

## I The Purchasing Process

So the purchase of an organ is imminent. Your reasons for choosing a new organ can range from the need for a small practice instrument to the need for a new organ for worship or a concert hall. These reasons will help shape the purchasing process for the new organ. For most people, the purchase of a pipe organ will be one of the largest single purchases that they will make, short of a home or a facility to house the organ. Many factors play into the decision of whether to purchase an electronic, hybrid, or pipe instrument.

**A) Church organs** -- These instruments are called on for the widest array of musical needs: this can range from the foremost duty of leading congregational singing and choral accompaniment to the performance of literature for preludes, postludes, and concerts. Often the pipe organ is a key piece in the design of a worship space. The visual design of a pipe organ is sometimes an anchor for the visual perspective of the room. The location of the pipe organ in the building — whether it is located in the chancel or the gallery — will affect the prominence of the design. A chancel design is usually expected to enhance the cross or altar area without overpowering it. A gallery installation usually provides a visual anchor or enhances an existing stained glass window, as well as providing a backdrop for the choir.

Whether the pipe organ provides a tonal backdrop for a Eucharist service or the commanding presence for the presentation of elements or entry of a Bishop, the pipe organ has to provide an array of tonal colors ranging from soft to commanding. In our company, church organ designs are a tactful balance of European organbuilding designs combined with the feel for American worship services and rooms. A cross-section is essential, as most American congregations embrace many different aspects of music in a single worship service. A good design will have tremendous impact on the longevity of the instrument for the congregation. An pipe organ builder who embraces the organ design as a function of the worship space can usually offer more benefits than an organ builder who might build a pipe organ based on a specific stop list or historical basis.

**1) Organ Committee** – In selecting a church pipe organ, an organ committee will determine the needs that the pipe organ must satisfy for their congregation, then select an organ builder who best meets the requirements of those needs. You may be among the people selected to be on such a committee. The pipe organ selection process considers not only how the pipe organ will sound, but also how it will look and fit the space. Organ committees often include people from the music department of the church, people from the leadership of the church, and people from the congregation. Proper representation on the committee is essential, but it is wise to avoid having too many people on the committee as this can slow or sometimes simply stall the process. Good musicians will guide you on the path to ensure the instrument is capable of meeting the demands. The committee will embrace and pass decisions on many different levels of the project.

A general list of considerations the organ committee will be facing:

- Why should we purchase a new pipe organ?
- In an existing pipe organ, should renovation be a viable option?
- Is a new pipe organ part of a larger project, such as a new building or renovation of a current space? If so, be prepared to make necessary recommendations to building committee and architect. The organ committee will also have to stand firm on such recommendations for a successful project.

- What is the artistic impact on the worship space and service?
- How will the project be funded?

Once the organ committee has reached initial conclusions on the first set of questions, the following thoughts can help you to evaluate a pipe organ builder.

When working with organ committees, one of the key factors we focus on is how our organs are involved with the space. When you visit installations, notice how the pipe organ looks in the building. Does the pipe organ design dovetail with the architecture of the space? Don't be afraid to ask how the pipe organ builder arrived at such designs. Sometimes building and liturgical architects may have played a role in such decisions. Was the pipe organ builder involved in space design to properly accommodate the organ? Or was the pipe organ builder just willing or asked to install the pipe organ where it would fit?

When an organ committee sets up a trip to visit a prospective organ builder's instruments, consider having a standardized list of demonstration pieces for the organ committee to be played on each instrument. This provides a better base line for you to review each instrument. Does the sound fill the space comfortably? Is there a good blend between treble and bass, or does one end of the spectrum become oppressive or weak? Aggressive trebles will make the pipe organ shrill or piercing. Heavy bass can make the pipe organ sound muddy and unclear. A certain level of prominence in the trebles is necessary to promote congregational singing, as this upper register is the leading tone for the hymns. Treble balance is a very delicate process and a key mark of the successful Tonal Director and Tonal Finisher.

These are a few of the artistic factors that a committee should consider in the process. Though musical tastes have always changed — and will continue to do so — a good instrument should still manage a wide variety of musical tastes equally well. In the end, the final selection of a pipe organ or even an organist will always be a direct reflection of the thought and intent of the committee and congregation.

**2) Consultant** – Occasionally, organ committees find it advantageous to work with a consultant. A good consultant can be a great facilitator for a number of issues. However, the selection of a consultant will require some thought as well. It is recommended that the consultant should be a proficient organist. Organ professors are often a good consideration, but be sure that the candidate has ample experience as a church organist. Not all professors have that experience. Interview the prospective consultant. Does he or she have a particular style of musical interests or a particular preference of pipe organ builder? Your consultant should be able to weigh options and make recommendations in your best interest. A consultant with very specific ideas for an organ builder or style of pipe organ may not be a good option for your organ committee. A good consultant should have a wide level of experience with a number of different instruments and installations.

