

Joe Vitacco at the 26-rank Kilgen in Our Lady of Refuge Church, Brooklyn, N.Y.



JAV Recordings Inc. (<http://www.pipeorgancds.com>, not available in record stores) is best known for its meticulous documentation of organs by E. M. Skinner and G. Donald Harrison. Lately, it has been ranging farther afield with recordings on the Cavaillé-Coll at Saint-Sulpice in Paris, the Kilgen at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City, and three von Beckerath tracker organs in Pittsburgh, New Haven, and New York City with Paul Jacobs playing Bach. It's all part of a master plan in the mind of Joseph A. Vitacco III, JAV's president, chief executive officer, accountant, recording supervisor, mail room chief, and office manager.

Vitacco, 36, established his company in February 1997 in his parents' house and garage in the Midwood section of Brooklyn. But the business has always been more a labor of love than a living. Though Vitacco is an enthusiastic salesman for a certain kind of instrument, with powers of persuasion that (if anyone's could) might even be capable of selling a pitman chest to a Fritz Noack, he has a day job as an executive recruiter.

Vitacco earned his degree in business administration at the University of Notre Dame in 1990, where he also minored in organ studies and got inspiration for his business model from the success of a fellow student in designing, publicizing, and selling T-shirts for a crucial Notre Dame/Miami football game. The shirts, "Catholics vs. Convicts," helped whip the home crowd into an enthusiastic frenzy, and Notre Dame won.

His fascination with pipe organs dates from his childhood in Brooklyn. "My grandmother took me to Our Lady of Refuge Church on Foster Avenue when I was two or three, and I just thought it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever heard," he said—a III/24 Kilgen organ dating from the early 1930s.

A few summers later, at Camp Mowglis in East Hebron, New Hampshire, a camp counselor, Karl Bengston, introduced him to a Virgil Fox recording of the Bach "Fugue à la Gigue," from a "Heavy Organ" concert at Filmore East. Returning to Our Lady of Refuge, Vitacco assisted Allen Dreyfuss, the organ technician, and spent his allowance on leather and glue, learning how to repair electropneumatic windchests.

"I studied organ with John Hirten, then organist of St. James Cathedral in Brooklyn, but I was no one who was going to set the world on fire with my playing," he acknowledges. When it came time to apply for college, he went to Holy Cross to inspect the 1985 Taylor & Boody organ there and inquired about Yale, where Charles Krigbaum told him not to worry; if he got in, the Skinner organs there would be waiting for him. But he finally chose Notre Dame and was able to continue studying there with university organist Craig Cramer on a 1978 Holtkamp instrument.

After graduation, his first job nearly landed him in the organ business. "M.P. Möller was going to hire me in marketing/sales at the plant, but the day after I got my degree, on May 21, they wrote and said they were sorry, but they were having financial troubles and wouldn't be able to take me on."

Vitacco persuaded his father and mother, both then working in the New York City school system, to make him a present of attending an AGO convention in Boston. It proved to be a major turning point. "All those organists, all those Aeolian-Skinner organs," he recalls. "I was totally awestruck." Among the people he met were Michael Kleinschmidt, Nelson Barden, and Jonathan Ambrosino, who introduced him to Thomas Murray of Yale.

For the next few years, Vitacco worked for Prudential Securities in New York City as a stockbroker during the day, and practiced and tinkered on the organ in his spare time at night. Cold-calling prospective customers for a securities firm using an industrial directory, he ran across A.R. Schopp's Sons Inc. in Alliance, Ohio, makers of organ pipes, and persuaded Bob Schopp's secretary to put him on the line. "After about a minute, he hung up on me," Vitacco remembers. "But I kept calling him. He started to listen when I said I was an organ enthusiast. Finally, he bought some HMO stock from me and we became friends."

Another customer, Larry Mericka, the distributor for Neumann Microphones, sold Vitacco a pair for \$1,424, and he started making recordings at the Sunday morning services in St. Thomas Church on Fifth Avenue: "Gerre Hancock didn't mind, so I

started calling other churches to see if I could get them to let me record there. Tim Smith at Riverside called me back and hired me to record a performance by Marilyn Keiser and one of his own recitals."

In 1995, in advance of the AGO National Convention in New York City the following year, Vitacco and Justin H. Bischof, then assistant organist at the Church of the Heavenly Rest in Manhattan, came up with a musical equivalent of the Miami-Notre Dame T-shirt: a recording of the great organs of the city to market to the assembled organ enthusiasts.

