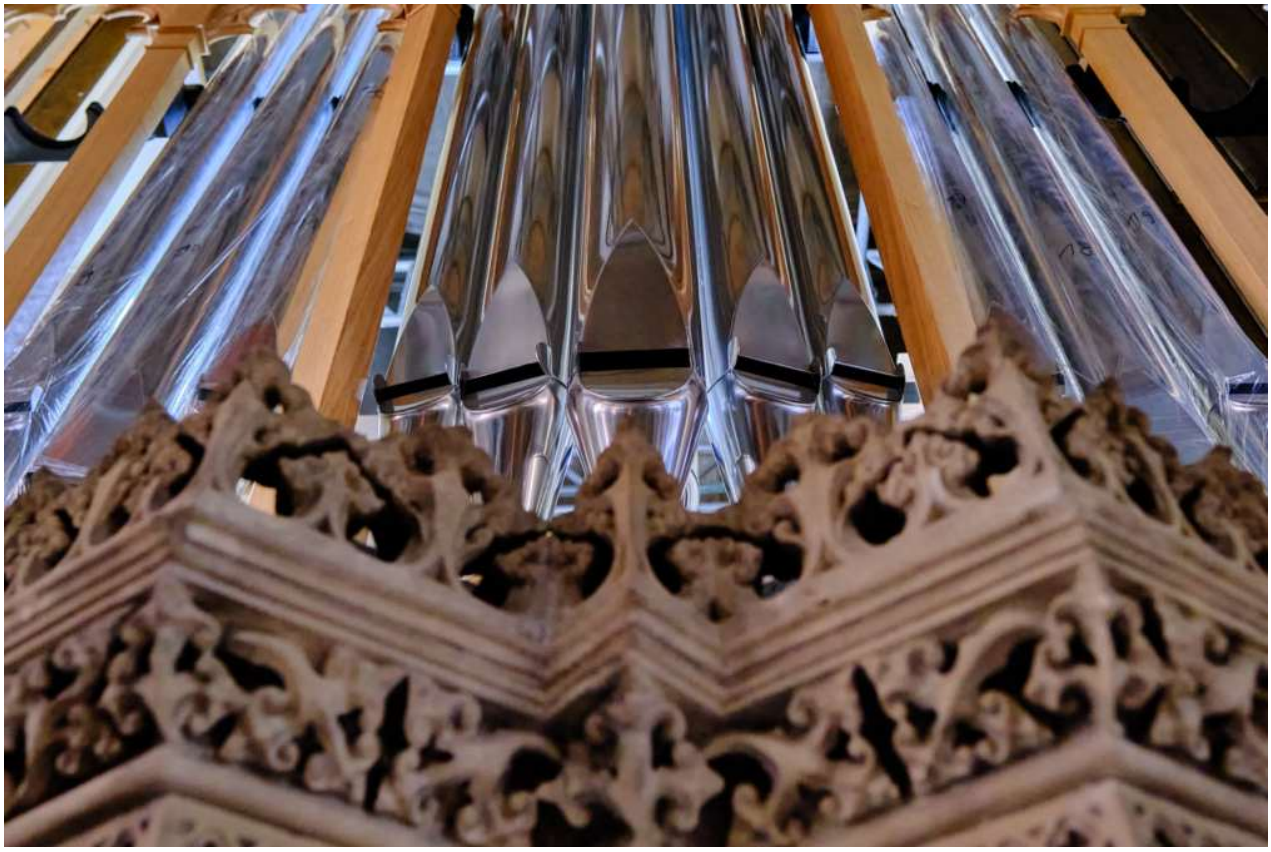
MAGDALEN COLLEGE OXFORD

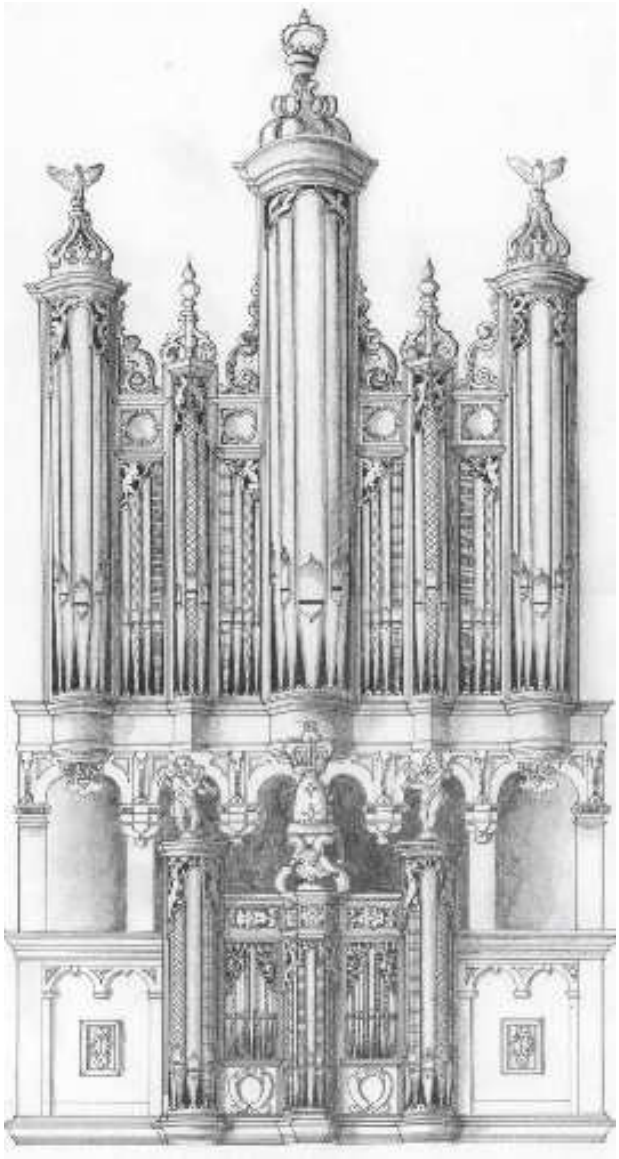
A HISTORY OF ORGANS IN MAGDALEN COLLEGE CHAPEL



A HISTORY OF THE ORGANS IN MAGDALEN COLLEGE CHAPEL

The earliest record of an organ in the Chapel is from 1481, when 1d was spent on repairs. It is assumed that a variety of small organs would have been in use during this time, including an organ from 1597 by the well-known London builder, Chappington.

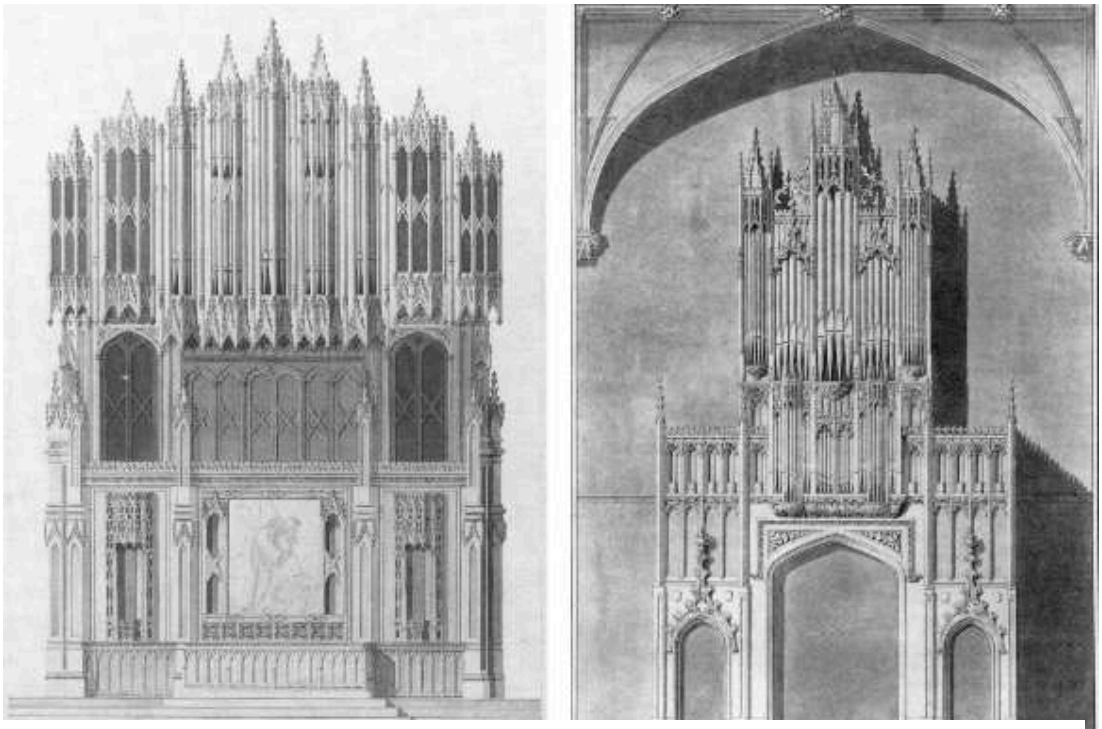
President Frewen's work 1629–35 included the provision of a large new organ, to be placed in a new building on the south side of the main Chapel, by removing the central window on this side and projecting into Chaplain's Quad. The building work was undertaken by local mason William Badger but the organ was by Robert Dallam, of the well-known family of recusant organ builders, probably his first independent work following the death of his father Thomas c. 1630. Interestingly, it was decided not to construct the organ above the pulpitum (as was more normal at this time). The organ had a central tower and two pairs of lower towers, all surmounted by Baroque detail. The Great case survives on the south side of the Chancel of Tewkesbury Abbey (where it is known as the Milton Organ), and the Chair case is on a western gallery at St. Nicholas, Stanford-on-Avon, in Northamptonshire. The pipes were decorated in coloured patterns. John Evelyn heard this organ played at Magdalen in 1654, but it was later moved to Hampton Court Palace at the instigation of Oliver Cromwell. It was re-erected by Robert Dallam at Magdalen in 1661, and he also worked on it in 1664 and 1665. Renatus Harris (Robert Dallam's grandson) carried out some remedial work in 1690 (undoing work by another builder, William Preston, 1681–82).



