

Introducing the St. Martin Luther Zimbelstern

This Easter Sunday, a brand new addition to our organ, called a zimbelstern (pronounced ZIM-bel-shtehnrn), will be introduced. The zimbelstern will add beautiful visual and audible features to our existing organ.

What is a zimbelstern?

The zimbelstern is a small instrument that works together with the organ and has two parts. First, the *zimbel*, from the German word for “cymbal,” consists of five small bells placed in a case on top of the organ console. These bells, when activated, play in a somewhat random pattern. The *stern*, from the German word for “star,” is mounted on the balcony and can rotate. Zimbelsterns have complemented organs since at least the 16th century, and many Lutheran pipe organs have them, with the star mounted on the pipework, including the Schantz organ in the Chapel of the Christ at Martin Luther College.



How and when is it used?

When the zimbelstern is turned on, the star will begin turning and the bells will ring. It is used simultaneously with other organ music, and provides a shimmering sound over the music. It may be used with festive, loud strains of praise, such as with those Trinitarian stanzas in which we give praise to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Or it might call to mind the angels above, and thus be used during stanzas or canticles that reference those heavenly hosts, such as during the Sanctus, in which we join with the angels of Isaiah 6 crying out, “Holy, holy, holy!” Like all aspects of our organ, the zimbelstern is intended to support the song of the Church in service to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Development of our zimbelstern

The St. Martin Luther Zimbelstern was crafted by Martin Luther member Christopher Spencer over the past year. The instrument is the most sophisticated of its kind in existence. It was engineered to work simply, such that guest organists would have no problem operating it, while also having state-of-the-art features to allow control over the volume and speed of the ringing, including an advanced activation mechanism, made possible by a custom programmable control board and integration with our Rodgers organ via a MIDI interface. Visual aspects of the design utilize custom woodwork and 3D printing.

Praise him with the sounding cymbals. Praise him with loud cymbals.

— Psalm 150:5 —