The work became an all-consuming project that took 16 months. A.R. Schopp's Sons gave financial sponsorship, and a gaggle of the city's best organists and their churches gave time and talent. "I was working in securities for Quick & Reilly at the time. I'd get out of work at 5:00 P.M., and then Justin and I would record all night long," Vitacco says. "We recorded 27 different organists on 23 different organs."

The result was what he calls "GOONY," a four-CD album by Bischof & Vitacco Inc. entitled *Great Organs of New York*, and 2,700 copies, complete with 140-page booklets, arrived at the doorstep in a tractor-trailer on the eve of the convention. The two entrepreneurs sold the discs to almost all the 3,000 people who attended the convention that July, and later issued 1,000 more.

"I'd never do anything like that again," Vitacco admits. "Just about everything imaginable went wrong during the production process. We did eventually break even, but Justin and I parted ways, and I decided to see if I could start a company producing organ CDs." JAV Recordings Inc. was born in February of 1997. Typical of its style are two of its first CDs, *An Ashmont Premiere*, with Michael Kleinschmidt on the 1995 C.B. Fisk Opus 103 in All Saints' Church, Ashmont, Massachusetts, and *Great Organ Builders of America: A Retrospective*, Vol. 1, with Peter Stoltzfus on the 1935 G. Donald Harrison Aeolian-Skinner Opus 927 in Trinity Church on the Green in New Haven, Connecticut.

The Ashmont recording session took place May 24–25, 1997. "I planned to edit it on the spot. We stayed up all that Sunday night,"

Vitacco remembers. "From there I went directly to New Haven, and we didn't leave the church until 4:00 A.M. on May 28. I got home that morning just in time to jump in the shower, dress, head out the door, and go back to work in Manhattan." His bosses at Quick & Reilly thought he looked tired, and asked if he had been out partying. Vitacco says he didn't even try to explain.

Documenting Skinner and Aeolian-Skinner organs was what Vitacco most wanted to do, and so he made JAV his day job in 1998. He worked full-time at it until 2001, when he became an executive recruiter in Jersey City, New Jersey, for a large international accountants placement firm.

With the help of sponsors such as A.R. Schopp's Sons, the A. Thompson-Allen Company, and Quimby Pipe Organs Inc., he has issued 16 volumes so far in a Great Organbuilders Retrospective series. These include Skinner Organ Co.'s Opus 327 at St. Luke's Church in Evanston, Illinois, Skinner's Opus 475 at Jefferson Avenue Presbyterian Church in Detroit, Opus 529 in the Scottish Rite Cathedral in the same city, and a two-CD set with Thomas Murray on the IV/167 Newberry Memorial Organ in Yale University's Woolsey Hall, Skinner Opus 722 after its 1929 renovation. Another series, four volumes so far, showcases Erik Wm. Suter, Gerre Hancock, and other famous or upcoming organists on the Skinner/Aeolian-Skinner organ at Washington National Cathedral. JAV also recently issued its second recording of the 1929 Skinner residence organ at Elm Court in Butler, Pennsylvania. The two sets include complete documentation on the organ, performances by Ken Cowan, Thomas Murray, and Peter Stoltzfus, and some rare renderings from beyond the grave by Marcel Dupré, Chandler Goldthwaite, Lynnwood Farnam, and other great artists on Skinner player rolls, played on the authentically restored original mechanism.

Vitacco insists that he appreciates good organs whatever their style. He describes James David Christie's recording on the Holy Cross Taylor & Boody, an instrument inspired by German and Dutch classical builders from the 16th to the 18th centuries, as "one of the most stunning and exciting discs I have." This past summer, he joined a tour of European organs that was led by J. Michael Barone of *Pipedreams*, and came away feeling strongly that preserving instruments on either side of the Atlantic in their original condition whenever that is still possible is vitally important.

"My goal has been to document some of America's most distinguished instruments and allow more people to appreciate their beauty and learn of the need to preserve them," he says. "I think that it is important to preserve the tone and the technology of organs like St. Luke's and Woolsey Hall and Butler Hall as they were created, insofar as possible. In France I saw how people deeply regretted changing the tone and mechanisms of some of Cavaillé-Coll's organs, and I know one day in the near future people will regret adding additional pipework and computers to Skinner organs. I hope my recordings will raise awareness of the value of keeping intact the few totally intact Skinner organs that are left."

Craig R. Whitney, an assistant managing editor of *The New York Times*, is the author of *All the Stops*, published in April 2003 by PublicAffairs.



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