Artist's reconstruction of Dallam case

In 1736, the College installed a new organ placed on the timber pulpitum. The old organ house was demolished at this time, and the window tracery presumably reinstated. The new Great organ was a tall construction, with a pair of side towers nearly reaching the vault, and totally obscuring the west window from the main chapel. A smaller Chair case faced east, and the joinery appears to have been sympathetic to the Baroque joinery of the columnar screen. The small towers to the

Chair case were deliberately sited above the columns either side of the central arched opening.



Wyatt's 1790s proposals for an organ built into the reredos and on a screen

During the 1790 Wyatt phase of work on the ceiling, the organ was dismantled and rebuilt by John Byfield, with substantial restoration. Wyatt planned to relocate the organ, with one highly unusual proposal for its integration with the stone reredos above the altar. A second proposal shows an organ above an arcaded loft, although the exact location is not clear.

Cottingham's stone screen (1829-34) is integrated with a highly unusual stone chair case supported on an internal cast iron structure – Myles describes this as "a unique example of a stone Ruckpositiv, a remarkable piece of engineering with cast-iron bracing, all cantilevered from a cast iron beam." An early presentation perspective view survives showing a large timber Great organ case on the screen, with a timber Chair case facing east. The former has a pair of tall towers, reaching close to the vault, and all of the joinery is dressed in Gothic detailing. The Swarbrick organ was reinstated in Cottingham's case (perhaps accounting for the height of the towers), but the exact form of the Great at this time is not

Cottingham's early presentation design for the organ

known, and it appears that a Mr. Blyth was responsible for the case in 1832. The old casework timbers were stored in the College yard for a time. There were a series of alterations to the instrument in 1847 by Bishop.

In 1854, Gray & Davison were commissioned to replace this organ with a new larger instrument with 35 speaking stops. The old organ was removed to their factory and the new organ installed in 1855. This was again located centrally on the screen, reusing Cottingham's stone Chair case. The new case was designed by J.C. Buckler, who is reported to have reused "the old work as far as practicable" but the new case was 1.2m wider. A drawing attributed to Buckler appears to show options for towers of varying width, all with Gothic pinnacles and canopies, the central option being selected, as shown in later drawings. There were minor modifications in 1866, 1877-78 and 1905 (the latter by J.J. Binns).

Case following the 1936 Scott additions

In 1936, Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, working with Harrison & Harrison, introduced new additions to the Gray & Davison / Buckler case. The instrument was completely recast at the same time, with the console set on the south end of an east-west organ, which cantilevered over the west gallery, and the distinction between the various parts confused (e.g. the Great was located in the stone Chair case). The two side towers again nearly touched the vault and on the top of the central section a new rectangular box (not shown on the Scott drawing) blocked what was left of the light from the west window. Hill, Norman & Beard revoiced the instrument in 1964.

