

In the wind . . .

by John Bishop



John Bishop

Organs aloft

A good friend worked with me for several years as a tuning assistant. He's a grand singer with lots of theater experience, and is music director of a nearby church where he presides over an ambitious choir program—one of those with the enviable problem of bursting the seams of the church's building. When someone new joins the choirs, it's hard to find her a seat. One day we were driving together to a tuning job, and I was guessing that the organ would be below pitch and we'd likely have to correct it—start over with a new “A,” a new temperament, and then tune every pipe. Using sloppy slang, I said to Mark that we would probably pitch the organ. He jumped instantly into a hilarious romp with a flawless Scottish accent in which *Organ Pitching* was added to the Scottish Games.

If you're not familiar with Scottish Games, I invite you to take a look at <www.caledonian.org/usheavyevents.html>. This page is from the site of the Caledonian Club of San Francisco, and describes the history and rules of games such as the *Caber Toss* in which competitors throw a tapered section of a tree trunk, and *Weight for Height* where competitors in different classes throw 28, 42, or 56 pound weights over a bar (maybe the origin of the phrase, *hoisting a few*). I confess that I find a comical side to what is clearly a serious competition, and I still chuckle when the phrase *Organ Pitching* crosses my mind—not infrequently in the work of the Organ Clearing House! Don't know yet if we're going for distance or height. In either event we're likely to go akimbo—or is it a-kilter?

Sounds disrespectful I know, but there is a practical reality.

The organ loft

There's a narrow door in the narthex of the stone building. You open it and find a tight-radius spiral stairway. The wooden door at the top of the stairs is swollen in its frame—you have to give the bottom corner a little kick, and the



La Madeleine, Paris, France



Cavallé-Coll organ, La Madeleine, Paris France

door makes a characteristic shuddering sound as it opens. (There's usually a musty smell.) But your struggle is rewarded. You come around the corner to a breathtaking view down the nave. And there's the organ console, inviting you to send majestic sounds across the abyss. I'm thinking of an enchanting morning I spent at La Madeleine in Paris about ten years ago when a sub-organist showed me the organ that had been played by Saint-Saëns and Fauré. He said he had to go to a meeting—I could leave with him or be locked in with the organ for an hour or two until the meeting was over. I chose “B.”

Lofty ideals

I know a different kind of organ loft. The hobbyist notices that a local church is closing. He has an old barn behind the house—why not nab the organ from the church and put it up in the hayloft. “I'll fix it up and install in the loft—it'll sound just like it did in the church.”

Two or three sweaty Saturdays later, the organ is among 80-year-old vestiges of actual farming. “That's all the time I have right now. I'll set it up in a couple years.” A year later, he sees a set of old wooden organ pipes at a flea market. Up into the loft they go. That's when he notices that mice have been running around the first deposit. “Oh well, I'll clean that up when I put the organ together.” And so on . . .

It's easier to start a project than finish one.

Forty years later, the Organ Clearing House gets a call. “We've just bought a house, and there are a lot of antique tubes in the barn. Someone told us they're worth a lot of money.” You know

what, probably not. On more than one occasion, I've recommended that such material be discarded or sent to the melting pot of an organ-pipe maker. And on more than one of those occasions, I've been berated, even abused, by people who angrily inform me that they thought the Organ Clearing House was “committed to preservation.”

Rule number one: we can't save them all.

Rule number two: we should be sure we're working hard to save the good stuff.

Rule number three: you rarely find good stuff in a hayloft.

What can be saved?

The preservation of pipe organs is the principal activity of the Organ Clearing House. But as we are in the front line receiving news of organs being offered for sale, we know as well as anyone that it's not practical or possible to save them all. Our warehouse is full. If we come across an instrument important enough to preserve by placing it in storage, another has to be discarded. So how do we choose?

