



## Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, 2002-2017

---

Volume 14  
Issue 4 *Winter 2005-2006*

Article 1

---

Winter 2005

### Wood and Lead and Wind and Tin

Thomas Columbus

*Illinois Wesleyan University*, [iwumag@iwu.edu](mailto:iwumag@iwu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag>

---

#### **Recommended Citation**

Columbus, Thomas (2005) "Wood and Lead and Wind and Tin," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, 2002-2017*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 4 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol14/iss4/1>

This is a PDF version of an article that originally appeared in the printed Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, a quarterly periodical published by Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact [iwumag@iwu.edu](mailto:iwumag@iwu.edu).

©Copyright is owned by the University and/or the author of this document.

## Wood and Lead and Wind and Tin

**These are the ingredients that Jeffrey Dexter '85 uses to shape the magnificent sounds of a Schantz pipe organ.**



**Story by Thomas Columbus  
Photo portrait by Jo McCulty**

To Jeffrey Dexter '85, a pipe organ is a “wondrous machine.” So, too, is a fire engine.

Both machines have captivated him since childhood. “In 1969, when I was 7,” he says, “my parents’ church had a fire and then had a new organ installed. I was fascinated because I could see some of the pipes.”

Then there was the time his father took him to watch firefighters put out a lumberyard blaze. He marveled at how fire engines, covered with soot and grime after a fire, were quickly restored to their immaculate condition. It was, Dexter says, “a testament to the civic pride those engines engendered.”

As a boy, he also became enraptured with performing music. But even as he studied piano and, later, organ, Dexter says he was “always fascinated by the mechanical aspect. How does it make this sound? How does it make a sound like another instrument? And how is this all controlled by one person?”

And now he is the person who controls that sound, not just as an organist, but also as a maker of organs. As vice president and tonal director of the Schantz Organ Company, Dexter has his office — complete with a collection of more than 100 die-cast model fire engines — in Orrville, Ohio. But he is often away from home, drawn by his other fascination, most recently by the 4,081 pipes installed this past summer in Mees Hall Auditorium at Capital University in Columbus, Ohio.

No two of those pipes, Dexter says, are the same. Each is its own wind-blown instrument. Arranged in 70 groups or ranks, they are controlled by a myriad of stops and three keyboards or manuals. Putting it all together, he says, “is a task of subjective musical decisions.”

To explain the scope of the task, Dexter likes to use the comparison of a child opening a new crayon box. “It’s like the difference,” he says, “between the box of eight Crayola crayons and the box of 64 with a sharpener — all those different hues. Similarly, with a pipe organ, you can color and shade and create different effects through the use of wood and lead and tin and wind.”

Capital University’s new organ goes beyond a metaphoric connection of the aural with the visual. In the nearly 80-year-old auditorium, the large pipes on each side of the stage’s proscenium arch are decorated with stencils, a technique that Dexter said was done in the late 19th century but has been little-used for many years. Working with a consultant, his Schantz team used a laser to cut crisp stencils out of sheets of Mylar, then applied the stencils to the burnished copper pipes and painted them by hand. The colors and geometric designs reflect those on the proscenium arch and the ceiling, so that at a performance the audience will have its eyes as well as its ears filled with harmonies.

The team that worked on Capital’s organ installation extended the efforts of a larger group based at Schantz’s Orrville headquarters, where each organ piece was crafted by hand. Reflecting on the collaborative nature of his business, Dexter says, “Pipe-organ building is like life. It’s about ‘we,’ not ‘I.’ My position gets a lot of attention. But 89 people work for us. It’s not about individual personalities; it’s about the whole. We’ve been building pipe organs for 134 years. We’re stewards. When you realize all the skills that made that (organ) happen, it’s rewarding — and humbling. It will last long after we’re gone.”

He compares his own task as tonal director, of seeking and shaping the sound that each wondrous machine will produce, to that of leading a church choir. “It’s not about you,” he says. “It’s about getting the lesson across.”

