



# Treasure in the Hills

## *French Romantic Organs in a Silver Boomtown*

By Bryan Dunnewald

When searching for sung daily offices, a French-style abbey church, and two French Romantic organs, one might look in Europe, but not in Silverado, California. The town and its namesake canyon, located east of Los Angeles in the Santa Ana range, hold scenery found in old Western films: dusty mountainsides that turn pink at dusk, tumbleweeds blowing across the winding two-lane road, a creek with little more than eight ounces of water in its bed, old mine shafts from the silver boom.

Yet here in the California mountains stands St. Michael's Abbey, a spectacular new Romanesque building patterned after 19th-century French cathedrals. Everything about it is exceptional: the location,

the building, the people, the liturgy, the music. Our challenge was to build an organ worthy of these extraordinary attributes.

### **The Abbey and the Norbertine Fathers**

The Norbertine Fathers trace their heritage back to twelfth-century northern France; they have several monasteries around the globe. The Fathers who founded St. Michael's Abbey were fleeing Communist rule in Hungary in the 1940s. After arriving in New York and staying with fellow canons regular in Wisconsin, they eventually settled in California in 1961.

With deep ties to France and a passion for singing, the Fathers sang in the first abbey church—a smaller edifice with dry acoustics and no pipe organ. When they had the opportunity to build a new church, they chose to pattern it after French cathedrals, with round arches and a barrel-vaulted ceiling.

### **A 20-Year Pipe Dream**

Fr. Jerome Molokie, an organist and canon regular at St. Michael's, was first introduced to our work on a visit to San Francisco in 2002. As plans for the new abbey church began to materialize, Jack Bethards and Fr. Jerome sketched ideas for two organs, one in the quire and one in the tribune (rear balcony).

**St. Michael's Abbey  
Silverado, California**

**Schoenstein & Co.  
Benicia, California**

Thanks to Fr. Jerome's advocacy, the abbey purchased one of our French choir organs, Opus 116A, which was in need of a new home. They made this purchase several years before the new abbey church was completed, showing total confidence in the organ as a priority in the design of the new facility.

The tribune organ was considered to be the old cliché—a pipe dream—until after the abbey was completed and the Janet Curci Family Foundation came forward as benefactor of the new instrument. We had a singular directive from the abbey: build an organ to play French Romantic repertoire. Designing such an instrument is easy on paper, but achieving the French Romantic sound required us to return to our detailed study of French organs.



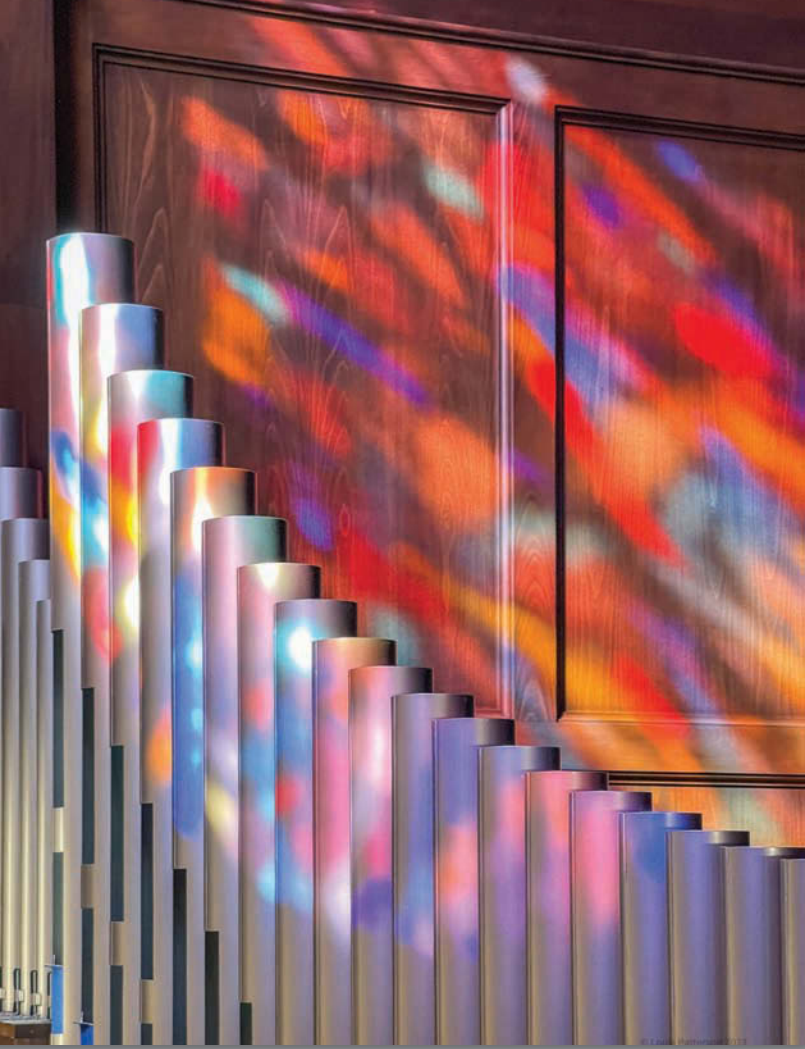
### A French Schoenstein?