Antechapel view of 1854/1936 case, removed in 1985

By the 1980s, the deficiencies of the Gray & Davison organ (as recast by Harrison & Harrison) were very apparent, and a decision was taken to provide a new organ. During the discussions over the new organ, it was decided to adopt a two-organ scheme, one on the screen speaking into the chapel and a second portable organ in the south-west bay of the Antechapel. Only the first part of this scheme was built, by N.P. Mander within a case designed by Julian Bicknell, completed in 1986, and the second organ was abandoned. The reuse of Cottingham's stone Chair case was an important part of this scheme, but the remainder of the case and instrument were sold to St. Edward's School, Oxford.

Julian Bicknell 1985 drawing of new organ case

Extensive archival paperwork survives to describe the gestation of the Bicknell / Mander organ, together a detailed article from the Informator Choristarum at the time, John Harper. Julian Bicknell, the brother of the organ historian Stephen Bicknell, prepared a series of reports to describe the development of the design. He was associated with the Prince of Wales's School of Architecture, is well known for his neo-Classical work, and so this is an uncharacteristic Gothic example, albeit still within the traditional language of architecture. Bicknell noted that the size of the organ was important to the atmosphere of the Chapel and Antechapel, pointing out that the case should be large enough so as to create the impression of a fortified bastion on the battlemented screen from the west, making the Chapel feel set-apart, but small enough to allow the sense of connection between the two spaces – similar to the ambiguity inherent in the two parts of the Chapel which are spatially linked by the vault but simultaneously divided by the screen. The case needed to mask the majority of the west window from the Chapel, to prevent glare, but not completely shield it. His design was carefully worked out, following the joinery patterns of Cottingham's choir stalls, but integrated with the screen (for example the pair of towers rise directly above the piers either side of the central opening).

The empty screen, March 2022

Originally conceived as just one half of a two-organ solution, the Mander Organ became the only instrument in the Chapel, and, after extensive use in daily services, began to show signs of wear and tear. Following a number of mechanical failures over the last decade, and a sense of frustration that the instrument no longer served the needs of the Chapel and no longer matched the necessarily diverse repertoire of a 21st-century choral foundation, nor was it able to provide the precision or range of colours needed to attract keen students of the organ, it was decided to pursue ideas for the commissioning of a new instrument. Between April 2018 and October 2018, four tenders for a new instrument in the Chapel were received. These were shared with a panel of external advisers and an internal Organ Committee in the College, and, after considerable discussion, it was decided to carry out further discussions with Orgelbau Eule with a view to commissioning them to build a new organ.

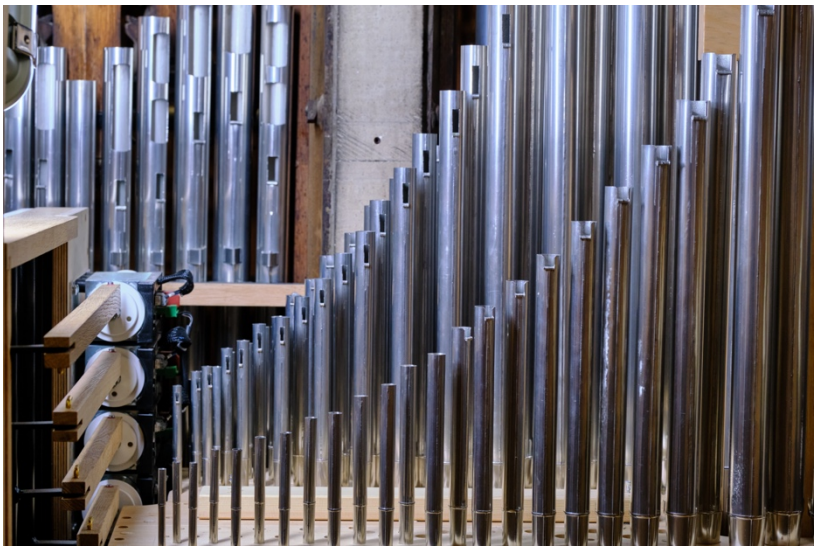
Mander Organ 1986-2022

With particular thanks to Stephen Oliver & John Harper for material used in this article.

THE NEW ORGAN

Tonally designed along German romantic principles, and of approximately the same size as the instrument that stood in the Chapel for more than a century before the Mander organ, this is the first organ to be built by Eule in the UK in nearly 100 years.