The obvious first answer is that we try to save the best ones. But it's not that simple. I notice that there are organs with lesser artistic content that are higher in usefulness. There are at least two basic styles of pipe-organ action that allow for more compact layouts—a good instrument in one of those styles may offer a terrific opportunity for a church that has limited space. Or a simple and non-descript electro-pneumatic organ might prove to be readily adaptable to a tricky physical situation. You can view such an organ as a kit by putting a good tonal structure on those sturdy chests. Be sure a good voicer has the chance to work his magic, and you'll have a winner on your hands. There's economy available in the reuse of well-made reservoirs, chests, swell boxes, and building frames, even if they're not from a major builder.

I believe that the ubiquitous 15-rank Hook & Hastings organ on which the OCH built its reputation is one of the most pure and artistically sophisticated versions of the American pipe organ, but I've learned to accept that those organs can be difficult to place in new homes. Along with their thrilling tonal structures come beefcake physiques. A 12-stop organ might have a footprint of fifteen feet wide and eight feet deep—simply too much for a lot of buildings. Most organs of that style (and they're not all by Hook & Hastings) are arranged internally with Swell-behind-Great. There's a simple frame with four sturdy legs and two long chest bearers holding up both manual windchests with walkboard between, and the organ is pretty deep from front to back. The relatively rare “stacked” version with Swell-above-Great is typically snapped up because those instruments require less floor space—but of course they stand taller and won't fit under the ceilings of many buildings.

Living in New England, we're surrounded by stately older churches. These are the buildings for which the 19th-century American tracker organ was conceived, and of course there's space



First Congregational Church, Woburn, Massachusetts



Hook organ, First Congregational Church, Woburn, Massachusetts

for them. But today's architecture has taken us far from the “here's the church, here's the steeple” kind of building. Contemporary churches can be high-end exciting buildings with creative designs and innovative interior spaces or simple buildings held up by laminated beams. In the first, perhaps the architect has not done enough homework to know how much space and what sort of acoustical environment a pipe organ needs. In the second, it's common that the area of the floor plan is misleading because the side walls are short and the pitch of the roof starts early. Nestling an organ up against a side wall doesn't allow the necessary height for an organ. And the rear balcony in such a building is likely to be suited for a Lilliputian choir, let alone anything resembling a pipe organ.

The standard and simple A-frame church building has been the natural breeding ground of the digital substitute for the pipe organ.

A Brobdingnagian setting

Jonathan Swift's novel *Gulliver's Travels* (published in 1726) gives us satirical views of international travel. Lilliputians (the residents of Lilliput) are

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about one-twelfth the size of humans, while Brobdingnagians (the residents of Brobdingnag) are about twelve times our size—a neat study in reverse ratios. These contrasting imaginary nations often enter my thinking as I travel among our clients. Too frequently I run my Stanley *Fat-Max*® tape measure up the back wall of a church and wish I could pull out another eight feet. (The Stanley is great for this because the blade is wide and rigid, and with a little practice you can run it 25 or 30 feet up a wall—a little like balancing a ball on your nose.)

Too often the challenge of the contemporary American organbuilder is to reconcile the seating capacity of a room with its ceiling height. We can imagine or devise formulas that define number of seats-per-rank, which are spoiled when given an 18-foot ceiling. Put 300 singing congregants in a room and you really want a 16-foot Principal.

When designing a sailboat, the difference in a foot or two of overall length can mean a huge increase in weight, sail area, and cost. Go from 35 to 37 feet and you might add 12,000 pounds to the weight of the boat. An architect or engineer can tell you the difference in price between an 18-foot and a 20-foot ceiling in a new church building. The 20-foot ceiling might allow that 16-foot Principal, but the cost of the building goes up by 40 percent. (This is when the price-per-stop of an organ becomes fictional—count in the cost of the new building and the 16-foot Principal becomes a four-million-dollar stop!)