Consultants can also relieve some of the pressure from the parish musician; they can alleviate concerns that the committee may have that the selection of the pipe organ could be based strictly on what the musician wants. The consultant should be able to draw out the thought process of the organ committee and work through recommendations. The consultant should be willing to work through the background checks of an organ builder with one of your business people in the church

or on the committee. This can help the committee's business liaison when making the recommendations to the church.

The organ committee should understand that the consultant is providing a paid service. To avoid bias between the consultant and the pipe organ builder, the consultant's fee should be based on this fair price for their time and travels involved and *not* as a percentage of the price of the pipe organ. A good consultant will know how much time is necessary given the estimated size of the instrument. Linking the consultant's fee and the price of the pipe organ together leaves the door open for potential problems. When negotiating the consultant's fee, consider the options available for the dedication recital. Will the consultant be the designated artist? Lastly, when using a consultant, be sure to be upfront with the potential pipe organ builders considered and be sure to delineate the chain of communication for the pipe organ builders. It is usually best to send correspondence to the consultant with a copy to the chair of the organ committee.

**3) Final selection** – The previous sections have discussed influencing factors for the church pipe organ, how a church would reach a decision, and who would be responsible for making the decision. Not to be overlooked is the sequence of events. Sometimes the sequence will be altered based on factors within the church. When do you decide to purchase a pipe organ? Is it a case of a new building for congregational expansion? Did the church suffer a catastrophic loss of the old pipe organ or building? Has the present instrument become unreliable or suffered water damage? Has the church been offered a gift for a new pipe organ? As you can see, these considerations might affect the sequence of decisions.

Ideally, we all like to make decisions on definitive plans and items; however, in the case of a new building or major renovation, a committee should probably decide on a pipe organ builder that can be directly involved with the architect for the best installation. Pitting competing pipe organ builders against each other during a building project may be perceived as good, but it can often lead to problems in the preparation of the building space. Since the building architect has no definitive direction with a given pipe organ builder, who is ultimately responsible? Depending on the scope of the project, the church and organ committee should be prepared to engage the paid design services of a pipe organ builder even if they choose not to designate them as the final builder.

Traditionally, the organ committee submits their recommendations for a specific pipe organ builder early in the project. Once designs have materialized on paper, the committee can propose an instrument to the congregation with case renderings, specifications and price. With a clear plan on paper, fundraising is ultimately easier for the organ committee and finance committee. In our experience, the new pipe organ is usually funded by a small group or by individual donors. This has been true in over 70% of our projects. So the purchase of a new pipe organ should not be a daunting task as might be expected. Plan well and follow the course proposed, and the rewards will serve for generations to come. The decision process will be important to the stewardship of the donors and congregation.

**B) Practice organs** -- For many, a small pipe organ is a valuable tool for study and practice for becoming a proficient organist. Many professionals will seek the purchase of a small pipe organ for various reasons. Though offering a smaller palette of tone color than an electronic instrument (which may have many stops), a pipe organ offers a greater array of personal integrity in the sounds than an electronic instrument. Pipe organs are breathing instruments and, like a human

voice, are affected by temperature, humidity and the random variations of the wind itself. This is an important factor to avoid tonal fatigue for the many hours the organist will spend during practice.

Two options are available for the practice organ: tracker action or electric action. The space, budget and needs of the artist will help determine this. Tracker action demands a much higher level of technical proficiency for artistic playing, but it offers a limited number of stops. Because of this, many performers prefer a tracker to keep their technique sharply honed. For an organist who is looking for a more tonally flexible instrument to aid the process of learning the music, an electric action pipe organ may be better suited. Trackers require a concentrated space for installation. Electric action pipe organs will allow the pipes and the console to be placed in two locations. The easy part of a small practice instrument is that the decision process is often less complex because the end user is usually the purchaser.

***C) University and Recital Hall organs*** -- Though high profile, these organs are smaller in numbers. Each can represent a number of exciting options for the pipe organ builder. The purchase of an instrument for these venues is often different from the selection process for a church pipe organ or a practice pipe organ. University pipe organs range from chapel instruments designed to meet church needs to practice pipe organs to recital hall instruments. The university professor and music department will select instruments based on highly detailed parameters. Since these pipe organs form the core for teaching, there is often a variety of pipe organs in a large organ department.

Many of these organs can be quite a change for most pipe organ builders, as builders get an opportunity to build in a very classic or historical style. While such an organ may not fulfill the needs of a church pipe organ, it is a good exercise for students to learn how certain techniques and styles of organ building and music came into existence. Likewise, the recital hall pipe organ may be designed with a greater level of concert work in mind. Pipe organs that can stand up to the presentation of a large symphonic concert may be beyond the parameters needed for church music. Church organ committees doing research and investigation to search for a new church pipe organ should keep this in mind when reviewing recital hall and university pipe organs.