Mindful of the importance of natural light and consonance with the architecture of the building, Klaus-Jürgen Schöler and Stephan Thürmer designed an instrument that does not reach to the ceiling and which allows space on either side, with façade pipes and shutters (for controlling the volume, operated separately or jointly) on both the east (facing into the Chapel) and west (facing into the Antechapel) sides. The new case draws heavily on the elegant design of the previous organ by Julian Bicknell, with the proportions of the instrument enlarged to match those of the Gray and Davidson organ that stood in the Chapel from 1854 until 1985. The console is situated on the north side of the instrument, reached through a passageway that runs from the top of the organ loft steps. The four manuals, several 'extensions' (for example, a 16' rank extended by an octave to function as an additional 8' stop) and 'transmissions' (ranks that sit in one division allocated, additionally, to another division) allow for a range of sounds that far exceeds that offered by the previous instrument. In accordance with German practice, and in order to allow for effective coupler design, the manuals, from bottom to top, are I. Great, II. Choir, III. Swell, IV. Récit. The lower three manuals are all mechanical action (where the player has direct control of the attack and release of a note through his or her touch on the key), and the fourth manual is electric action. The Great and Choir manuals (on which most early music would be played) are coupled mechanically, as is Great to Pedal, and all other couplers are electric. The 'tuba' stop, which has its own blower, operating on a wind pressure of 10 inches, can be played on any of the four manuals. The Choir organ pipes are situated in the Cottingham stone case at the front of the instrument. The 'Physharmonica' is a harmonium-like free-reed stop that is fully mechanical with its own swell pedal (which, when fully closed, effectively starves the reeds of air completely, in the way that a harmonium's sound would die without the continuous air supply provided through the pumping action of the pedals). The two swells are tonally differentiated with Germanic romantic ranks sitting in the southern swell, and French sounds in the northern.



Briefed with designing an instrument that would provide the tonal palette to accompany the Choir in a wide range of repertoire, as well as functioning as an effective and colourful solo instrument for organ voluntaries and recitals, one of the key considerations was the educational element of the design – aspiring organists who spend time as Organ Scholar at the College should learn about touch (thereby making at least some mechanical action an essential part of the specification) and the imaginative combination of sounds for best effect in solo and choral repertoire (the previous organ had 24 sounding stops and two manuals, whereas this instrument has 45 sounding stops over four manuals).