But consider the example of the 1880s New England church building. A floor plan of 90-by-50 feet calls for a ceiling height of maybe 30 feet. There's a balcony stretching around sides and back, a seating capacity of 800, and that 40-stop organ sits comfortably up front. It's not necessary to make the lowest notes of the 16-footer be Haskell basses, it's not necessary to jam the Great chorus against the ceiling, and it's not necessary to cut the maintenance access under the Swell to 18 inches. I've measured people's shoulders to make that crawl-space as small as possible—that's not a good way to ensure the long-term reliability of a pipe organ.

I've got two things going on here—the preservation of vintage organs and the proportions of church buildings. The organs of the late-19th and early-20th centuries are telling us something about the natural proportions of buildings. Later 20th-century advances in building techniques have altered the proportions of modern buildings. My 19th-century model church is dominant in the local skyline because of its style of construction. A given floor plan determines a ceil-

ing height. The ceiling height determines the pitch and loft of the roof because the timbers that hold up the ceiling are directly related to height of the roof.

The builder of a new pipe organ has some flexibility in design to make a few large pipes lie down or go wider rather than taller. But if you're interested in the preservation of a vintage organ, you have a hard time when working in modern cost-effective worship spaces.

Reinforced concrete and steel or laminated beams allow us to have lower ceilings in wider rooms. Saves money in construction, but the majesty is lost. When your church is thinking of building a new sanctuary, slip a few photos of the "real thing" on the conference table. Your organbuilder will thank you.

And as we preserve those instruments built in earlier ages, let's be sure we're choosing the good ones. There's no room for mediocrity in pipe-organ building. That's when we decide to pitch them.

While you're reading online about Scottish Games, take the natural leap to read about bagpipes, especially the jokes. How can you tell a piper with perfect pitch? He can throw a set into a pond without hitting any of the ducks. ■

On Teaching

by Gavin Black



This & that

As I mentioned in last month's column, this month I will provide a sort of miscellany or potpourri of brief thoughts, ideas, and anecdotes that will amount to "light summer fare," but which I hope will be interesting. Some of this column will introduce subjects that I will take up more fully later on.

Organ pedagogy

When I was a graduate student in organ performance at Westminster Choir College in the mid-80s, I took—as was required—the course in organ pedagogy. This course was, in those days, set up in an extraordinary way, and it ended up having a strong influence on the way that I think about teaching. The course was not a step by step traversal through a particular method of teaching. It did not purport to teach us *how to teach* in any technical sense. Rather, it was a kind of colloquium loosely organized around the notion of teaching but really concerned with what it means to be a musician, an organist, a performer, a colleague, and, indeed, a teacher. The course—and this was the crucial part as far as I was concerned—was taught by all six members of the organ department in turn, each one taking two or three weeks, and sharing whatever he or she thought was interesting, useful, or important for us to know.

Structured this way, the course taught us two lessons before we even stepped into the classroom. The first of these was that learning to be a teacher did not consist of learning some other (presumably older) teacher's method, or, more broadly, did not necessarily consist of learning a method at all. The second was that diverse or divergent points of view were worthy of respect, and that anyone who had experience and something to say was worth listening to, even if he or she was not your own teacher, and—especially—even if he or she was rumored to have an approach or a philosophy that was different from your own, from your teacher's, or from what you were used to.

(The Westminster organ faculty at that time was such an extraordinary group and represented such a great amount and diversity of experience that I would like to record here, even though it is already of course a matter of public record elsewhere, the names of the teachers who made up that group, in order of their seniority at the time. They were Donald McDonald, Eugene Roan, Joan Lippincott, Robert Carwithen, William Hays, and Mark Brombaugh.)

Two kinds of teaching

The whole phenomenon of declaring that "there are two kinds of" something—usually "people"—is somewhere between a joke and an oversimplification. My notion that there are two kinds of teaching is the latter: an admitted oversimplification that, if it is recognized as such, might be interesting. The first kind of teaching is the normal kind: a student comes for a lesson more or less every week, and practices regularly. The work of these lessons is organized in a fairly systematic way, and the teacher's

job in large part is to help the student make systematic progress, with each lesson building upon what came before. This will always be the largest and most important part of what goes on in the teaching/learning process, especially when that process addresses an area that involves technical skill.

