

Perception and the Organ

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Originally posted on organforum.com, August 17, 2008

Well made pipe organs, as acoustic instruments, and as a permanent part of the worship space, belong in a classification that excludes non-pipe instruments. I say this for several reasons.

The argument of the digital and "virtual pipe organ builder" seems to center on the vagaries of perception: if the sound of the digital or "virtual pipe organ" creates is real, then that which created that sound must also be real. It is insinuated that this latest imitation offers all of the benefits of the pipe organ, but none of the drawbacks. You know, pesky things like space, and maintenance.

This claim, of course, cannot be substantiated until enough time has passed to make such a comparison, and in all likelihood, in 20 or 30 years this issue will all but be forgotten and the virtual organ replaced, hopefully with something authentic. No one will care then who was right. Money will have long since changed hands, the principals (no pun intended) involved will be long gone and any reproach would be pointless.

The reality of the instrument in discussion here will be as true then as it is now: the pipe organ is a musical instrument that creates sound using pipes made and voiced by human beings. In a pipe organ there is no recorded or artificially created sound. Just as in a river one can never set foot in the same place twice, every time an organ pipe speaks something imperceptibly unique occurs. The pipe organ is imperfect and living, and the reality of its existence is unquestionable. It is a machine whose essential principles of manufacture and operation have been unchanged for centuries.

With respect to digital organ builders, even the best of the imitations are none of these things. They can't be. They are their own unique medium. Some are assuredly better than others. In the case of sampled instruments, it is important to remember their essence is the reproduction of someone else's work, someone else's artistic vision, manipulated and re-purposed. The sampled instrument is not an original artistic creation. In summoning it into existence its creators do not manipulate raw metal or wood; they instead pick and choose from things already made (or made for them) and put them together. Not unlike decorating a room.

More importantly, there is a subtle, but significant difference in the design philosophy of a well made pipe organ: it is designed to be re-buildable. It is, in a certain sense, an "heirloom" object whose value can be at times subjective and therefore regrettably be lost on those who inherit it. Conversely, a pipe organ can, under the right circumstances, have its total cost of ownership amortized over a length of time that makes it extremely cost effective. This requires, of course, a very long view and sound stewardship. The mixing of digital and pipe is not really compatible with this point of view, since at best, the duty

cycle of the digital components is not comparable to the pipes and mechanism of the pipe organ.

In considering this, I wonder if there is an analogy to be made between the "virtual pipe organ" and the concept of "readymade" art. Both are controversial. Both take existing elements and re-present them as something new and unique. Today, 90 years after Marcel Duchamp turned a urinal on its side and called it Fountain, people are still arguing as to whether or not what he did was art. The pipe organs built 90 years from now will still have more in common with pipe organ built 90 years ago. The digital and virtual pipe organs (as yet) have no such context.

I am reminded of the time I went to a found art exhibit and saw pipe organ parts used. Apart from the fact that the work was amateurish, as a pipe organ builder I was immediately offended. But isn't the point of such art not to please you, but provoke you into thought? In the case of the most ardent argument put forward by the makers of the "virtual pipe organ", the point submitted is that it exists to create music; their argument is that the instrument is the medium in which the artist works, not the artistic work itself.

This is where the pipe organ, as an object, diverges. In its refined form it is a true unique artistic creation, the product of applied human knowledge and the working of raw material by human hands. Like a sculpture, it becomes part of the place in which it resides. It is true of course, that as with a Stradivarius or Gueneri del Jesu, without context, without music or musician, the object has no meaning, nor purpose. It's just wood, shellac and gut arranged a certain way. But the pipe organ is often also a visual object most often identified as part of the Christian worship experience. So the context of the pipe organ must be recognized as something more than a medium for the musician.

One must be mindful of the inseparability of the church and the pipe organ. The pipe organ as it has evolved would not have done so without the church and Christian musical tradition, and this, like it or not, remains true today; the majority of output of the pipe organ industry is for churches. Secular music is, and always has been, the secondary (though equally important) role of the pipe organ.

My argument is first and foremost for the consideration of context: in the church setting, who is the organ built for? What is it there to do? In seeking this goal, a modern builder should, in my opinion, strive to be informed by classicism and a thorough understanding of period styles, but should by no means be bound by them. Put more simply, one must understand the rules (such as they are, by rules I mean the classical principles of design) in order to understand how and when they should be broken to create a successful musical instrument. Such knowledge comes from study and hard won personal experience.

Too often I find that the use of the organ as a secular instrument is put forward as its "greater" role. This, I think, ignores the context of the pipe organ in the lives of the congregations it serves. I have said before that I find little to argue with when a church finds a pipe organ beyond their means. People have every right to make decisions on how

best to serve their own religious community. I can only say that I feel, as a builder, I must be mindful of the mission of the instruments I create and see to it they can do so with subtlety, musicality and longevity. When a congregation goes to the trouble to entrust me to build or rebuild a pipe organ, I feel I must honor and respect that trust.