This lesson, that it’s not only about oneself, Dexter may well have learned from his wife, Daphne Liggett Dexter, who graduated from Illinois Wesleyan in 1987. A piano pedagogy major, she took six semesters of organ, enough to give her an understanding of her husband’s fascination. “She’s given up two very good positions to follow my career in organ building,” says Dexter. “She’s a really supportive person.”

The couple — who have two daughters, Lindsay, 19, and Polly, 9 — met in the School of Music’s library. “I worked summers there,” Dexter recalls. “Daphne came in as an incoming freshman looking for information for a class she was going to take.” They wed in 1985, bearing the added distinction of being only the fourth couple to marry in the newly constructed Evelyn Chapel.

After college, the newlyweds found jobs in Bloomington. She became a teacher in the University’s preparatory piano department and he was director of music ministries at Wesley United Methodist Church. During Dexter’s



**Above, a display case full of model fire engines is a centerpiece of Dexter's office. (Photo by Ric Snyder)**

tenure there, the church decided to build a new organ — an event that provided him the opportunity he'd been awaiting since childhood.

The church commissioned Austin Organs of Hartford, Conn., to construct its organ. Dexter says, "I got so involved with the interchange and interaction with the organ builder that they offered me a job in Hartford." The hourly pay was \$4.75. Even accounting for 16 years of inflation, that's \$7.40 per hour in today's terms.



**At Schantz's Ohio headquarters, Dexter (right) checks progress on a church organ console with Fred Robinson, who heads the company's console department. (Photo by Ric Snyder)**

again and again and again. That was to be the end of Daphne Dexter's work at the Hotchkiss School, a topflight boarding school in Connecticut; Schantz finally offered her husband a position in Orrville.

"I'm not sure," Dexter says, "that Victor Schantz was convinced of my qualifications or just got tired of writing back to me."

Dexter started at Schantz as a voicer, the person who manipulates the parts of a pipe: the foot, the toe (where the air enters), the face, the lip, the body. "I was a flue voicer," he explains. "I voiced pipes whose method of making sound is similar to blowing across the top of a soda bottle to set the air inside resonating."

He also worked as a tonal finisher's assistant, sitting among the pipes and making adjustments as the person at the console decided how it all should sound.

Now he is the person at the console, the person who controls the sound.

"It was a leap of faith," Dexter says. "We gave up two very good jobs." But, he adds, it was the start of a very rewarding career. Dexter traveled the country for Austin, installing organs. "That was a great teacher," he says. "It was almost like being an apprentice. After 30 to 40 organs, I developed a sense of what works and what doesn't."

As he honed his skills, he also developed an awareness of what was happening in Orrville, Ohio. With the support of the family that has owned the Schantz Organ Company since its founding in 1873, its tonal director Burton Tidwell was making changes.

Dexter had first encountered a Schantz instrument, a large concert organ, during his Wisconsin high school days at a weekend for organists hosted at nearby Carroll College. During his time at Illinois Wesleyan, he spent many hours of practice, recitals, and chapel services at the Schantz three-manual pipe organ in Presser Hall's Westbrook Auditorium.

In 1989, the same year that the Dexters moved to Hartford, Tidwell had become Schantz's tonal director. According to a recent article about the company in *Choir and Organ* magazine, Tidwell was moving Schantz's tonal direction "from the neo-baroque leanings of the 1960s and '70s towards a sound characterized by cohesion of ensemble."

To Dexter, that direction was leading Schantz into a "renaissance" in organ building — an effort that he was determined to join. He wrote to Victor Schantz, the fourth generation of his family to head the company. Dexter wrote



Dexter, two other vice presidents (Timothy Mann and Eric Gastier), and Victor Schantz compose the management team of a company that employs pipe makers, woodworkers, metal workers, assemblers, voicers, and even computer experts. “Much of an organ is made the same way it has been for centuries,” Dexter explains, “but now a computer in the console tells it how to work.”

All four members of Schantz’s management team are church musicians — a desirable background, given that most of the dozen or more organs Schantz builds each year are for churches. Other commissions come from universities and concert halls. In fact, one of Schantz’s most renowned achievements came into being at Cleveland’s Severance Hall, hailed as one of the world’s most beautiful concert halls, home of the Cleveland Orchestra, and “a spectacular place,” Dexter says, “to hear music of any genre.”

