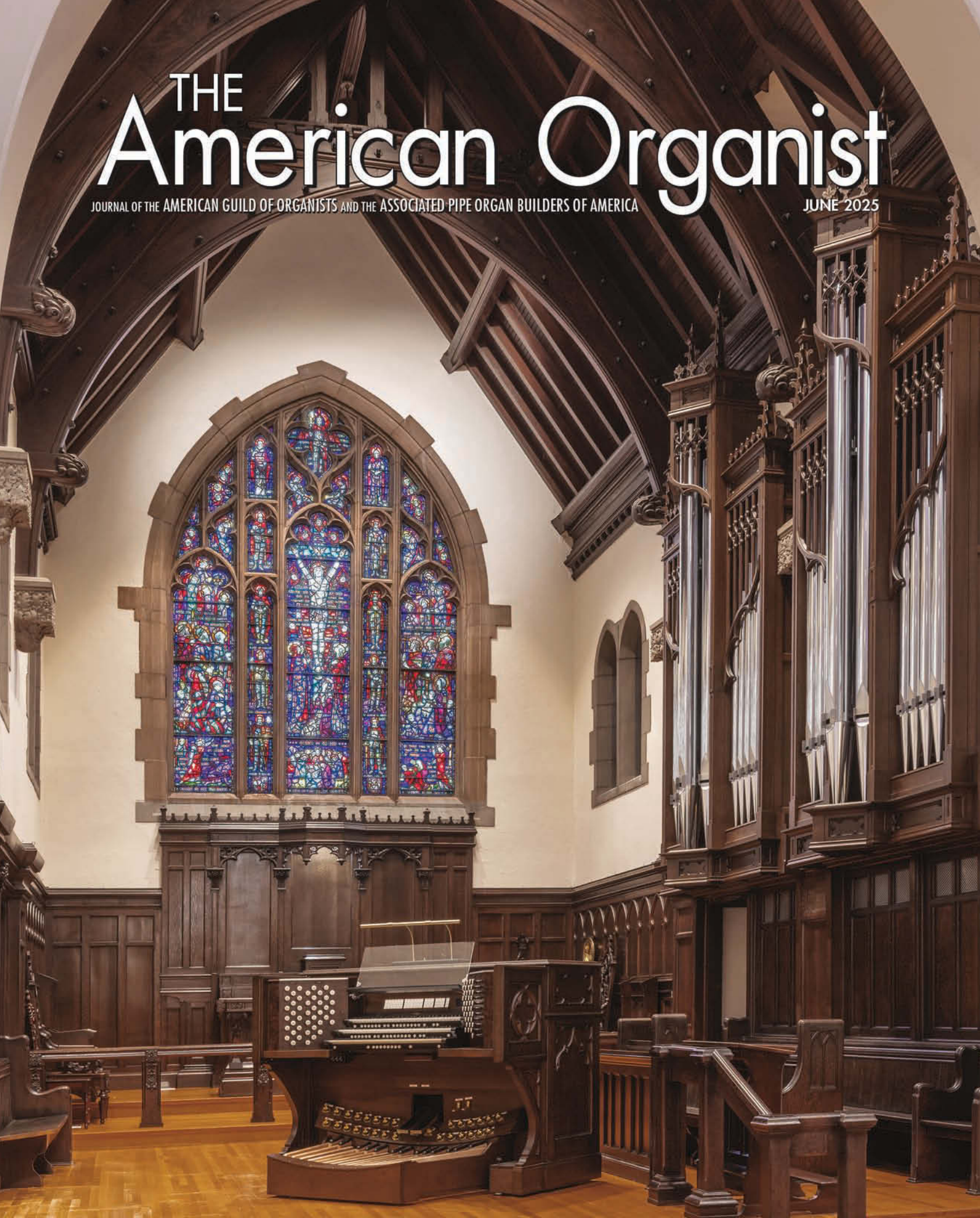


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Coffee Break

with Stephen Price

It is no exaggeration to say that Katelyn Emerson is a leading light of her generation, captivating audiences with her technical brilliance, expressive interpretation, and deep musical insight. A prizewinning organist, scholar, and educator, she has given recitals in prestigious venues across the world, earning acclaim for her vibrant performances. She is also dedicated to sharing her knowledge through masterclasses and workshops, inspiring a new generation of organists. In addition to touring the globe as a recitalist, Katelyn is currently conducting research for a PhD at the University of Cambridge's Centre for Music and Science. Katelyn spoke to Alex Hodgkinson.



Katelyn Emerson

In addition to a love of performing, I have always had a fascination for musical analysis. Since the fall of 2022, I have been fortunate to be largely based in Cambridge, England, initially completing a master's degree and now halfway through a PhD.