The tribune organ at St. Michael's is our largest French Romantic instrument, but it is far from our first. In 1985 we made a thorough study of French Romantic organs for two reasons: first, to add new tone colors to our eclectic symphonic organs; and second, to find the secrets of the *orgue de chœur*—miniature instruments that carry the main load of French service music. We thought these “little giants” could be the answer for American Catholic churches who at that time were moving singers and organists from the gallery to often-inadequate makeshift spaces near the altar.

The study tour included 25 organs, with 15 documented in detail. We engaged Kurt Lueders to be our guide. Jack Bethards, David Broome, Brant Duddy, Steuart Goodwin, and Robert Schopp made up the study team. These many hands made it possible to take detailed scale measurements of flues and reeds, snap photographs, make recordings, and document special features of each instrument.

Upon our return, sample pipes were made and voiced. Eventually we built several instruments in strict French Romantic style, all ten ranks or less. Small organs in this style work well in this country; however, a large instrument that's true to the French style requires a cathedral acoustic. After nearly 40 years, we found that acoustic and musical need at St. Michael's Abbey.

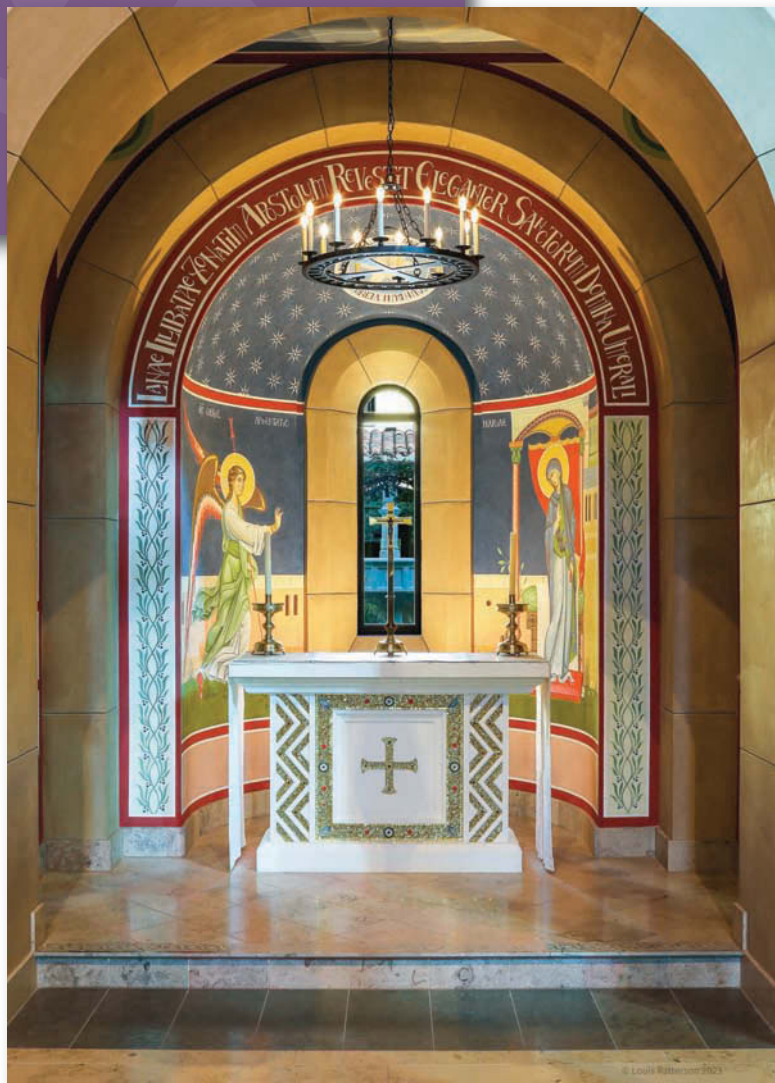




### The Tribune Organ

Although the tribune organ is a luxury unto itself, its tonal design had to be economical. Cavallé-Coll's signature four *fonds* (Montre, Flûte harmonique, Gambe, Bourdon) are only effective when each can be heard as a meaningful addition to the ensemble. The beauty of these organs is their ability to make myriad tonal variations with simple voices. No voice is superfluous.

