

FLYING BLIND: THE CORRECT WAY TO SELECT AN ORGAN BUILDER

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There are two types of piano buyers. The serious musician judges tone, action, and reputation for stability and longevity. The host or hostess furnishing a living room is happy with a pretty melody played by the salesman, but concentrates on how the piano will enhance the décor. Wood color and grain, carving, gold leaf and shape (baby grand always wins over upright) are the key factors.

Organs, which are usually bought by committees, get judged *both* ways, since committees are usually made up of only one or two musicians and several dedicated volunteers. This committee auditions the work of the builders under consideration. Although only the musicians have the background and vocabulary to analyze organ tone, every member of the committee can tell whether or not the sound of the organ is appealing. As long as the committee keeps its attention clearly focused on music, it can do quite a good job figuring out which of the organs they have heard will best satisfy the congregation.

The builder selection process can be completely derailed if builders are asked to submit case renderings before the musical auditioning process is complete and a builder has been selected. The reason is simple. With drawings in hand, everyone has something solid to hang on to rather than the ephemeral subject of organ tone. When the committee starts evaluating pictures, attention immediately shifts from the sound of the organ to the look of the organ. A case rendering is something everyone on the committee can comment upon with full confidence. They have all faced decisions about how things should look in their home, perhaps their business, or in the church. Furthermore, most of them have very deep-seated convictions about how their church should look. Many have connections with the building going back generations. Most have had strong emotional experiences connected with the church. The selection process becomes a visual contest among renderings.

The sad fact is that, in addition to losing track of the musical objective, this contest often shuts off any truly creative case design. If the people latch on to a preliminary drawing, they may not be open to new ideas that come from a truly rigorous design methodology. Another damper on creativity enters as committee members try to imagine how the entire congregation will receive the organ case. Not wanting to offend, they may tend towards the bland, unimaginative rendering. The proper way to design an organ case is for the builder to work cooperatively with the client and their architect. The process takes a great deal of engineering time that the builders can't invest on speculation. It begins with simple sketches and progresses step by step into a drawing that the client feels would be appropriate and acceptable to the congregation. Then more elaborate and detailed drawings are made, leading to a rendering perhaps in color and perspective showing the instrument exactly as it will appear in the building. Sometimes, models are employed—to give an even more dramatic illustration of what is to come. To ask a builder to produce a case with anything less than this amount of effort is unfair to the builder.

Finally, if the builder is asked to produce a quick sketch on speculation, it may be quite attractive in his eyes but completely miss the mark with the committee. Immediately, his credibility is damaged. But if he doesn't make a sketch, how can the committee know if the builder who makes the best sounding organ can also make a great case? *Check out his credentials.* All builders have a portfolio of the many cases they have designed, encompassing a wide variety of styles. If the builder has designed successful cases that look attractive in their settings, it's safe to assume that he could do the same for you. Until you have selected your builder, keep the blinders on.

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