From the Consultant

When I began teaching in 1988 at a music school in Westport, Connecticut, I was naturally curious about local pipe organs. The director of the school invited me to come play the organ where she was organist, the United Methodist Church of Westport and Weston. Occasionally we would have chamber music concerts there, as it was a nice space for that type of music and the frequent suggestion was made to use the pipe organ.

Over the years, I became more familiar with this late 1960s organ of mediocre quality and its limitations. This two manual instrument of about 20 stops was in poor mechanical condition: it enjoyed a failing combination action, frequent ciphers, tuning instability and other frustrations, even though periodic maintenance was given. The organ, being a product of its time, was very thin in sound, had little bass response (as did the room) and few solo colors. Most importantly, there was no sense of real ensemble, even when the *tutti* was drawn.

The aging instrument was also limited in its dynamic range for choral accompaniment and congregational singing, as well as being weak in trying to blend with other instruments. Overall, the organ did not make a strong impact; these and other issues would come to the forefront in the course of the project.

A few years went by, and a new organist and choir director was hired. The new organist was Mr. Todd Simmons, someone who happened to be one of my teaching colleagues at the music school, and who also later became the Assistant Director of that school. As the organ continued to deteriorate, he and the church became even more disappointed with the organ's reliability and marginal tonal resources.

Knowing that I was an organist and had done other consulting work, Todd asked me to come "check it out" for some recommendations and ideas on how to "get more guts" from the organ and what could be done to make it sound better. I recall he also stated, "we need more, but better softs and louds, not just mezzo-mediums…"

Being a fine musician, pianist, teacher, choral conductor and enthusiastic person, Todd had heard many beautiful smaller pipe organs in similar acoustical settings. He was a keen observer from the get-go and after a few discussions on this organ's situation, initially asked me to help him by listening to the organ in the room and working on registrations for pieces, anthems and hymns.

Soon after that, we began an in-depth conversation on what could be done to either rebuild or replace the organ with something that would not only offer more tonal possibilities, but that would also fill the room and excite the strong congregational singing potential he knew was there.

As we talked, it was apparent that virtually a new organ would be the best option, but to possibly consider using much of the existing pipework, having it rescaled, revoiced and placed on a new, reliable chassis. At this point, Todd asked me if I would serve as an advisor/consultant to him on the project and I was happy to accept and offer help.

At that point, I asked him "what do you and the church want the organ to do"? The first thing he said was for it to be reliable, to have a wider dynamic range, more tonal colors and a strong sense of presence in the room. They also wanted it to strongly lead and accompany congregational singing, sensitively render choral, solo and instrumental accompaniment, help inspire organists to practice, and finally, the comment that struck me the most; to "have a worthy instrument that would last."

Our task began to take shape. Soon meetings were held and we started thinking about a potential builder for such a project. As word spread about the activity, a donor came forward and offered to fund the project, even before a budget had been determined, but with the coda comment, "how soon could it get done?" What a find!

One of my pervading concerns was the acoustic, which, while fine for chamber music, was a bit dry for organ and choral music and congregational singing. Having noted the difference in the acoustic when the room was more fully occupied, I knew the challenge of filling the room efficiently would be a mandate for the builder.

There could be little change in the room's acoustic (fortunately no carpet, drapery or cushions are present), and with a mid-20th century flattened A-frame type building with many odd angles and slopes, the acoustic was not generous, but far better than a completely dead room.

As we worked on a draft of what to show potential builders what the organ needed to do, a stoplist began to emerge, but with an eye on a budget and space limitations. We tossed about ideas regarding a stoplist, but first asked builders what they thought they could do for the church, based on the above criteria.

One of my first thoughts was to ask for a façade, as the previous organ had nothing visible except a partially hidden, non-descript console in a lowered pit in the choir loft. I reasoned that a façade would add some architectural harmony and interest into the room and reinforce impression the church was getting something new, better and different.

Another issue we agreed on from the beginning was that the organ should remain an all pipe instrument. Some builders were not as willing to adhere to this request, rather leaving the pipework much as it was, and try to fill in the gaps with digital substitutions.

The process of selecting a builder began and Todd asked me "who could do this"? After naming a few candidates, one firm was clearly most interested, experienced and willing to work with us and on this organ, based on our requests. Having known the Odells and their fine lineage of historic instruments as well as their excellent work on new organs and various projects over many years, I was happy to welcome their presence to rise to this challenge. Having worked in similar situations, they were experienced in this regard and were happy to talk and work with us.

I suggested the church have Edward and Holly Odell give the organ a full tuning – something the organ really needed. This would give them a way to fully survey the

instrument and get to know it in a professional way. After their tuning of the organ, the organ sounded better, and gave us a glimpse that much potential was there.

