

## BEAUTIFUL AND USEFUL

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In preparing a talk for the 1999 American Classic Organ Symposium in Salt Lake City, I needed a concise explanation for the strong appeal of the eclectic organ as conceived so convincingly by G. Donald Harrison and the artisans of Æolian-Skinner. It is fairly easy to make a long list of technical qualities that these organs, large and small, exhibit—design architecture, scaling, voicing and finishing techniques, and so on. But what is it about this combination of attributes that has made these organs so popular to so many people for so long? It suddenly occurred to me that it can be summarized in just three words, *beautiful and useful*. The combining conjunction in the phrase, of course, is the key. We all know organs that are beautiful and organs that are useful, but the combination of these two qualities in one instrument is the rarest of accomplishments.

Beautiful organ tone compels you to listen. Drama, repose, dynamic contrast, variety of tonal color, the blend of colors to produce new ones, and most importantly, ensemble are all facets of tonal beauty. The number of stops means little, as anyone who has heard a large but disappointing organ may attest. An organ of just a few stops, on the other hand, can be so beautiful that you wish to listen to it for hours.

The usefulness of organ tone is dictated by its repertoire requirements and its acoustical setting. In some venues, particularly in the academic world, an organ may be fully useful if it can perform only one limited branch of the repertoire. In a church it may be useful only if it can support congregational singing, accompany a choir, blend with other instruments, and render a wide variety of organ solo repertoire in a musically convincing way. In a symphony hall, it may not be useful unless it can stand up to the tutti of the modern orchestra. If, however, an instrument fits the repertoire, but does not match the acoustic, its value will be inhibited, if not entirely absent.

Whether an organ is beautiful and useful is also a matter of context. Looking back, we find that the great builders who were most noted for creating instruments of beauty and utility must be judged by the criteria of their time and place. Some of these instruments may not pass the usefulness test today, but that does not mean that they are not worthy of respect and of careful study.

At the symposium I asked my audience how many of them had played beautiful instruments that were not useful and useful ones that were not beautiful. I could see the answer in their expression. These people, most of whom had wide experience as organists or builders, had encountered very few instruments that were both beautiful and useful. Perhaps this is one reason they attended the symposium: to hear one of the best examples of an organ that meets this test—the Mormon Tabernacle organ.

How many of you have played extremely beautiful organs that are virtually useless in the setting where they have been placed? The obvious examples come from the tendency in recent decades to put highly specialized (repertoire specific) instruments in mainstream churches. All too often, instruments that are undeniably beautiful are placed inappropriately because of the enthusiasm of a musician, consultant, or builder for a particular style of organ design. An instrument that is a work of art in the North German Baroque style may, in its first year, be an attractive novelty in a mainstream Presbyterian church, but over time may prove to be of limited usefulness. By the same token, an Æolian-Skinner, no matter how beautiful, might not be terribly useful in a conservatory dedicated exclusively to teaching North German Baroque repertoire. Even in cases where the repertoire specificity of the organ may be appropriate, a beautiful organ's usefulness will be limited by the acoustic. For example, a French Romantic-style instrument in a Roman Catholic church with a dry acoustic could not display the beauty of its full power.

How many of you have played useful instruments that are devoid of beauty by virtue of blandness or even ugliness? This country is littered with church organs that, on paper, have all the resources necessary for an eclectic church music program and can plod through a service, but utterly lack musical interest. Such usefulness without beauty is an abomination because it robs music of its inspirational and communicative value and renders it nothing more than a background. It can be compared with the "art" which adorns dental offices and motel rooms. Bland, uncommitted voicing is the hallmark of such sad organs. These are instruments designed to offend no one and, in the process, inspire no one. Organbuilding is not a safe trade. One must be committed to a musical ideal. Taking a middle-of-the-road approach is not eclecticism, it is fear of commitment. Such an approach is particularly inappropriate in church work.

I must say that given the choice of beauty or utility, I would always choose the beautiful instrument. However, such a choice should not have to be made, particularly when dealing with organs dedicated to the service of a church. A fine pipe organ must be both beautiful and useful. This does not mean that every organ in a church must be of eclectic design. It does mean, however, that the musical requirements, whatever they may be, must be met. In some places it may be possible to have more than one organ, but where it is not, one instrument must be designed, as far as possible, to serve all the legitimate needs. This brings us back to G. Donald Harrison and the American Classic organ— concept that most certainly proved it is possible to have an eclectic organ that is both beautiful and useful. G. Donald Harrison's approach, of course, is only one. There are many others, but it would be hard to find a better illustration of the concept than in the brilliant work of Æolian-Skinner at its prime.

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