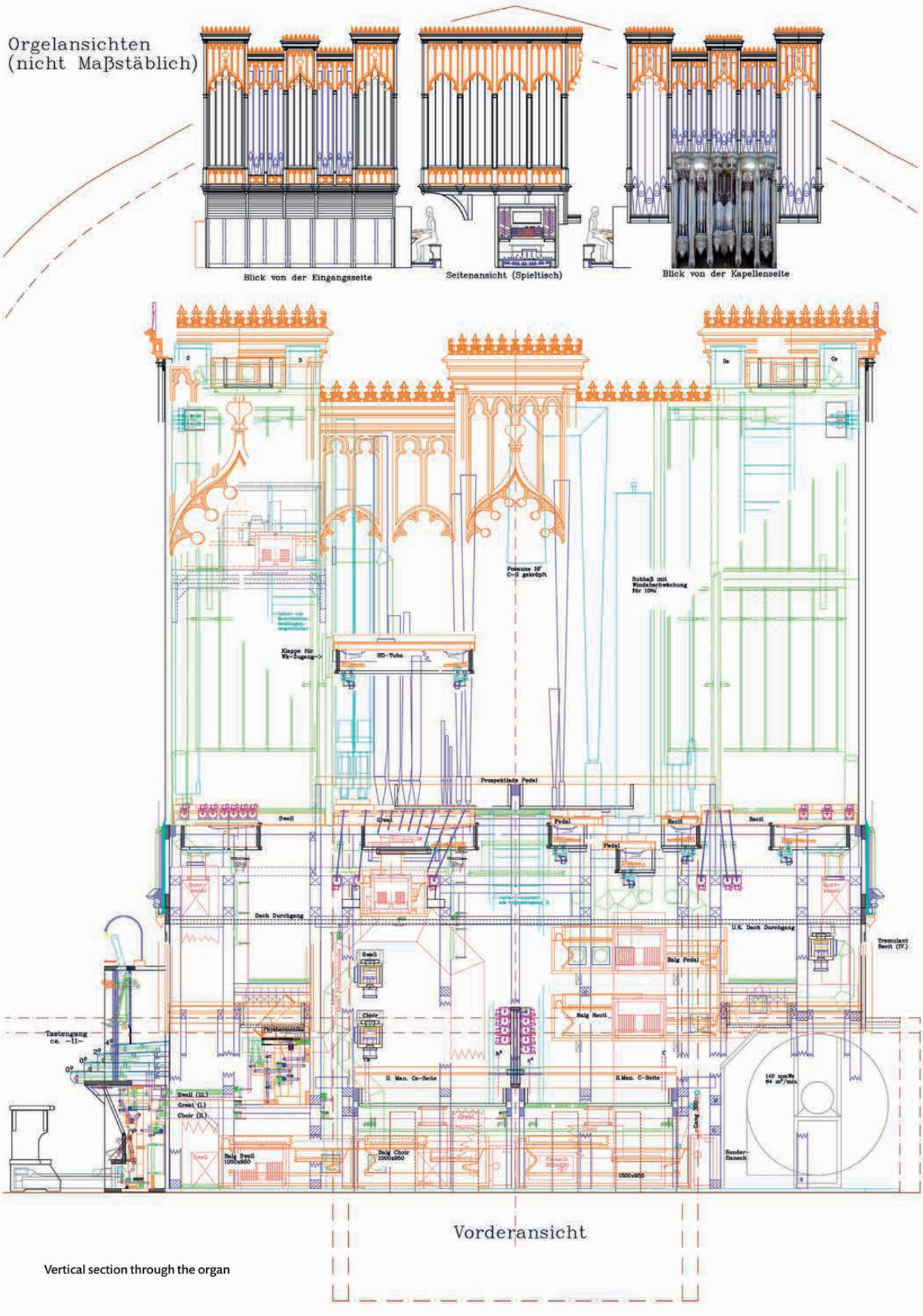
The following extract from the proposal submitted by Eule in 2018, unedited and making characterful use of English, gives a sense of the vision for the new instrument:

- a rich cast with a great scale of basic stops (8', also 16' and 4') in very differentiated dynamics and colours – the new organ shall bear the choir and the congregation from the ground with a full, warm, bearing and broad sound, not to pull them from the height with small and sharp stops
- string stops for clarity of the sound and colourful solo reeds and flutes
- artistic voicing with attention to the individual character of each stop
- best capability for combining every stop with others to create new sound colours, enlarged by using transmissions and octave couplers (not for more loudness, but for new sound spheres!)
- two swells for more dynamic differentiation
- eschewal of too many loud and powerful stops, for instance Spanish trumpets or great reed choruses on all divisions
- adequate scales and wind pressures for the character of the stops and their sound in the chapel – not too high and heavy, but enough to give the organ the force to penetrate especially when the chapel is completely filled with people, the reverberation sinks to 0 and the organ is dependent only on her own sound, without any enhancement by the acoustic
- optimalized sound emittance, promoted by the arrangement of all divisions in the organ interior with good focussing to the main chapel, but also to the antechapel
- all windchests and all pipes are placed atop the case foundation and atop the cornice, excl. the Choir within the historic stone case
- the new organ shall get a wide, expressive dynamic spread, starting from the nearly unhearable ppp of the Viola d'amour 8' in the closed Swell, and increasing in imperceptive steps to the grand, majestic and room-filling Tutti.

There is no other organ in Oxford built along these lines. The organ at Exeter College was built according to French romantic principles by an English firm (Walker) in the 1990s, that at Merton designed as an English romantic instrument by an American firm (Dobson) in 2012, the organ at Keble as an English romantic instrument by the English firm of Tickell in 2011, and the majority of other instruments in the city have been built in the classical and baroque style, including the organs at Queen's (1965), New College (1969, restored 2013), Christ Church (1978, restored 2022), Jesus (1993, restored 2016) and Lincoln (2010). Older instruments, including those at Worcester (1865, fully restored 2005), St Peter's (1875, fully restored 2003) and Balliol (1937) are examples of English romantic organ building.

With this highly-original and unique instrument we hope to bring a new and exciting sound world to the worship of Magdalen College Chapel, continuing and enhancing the rich tradition of music-making of which we are proud to be the inheritors and current guardians.