The company’s task there was not to build an instrument but to conduct a \$2-million restoration of the hall’s E.M. Skinner organ, considered one of the finest concert organs ever built. Silent since 1976, the restored organ made its debut with the Cleveland Orchestra in January 2001. Every time that organ is used, a member of the Schantz staff is there, Dexter said, “just in case the organ decides to be capricious as a 75-year-old instrument can be.” Only once has action been needed.

Working in academia can also be “a fun challenge,” as Dexter puts it. Among his more recent projects was directing an update and revoicing of the first Schantz instrument he encountered, the organ at Carroll College. Less typical, he says, are institutions such as Capital University that want to build a pipe organ from scratch — a project that can take several years and cost millions of dollars. “In a time when many institutions are closing organ departments,” he says, “Capital’s investment seems all the more significant.”

Dexter says that Capital, like many other Lutheran colleges, “has a proud tradition of singing.” The school desired its organ to partner with a number of choral as well as instrumental ensembles. Capital’s music curriculum also includes organ classes, but those musicians previously had to train on electronic instruments. As Capital organ instructor Janet Linker told Capital’s alumni magazine, the new pipe organ fills both a musical and theological void. “Organ and sacred music are an integral part of our mission, to me,” she said.

For enabling him to create an instrument that can meet those kinds of standards and demands, Dexter credits his college education. “I can’t imagine doing this without an academic foundation,” he says. “I can’t imagine doing it without knowing what kind of organ Bach would have known, the kind of sounds he would have heard. It is important to know this — not to build an organ that would have existed then — but to build an organ that can play Bach.”

Dexter admits, however, that it has taken him 20 years of experience to grasp the whole concept of a liberal arts education. Now he sees the value of clear expression and critical thinking, of being able to integrate fields of knowledge. He can see now why Illinois Wesleyan music professor Robert Donalson forced his students to consider questions such as how Beethoven’s life and times would influence him to write his symphonies. Dexter also remembers the late IWU music professor and choral conductor David Nott, “who taught me how to



**Years of experience have enabled Dexter to make the necessary adjustments as he tunes Capital’s new organ. (Photo by Jo McCulty)**

sing and to conduct choirs. I used that from the day I walked out of Illinois Wesleyan and I use it today. What I do is similar to conducting a choir; he was a master at blending sound.” And he remembers Nott for more than teaching about voice, for a “role-up-your-sleeves-and-get-dirty approach” to his hobby of collecting cars.

Even more germane to Dexter’s future career choice was his interaction with David Gehrenbeck, who was his primary organ instructor at Illinois Wesleyan. Gehrenbeck was himself a consultant to churches looking to commission new pipe organs and often brought Dexter along with him to various organ committee meetings and inspections of new organs around Central Illinois. “Dr. Gehrenbeck’s kind demeanor and skillful negotiations between organ builder and client would be something I came to value in my own career,” Dexter says.

At this stage in his career, Dexter knows an immense amount about music and material and sound. He knows lots of facts and innumerable details, but he also knows of blending and connecting and creating a whole. The Schantz Web site talks of building an organ that has “the power and character to thrill and inspire.”

And to thrill and inspire, one must capture the spirit of those who have created the world’s great music, not just dryly preserve their works. “If someone were to perform a recital consisting entirely of Bach’s organ works in a single afternoon,” he says, “I could intellectually appreciate that. But I wouldn’t want any more than the man in the moon to sit through it — nor would most people, I suspect.”

Such an attitude may be a reason why at Capital, one of the opening concerts for the new organ was scheduled to be Todd Wilson, the curator of the organ at Severance Hall, improvising to a showing of the silent film *Phantom of the Opera*.

Builder-of-organs, husband-of-Daphne, father-of-Lindsay-and-Polly, collector-of-fire-trucks, lover-of-wondrous-machines Jeffrey Dexter thought that selection was a good choice: “I want people to feel the emotion and have fun.”