Most empirical musicological research has focused on either the musical score or listeners' perception or reactions to music. But there's a significant dearth of study into how the players themselves make unique decisions to shape the music, so I'm working to fill some of that gap—and having quite a lot of fun doing it!

For my master's dissertation, I analyzed recordings from 1911 to 1935 to see if the organists' interpretative timing could be linked to their pedagogical or cultural traditions. I extracted timing data from the most frequently recorded pieces so that I could compare apples to apples. These were—perhaps unsurprisingly—by Bach: the Fantasia and Fugue in G Minor (BWV 542) and the Toccata and Fugue in D Minor (BWV 565). It was amazing to analyze the varied interpretations, and the research led to some interesting findings.

My PhD is now extending that research. I'm in the middle of the main data collection, which is with living players: approximately 30 organists from North America, Asia, Australia, continental Europe, and around the UK. I have the privilege of recording their performances of the same repertoire on two organs in Cambridge and discussing their interpretations and experiences: what they're thinking, how they're approaching the repertoire and the instruments, and, more broadly, the role of interpretation in their performances. Musicians tend to have such inquisitive and thoughtful personalities, which comes through beautifully in the performances and the ways they speak. Their perspectives are fundamentally shaping the dissertation in wonderful ways—a reminder that we must take the individual into account even as we examine broad trends.

Cambridge is also an extraordinary place to live. I'm treasuring every second of music, fascinating conversations with specialists in every subject imaginable, and time with inspiring colleagues and students. I'm particularly



enjoying teaching both academic students and the organ scholars, and we had a rewarding study trip to Paris in March with the Oxford organ scholars.

I have been so lucky to be able to make a living as an organ recitalist for, I think, nearly 15 years now—which I can’t quite believe, saying it aloud. When I started out, I genuinely thought of it as a phase, and I’m amazed and thrilled that the phase hasn’t ended. I’m so grateful to continue to do this, because I absolutely love going to new places and meeting new people, discovering new instruments, and putting together interesting programs. That combination really makes me happy.

I very much enjoy thinking about programming. Back in mid-April, I played five recitals—in the United States, Finland, and the UK—two of which were during Holy Week. The first was on Palm Sunday, for the 30th anniversary of the beautiful Pasi organ at Trinity Lutheran Church in Lynnwood, Washington. They requested a Holy Week procession from Palm Sunday through Easter, so the program traversed renditions of “Aus tiefer Not” and “Da Jesus an dem Kreuze stund,” as well as *Silent Waters* by the Dutch composer Ad Wammes (representing the part of Holy Week where the organ is silent), before finally reaching Easter through works by Paul Manz and David Dahl, all framed by the Prelude and Fugue in E-flat (BWV 552). I then flew back to the UK for a Holy Week meditation the following Wednesday at Blackburn Cathedral, including Bairstow, Bach, and Dupré’s *Symphonie-Passion*, which I had learned for the occasion. I always try to play something new for every recital, because there is so much to explore.

I’m really looking forward to playing the opening recital at the upcoming AGO convention in Fort Worth, Texas, on June 30. The AGO conferences always have such a nice atmosphere—welcoming, supportive, with plenty of interesting recitals and other events. I haven’t yet met the 1996 Casavant at Broadway Baptist, but I’m told

it is in the French style, with an immense amount of symphonic capability, so I will do my utmost to show it off as best as I can, knowing that there will be a very discerning audience.

The day after the recital, I will present a workshop for conference attendees on one of my pedagogical emphases: injury prevention and recovery. For me, as for so many of us, playing and pedagogy go hand in hand, and I can’t wait to meet new colleagues and share strategies and approaches I have developed during my playing career and through working with physical therapists and occupational ergonomists.

Some of the best advice I ever received came from Dianne Dean, my wonderful, inspirational children’s choir director at St. John’s Episcopal Church in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. When I was about twelve years old, Dianne told my mother and me that, if I did pursue music professionally, we should prepare for a roller coaster ride. And she was right!

It has indeed been a thrilling roller coaster. There are challenges and frustrations, but our job in the end is to make beautiful music, no matter how low on sleep we are or how late we arrived the night before a concert because of a delayed flight. Unexpected complications can even be invigorating because, once you’ve gotten to the other side, you can think to yourself, “Oh, I conquered that!”

There are of course immense highs too, highs that I simply revel in, partially because I’m an optimist (and even exhaustion can’t dampen that), but primarily because I know that I’m extraordinarily fortunate—and grateful—to be surrounded by wonderful people as I do what I love. I think this crazy organ world has the best sense of community we could possibly imagine.

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