MARK WILLIAMS,
INFORMATOR CHORISTARUM & ORGANIST



Vertical section through the organ

Magdalen College, Oxford

ORGELBAU EULE, BAUTZEN, GERMANY (2023)

I. GREAT

C-c4, 61 notes, mechanical action

Bourdun (from IV)	16
Principal Major	8
Flûte Major	8
Cello	8
Lieblich Gedackt (from IV)	8
Octave	4
Gemshorn	4
Quinte (from Cornett)	$2^2/_3$
Octave	2
Mixture 19.22.26	III-IV
Cornett 1.8.12.15.17	II-V
Trumpet	8
Tuba	8

I-I sub, II-I (mechanical), III-I, III-I super, III-I sub, IV-I, IV-I super, IV-I sub

II. CHOIR

C-c4, 61 notes, in stone case, mechanical action

Principal doux	8
Gedackt	8
Salicional (bass 8 notes from Principal)	8
Octave	4
Flûte douce	4
Nassat	$2^2/_3$
Waldflöte	2
Terz	$1^3/_5$
Clarinette	8
Tremulant	
Tuba	8

I-II, III-II, IV-II

III. SWELL

C-c4, 61 notes, enclosed, mechanical action

Flûte harmonique	8
Viola d'amour	8
Violes célestes	8
Flauto traverso	4
Salicet	4
Violine	2
Oboe	8
Physharmonica	16
Physharmonica (ext. 16ft)	8
Tremulant	
Tuba	8

III-III super, III-III sub, IV-III, IV-III sub

IV. RÉCIT

C-c4, 61 notes, enclosed, electric action

Bourdon (ext. 8ft)	16
Diapason	8
Lieblich Gedackt	8
Octave	4
Plein jeu (15.19.22)	III
Basson	16
Trompette harmonique	8
Voix humaine	8
Tremulant	
Tuba	8

IV-IV super, IV-IV sub, IV-IV unison off

PEDAL

C-g1, 32 notes, electric action

Principalbasse	16
Subbass	16
Bourdunbass (from IV)	16
Quinte (ext. Subbass)	$10^2/_3$
Octavebass (ext. Principalbass)	8
Bassflöte (ext. Subbass)	8
Octave (ext. Octavebass)	4
Posaune	16
Trombone	8
Tuba	8
Tuba (ext. 8ft)	4

I-P (mechanical), II-P (mechanical), III-P, IV-P, IV-P super, III&IV-P
Gt & Ped pistons combined

Concave & parallel pedalboard (modern German type).
Balanced expression pedals to III and IV (which can be combined on one pedal) and to the Physharmonica. There are dials controlling the Swell III and Récit IV shutters, each box having two sets of shutters: Antechapel / Antechapel & Chapel / Chapel.
8 divisional thumb pistons per manual (with 8 levels of memory, by dial).
8 divisional toe levers to the Pedal organ.
10 general pistons.
Reversible thumb pistons to I-P, II-P, III-P, IV-P, II-I, III-I, IV-I, III-II, IV-II, IV-III.
8 Stepper Advance thumb pistons and 1 Retard.
1 Stepper Advance thumb piston and 1 Retard for console assistant.
Reversible toe levers to I-P, III&IV-P.
2 Stepper Advance toe levers and 1 Retard.
Cancel and Set pistons.
USB socket.
Setter system for general pistons with an open area of 10,000 combinations and an authorised area with unlimited number of combinations.
Tuning: Equal Temperament, 440Hz @ 17°C.

Notes

The heavy pressure Tuba rank is common to all divisions.
Couplers are electric except those marked 'mechanical'.

Most pipes are of metal, but the following are of wood:
Great Flûte major 8 (open bass)
Choir Gedackt 8 (stopped bass)
Choir Flûte douce 4 (tenor C to top F)
Récit Flûte harmonique 8 (open bass)
Récit Bourdon 16
Pedal Principalbass 16 (bass 4 notes, horizontal on the roof)
Pedal Subbass 16 & Bassflöte 8
Pedal Posaune 16

Mixture compositions:

Great Mixture

C1	19.22.26
C13	15.19.22
C25	12.15.19
C37	8.12.15.19
F#55	8.12.15.15

Great Cornett

C1	12.17
G8	12.15.17
C13	8.12.15.17
G32	1.8.12.15.17

Swell Plein jeu

C1	15.19.22
F#18	12.15.19
F#31	8.12.15
F#43	5.8.12