The second kind of teaching is that in which a teacher says or does one simple thing that—very quickly, almost suddenly, with little or no need for follow-up or amplification—makes a significant or even crucial difference to the student. This is a kind of teaching by "revelation" or "enlightenment." Of course—as I have experienced myself!—this concept can lead towards arrogance ("I will bestow Pearls of Wisdom upon my students as if I were a great Guru") and laziness ("I need not undertake the grinding work of helping my students develop a systematic lesson and practice plan").

(I should mention that I think that laziness can be quite useful sometimes—more about that below—but that arrogance probably cannot.) The antidote to this arrogance and laziness is the realization that, if sometimes something that you say or do as a teacher can have a revelatory effect upon a student and can create as much progress for that student as you might expect to achieve in a semester of work, it is always impossible to know or even guess in advance what might have that effect or serve that role for a particular student. It is not really something that you can do on purpose!

Here are four almost offhand remarks made to me over the early years of my own organ and harpsichord study, by four different people, some of whom were official teachers of mine and some of whom were not, each of whom turned out to be about as important to my learning as any given few months of studying and practicing:

1) After listening to me play a bit of a Bach fugue on the organ in my first year of organ study, an astute listener commented that I should listen to my playing of the subject in the pedals, and then try to recreate that effect in the voices that were on the manuals. This taught me that sometimes the visceral, kinesthetic, dance-like feeling of pedal playing can be a good intuitive source of rhythm, shape, and liveliness.

2) Early on in the time when I was studying organ with Paul Jordan—probably in about 1973—I was trying to play a short piece for him. Whenever I made a wrong note, I hesitated, or stopped, or tried to go back. Paul said to me that I should always know before I started a passage whether I was, on the one hand, *playing* it, or, on the other hand, *drilling* it. If the former, then I should be utterly committed to keeping it going, never breaking rhythm, always thinking about the next thing, not worrying about what just happened. If the latter, then I should know in advance what bit of the music I was drilling, and indeed go back and repeat it as many times as I needed to, but on purpose, not as a result of letting myself be derailed. This brief comment was, I believe, the source of at least half of my own ability to practice effectively and to perform, and to help others learn how to do the same.

3) A young but experienced virtuoso harpsichordist with whom I was chatting one day in the late '70s, commented that any gesture that a person could perform at any given (slow) speed, could also—absolutely certainly—be performed at *any* (faster) speed, given appropriate practicing. I had no way of actually evaluating the truth of this claim at the time, but I kept it in mind. In the end it provided more or less the other half of my own ability to practice effectively and to teach effective practicing.

4) In the spring of 1979 I was studying privately with Prof. Eugene Roan, a few years before I studied with him as a graduate student. I played one of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* fugues for him on my new harpsichord, and he commented that he couldn't hear a certain motif when it entered in the top voice. I think that I said something about harpsichord voicing, or acoustics, but he suggested that I simply make the theme a

Rycote Chapel, Oxfordshire



Rycote Chapel was built in the fifteenth century and visited by most of the Tudor monarchs during their visits to the nearby Rycote Palace, now long since demolished. The village of Rycote is mentioned in the *Doomsday Book*, but this too has long since vanished. The palace was once an important royal residence and Henry VIII spent part of his honeymoon there with his fifth wife. The chapel now belongs to English Heritage. It has some interesting furnishings including carving, almost certainly by Grinling Gibbons.

The new organ has been designed to fit in well with its ancient surroundings. It sits on a musicians' gallery at the west end of the chapel and complements the reredos at the east end. It is finished in natural waxed oak with rich carving, also in oak.

SPECIFICATION

Stopped Diapason 8
Principal 4
Chimney Flute 4
Fifteenth 2

All stops divide at middle C

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