

Economy is Destiny

An essay by Edward Odell
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Tastes change, it is inevitable. I would contend that the core of what makes a pipe organ of significant quality does not.

In my experience poverty can be the best friend of the organ. The church that lacks the funds to rework their organ to suit the tastes of a particular organist or self-appointed expert will leave their organ alone and (hopefully) concentrate their efforts on maintenance and preservation. In fact, I would go so far as to say that in some cases neglect is preferable to things I have seen carried out in the name of “improvement.”

I hear the word “preservation” being thrown around and used with pejorative connotations. I have to wonder why this is. When did the concept of maintaining what one has and keeping its character intact become a loathsome thing? People preserve things all the time for many reasons, both practical and non-practical. When a thing does its job well, one should ask: must it be replaced? Is improvement truly improvement? One may believe that one can improve a thing when considering it in the abstract. Reality often reveals otherwise.

Like it or not, the pipe organ exists largely for the purpose of worship, the fundamental requirements of which I think fall far below the grandiose dreams of the armchair organ designer. When a simple, well-made organ that served its congregation for many decades needs little more than the attention of a properly trained organbuilder and is instead discarded or “reworked”, we kid ourselves when we say that it was necessary. When quality is absent, that is another matter entirely.

It is worth remembering that for all intents and purposes, in modern worship the pipe organ exists also as a luxury item. Churches commissioning new organs obviously do so because they have the means, either public or private. And quite honestly, while one can rant and rave, what a church does with their pipe organ is their affair; the pipe organ is their property. My point is that if I am consulted by a congregation lucky enough to inherit a good pipe organ, I will always tell them they should consider first how best to preserve it before anything else. This simple piece of knowledge may not suit someone’s agenda. When someone comes along and declares an organ inadequate, I think one should ask why. I would challenge a person to tell me, or better yet, show me what musical role is rendered impossible to achieve. Then perhaps that pivotal missing element is not so tangible.

I recall years ago I attended a presentation given by Jean-Louis Coignet discussing recent alterations to the organ at Ste. Clotilde. There was such a furor over changes to this instrument and the so-called ‘slap heard around the world’ when an argument arose between the Titulaire and Madame Langlais. I remember remarking to a friend that had this

been an organ at an inner-city church in America, no one would have cared. Yet here we were quibbling over who did what and when. Even Jean-Louis admitted to me he was bewildered by it. Take this situation out of context and it all seems quite ridiculous.

So what is the lesson, if any? Perhaps that for the pipe organ, economy is destiny. For some, it might be the hard-won understanding that inaction, as unattractive and unexciting as it may seem, can make a much greater statement. Quality, in the pipe organ and elsewhere, endures. Respect it, and you'll sleep better at night.