With so many stops of the same type throughout the organ, it is critical to vary scale, construction, and voicing in an organized manner to achieve a satisfying tonal result. In addition to several principals, there are six open flutes (four of which are harmonic), five strings, three stopped/tapered flutes, and a variety of French-style reeds. Most *fonds* are treble-ascendant and slotted, and the live acoustic allowed for a Cavallé-Coll approach to chorus scaling all the way up through the Fourniture.



## Exceptional Uses

St. Michael's has already incorporated the organ into its exceptional offerings of daily offices and masses, all of which are sung. To hear a full quire of priests who sing several times each day feels otherworldly, especially when one recalls that they're just an hour from Hollywood. Hearing that singing in a cathedral acoustic, accompanied by the choir organ, with musical commentary from the tribune organ throughout, is astounding.

The tribune organ was dedicated in what the abbey hopes is the first of many recitals by acclaimed artists. Paul Jacobs played a varied program on December 2, 2023, reminding us how versatile a successful organ can be, no matter its accent.

We hope the tribune organ, coupled with the choir organ, singing, mosaics, windows—all that makes the abbey special—will inspire the Fathers and visitors for decades to come. It was a privilege to contribute to an extraordinary institution's offerings and a joy to build an organ for such an exceptionally beautiful place.

Many people helped bring this project to fruition, including the Janet Curci Family Foundation, Fr. Jerome Molokie, Fr. Justin Ramos, Fr. Gregory Dick, Kevin Shaffer (director of construction), Gabriel Ferrucci (business advisor), Enzo Selvaggi (case design advisor), and the Schoenstein & Co. staff:

Jack Bethards  
Louis Patterson  
Bryan Dunnewald  
David Anderson  
Erik Asprey  
Dean Belgarde  
Drue Berti  
Ann Bharoocha  
Glen Brasel  
Timothy Fink  
Christopher Hansford  
William Holt  
Valentin Ivanov  
Yolanda Mascote  
Humberto Palma  
Patricia Schneringer

**Bryan Dunnewald** is the tonal director of Schoenstein & Co.

Photography: Louis Patterson

## St. Michael's Abbey • Silverado, California

Schoenstein & Co. • Benicia, California

Three-manual and pedal tribune organ • Opus 183  
31 voices, 34 ranks, electric-pneumatic action

I. GRAND-ORGUE	PIPES	III. RÉCIT EXPRESSIF	PIPES	Couplers	
16 Bourdon	12	8 Flûte traversière	61	Grand-Orgue/Pédale	Six pistons each for Grand-Orgue, Positif, and Récit
8 Montre	61	8 Viole de gambe	61	Positif/Pédale	Set piston
8 Flûte harmonique	61	8 Voix céleste	61	Récit/Pédale 8, 4	General Cancel piston
8 Gambe	61	4 Flûte octaviante	61	Positif/Grand-Orgue 16, 8	Two memory-level pistons
8 Bourdon	61	2 Octavin	61	Récit/Grand-Orgue 16, 8, 4	Programmable piston range for each memory folder
4 Prestant	61	8 Trompette	61	Récit/Positif 8, 4	
4 Flûte douce	61	8 Basson-hautbois	61		5. Reversible piston and toe levers for Grand-Orgue to Pédale, Positif to Pédale, and Récit to Pédale
2 Doublette	61	8 Voix humaine	61		6. Two balanced expression pedals of brass
1½ Fourniture IV	244	Trémolo		<b>Console</b>	7. Piston sequencer, in European mode, controlled by (+) toe stud and piston, and (-) piston. Indicator showing piston employed.
8 Trompette	61	Récit 16, 4		1. French-style open-drawknob console with bench and music rack all of hardwood, designed and finished to complement the organ case	8. Record/playback system
4 Clairon	61			2. Bone- and ebony-covered keys with articulated touch	9. Pedal light, coupler rail light, and music light
Grand-Orgue 16		<b>PÉDALE</b>		3. Polished ebony drawknobs on brass shanks	
		32 Soubasse*	12	4. Solid-state capture combination action:	
<b>II. POSITIF EXPRESSIF</b>		16 Contrebasse	32	5,000 memories—assignable and lockable, with backup and level indicator	
8 Salicional	61	16 Soubasse	32	14 general pistons and toe studs (eight left, six right)	
8 Unda-Maris (TC)	49	16 Bourdon (G.O.)			
8 Cor de nuit	61	8 Flûte (G.O.)			
4 Flûte	61	8 Salicional (Pos.)			
2½ Nazard	61	8 Bourdon (G.O.)			
2 Flageolet	61	4 Flûte (G.O.)			
1½ Tierce	54	32 Bombarde	32		
16 Basson	61	16 Bombarde	12		
8 Trompette	61	8 Bombarde	12		
8 Clarinette	61				
Trémolo					
Positif 16					

\* Quint-length pipes C–F-sharp