

Kevin McNeilly

Church Organist

for Graham P. Steed

But, oh! what art can teach, /What human voice
can reach,/ The sacred organ's praise? —John
Dryden, "A Song for St. Cecilia's Day, 1687"
. . . *ôtez voix humaine* — César Franck,
instructions on a score, 1878

Great, Positive, Swell: if not by design
then by something like destiny, its three-manual
stack wrote his monogram upwards, a mark
he owned more as a joke than proudly. Instrument
unmastered by nature, the organ lacks
touch, its plastic keys little better than switches.
Style flourishes in density, volume,
voicing: no question of subtlety. So he trowelled
the nave thick every postlude with layered
subtones, contrabassoon throb coupling the shrilled tierce,
whole-hog harmonics, a Sunday show-off.
Those who stayed on in the hardwood pews always clapped,
except the few staunchest relicts, clutching
purses and clucking their dry, disapproving tongues.
A few boys (me among them) stood beside
the console, watching his chubby fingers blur runs,
his leather slippers massaging pedals,
though we'd been instructed to listen from our seats
for the sake of appearances. (Hero
worship, we heard, was nothing like discipleship.)
Still, he was the next best thing to greatness,
and, heretical, we scandalized the deacons.
At last, theology got the better
of art, and they had him fired. For his finale,
I think he played Franck's "*Pièce Héroïque*,"
its unremitting double double double beat
rocking the rafters and rattling the stained glass,

an untuned pun at the expense of holiness,
his diapason coming full circle.
You can't wrestle fate, but you sure can raise a stink.
If nothing else he taught us how, hard pressed,
never to compromise, nor mistake earth for heaven.