After this, the church asked the Odells to submit a proposal for either rebuilding or a new organ. As the Odells looked through the organ, they determined that a new console, chassis and electrical system would be required and that it would be possible to rebuild one or two small windchests, but otherwise new windchests would be required throughout. By adding a façade for visual interest, adding some new pipework and retaining about half the existing pipework (though carefully rescaled and revoiced), the organ could take on a new character that would be far more flexible and of greater quality than its predecessor. This concept, coupled with their thorough proposal and an engaging on-site presentation was all most impressive and helped to land them the contract.

As the new organ design was developed, it was decided that the Great principal pipes would be scaled larger, and properly and thoroughly voiced. The new design also called for the wind pressure to be increased, in part to improve the tonal egress into the room. A clever suggestion was to borrow the Great 4' Octave as an 8' Second Principal stop on the Great, creating a smaller, but secondary, 8' principal for smaller combinations. The stop could also be used to fill out foundation tone when needed.

As we continued to explore various tonal issues, it was noted that the old organ had no soft reed color nor solo flute color, so we asked the Odells to address this. Among things, their proposal suggested adding an 8' Oboe and building a new Harmonic Flute, patterned after historic Odell examples. We were delighted with these additions and they make a real difference on paper and most importantly in the product.

I recommended new 2-2/3' and 2' principal stops to replace the existing flute-scaled 2' in the Great. These new stops would enhance the organ and bind the basic principal chorus much better. The Odells agreed. The Odells suggested going further to install a new Mixture to create a full Principal chorus, giving the organ a sense of ensemble, a true *plenum*, something it never had.

Having listened to the result, I can state these stops create a truly full-sounding principal chorus, finally integrating the instrument into the room. The organ as conceived by the Odells has made a huge difference for hymn and repertoire playing and make the instrument "ring the room" more effectively, something that had not been previously achieved.

The Great also contains the revoiced 8' Bourdon, now sounding more like a continuo stop, suitable for that purpose in choral music or to accompany the Great's *cornet de composée*. The Gemshorn and its Celeste were retained for flexibility in accompanying and allowing for more soft colors, especially welcome in a smaller instrument.

The Swell received "the Odell treatment", in that all the pipework was revoiced. The flues, strings and mutations were all given a transformation by Holly Odell, the voicer, and the reeds were reworked to make a dramatic difference. The strings and 8' Rohrflute now all have more presence and can now fully support a choir in anthems, as well as

contribute to the ensemble. The Swell *cornet de composée* is now nicely balanced and the flutes have a much more piquant character with more usability and listening interest.

The new 8' Oboe, voiced by the well-known and respected reed voicer, Sam Hughes, offers a nice color for softer choral accompaniment and foundation combinations, as well as providing a new solo stop. The existing 8' Trumpet, originally extended to 16' for the Pedal, was also cleaned, revoiced and regulated into a stop that now serves a dual-purpose chorus/solo reed. The 16' octave, now reconditioned, adds more *gravitas* to the Pedal and the full ensemble.

The Pedal division was given a few borrows and extensions for flexibility and the fluework revoiced to give more bass and foundation tone. New 8' Principal basses of polished aluminum are attractively arranged and displayed in the new façade. The façade blends well with the church architecture and adds visual and musical interest to the room, allowing these important bass pipes to speak more clearly.

The full ensemble now fills the church worship space with a richer, warmer and well-blended tone that is pleasing and inspiring to listen to and sing with. The softer sounds are more usable and possess a wider dynamic range, so the possibilities for choral, vocal and instrumental accompaniment are greatly enhanced.

A new, terraced jamb console with a solid-state control system and multi-level combination action affords the player flexibility and welcomed reliability in playing, practicing and controlling the instrument. All the woodwork was personally crafted by Edward Odell and is of fine cabinetmaking grade and construction. In the installation process it was reassuring to see how beautifully designed and well made all components of the organ are, both inside and out.

During the tonal finishing, it was exciting to witness the attention to detail in balancing each stop and the various ensembles to provide the church, organist and builder with an instrument to fulfill the original mission. I was very happy to work with all parties involved on this project and am very pleased with the results, as is the organist and the church. I might add this project also stayed within a relatively small budget, and it was refreshing to hear from the builder that materials and workmanship were never an issue; they insisted in every aspect that things be done thoroughly, with the highest level of attention to detail.

The organ is now in regular use and a series of dedication concerts have been planned, as well as activities to introduce it to youth and others to widen the audience appreciating this instrument and pipe organs in general.

My thanks go to Edward and Holly Odell, their associates, to Todd Simmons and the United Methodist Church of Westport and Weston, Connecticut and the donor for having me work with them in a collaborative effort to complete this important project to enrich the worship and outreach of this vibrant congregation.

K. Bryan Kirk, Advisor/Consultant ~ October 2006