



Church Music Australia

The National Newsletter of
RSCM Australia – A National Church Music Association

No. 13

July 2010

What Not to Buy **Purchasing an Organ for your Church**

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I was somewhat bemused by the title of a recent book – “Whom Not to Marry”. You would think that the plethora of self-help books on marriage, to say nothing of relationship gurus, coaches, dating websites and so on, would have enough material for those looking for advice. Particularly in an increasingly secular world, the advice of a 79 year old celibate Australian Catholic priest living in the US might, to many, seem quite irrelevant.

But no – New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd devoted a column to his advice and it was the most downloaded newspaper piece for the Times in that week. And some of his advice is pretty blunt and condensed! So in the spirit of Father Pat Connor’s advice to the lovelorn, let me offer my own advice on the subject of purchasing an organ.

Don’t buy a “home organ”. You can often recognise this instrument by its layout – two keyboards of about 49 notes each, the upper one being positioned slightly to the right of the lower one. There is generally a keyboard for the feet which one plays with the left foot and probably an octave of notes. Such instruments will have stops with a variety of names and perhaps include several types of reverberation, vibrato and percussion. These instruments are often called “spinet” instruments. Some of these look really “hi-tech” – a large interactive LCD screen with menus and plenty of options including church registrations.

Why not buy this? Because it is intended as a home entertainment instrument for people of limited musical training who would like to have fun playing (for example), excerpts from musicals and popular songs. This is perfectly legitimate. But a church instrument is designed to fulfil an entirely different purpose. A home organ works well in a lounge room, but is seriously underpowered in a church acoustical environment where it will sound thin and weak. Its sounds are not “voiced” to lead congregational singing, and it also has many stops or controls which use effects which don’t have a place in church music. Furthermore, most legitimate church music is not written for the “right hand melody, left hand accompaniment, left foot bass line” which the layout of this instrument is designed for. What sounds impressive in the warm, intimate and friendly environment of the lounge room when played by Aunt Maggie will frankly sound inadequate, ineffectual and incompetent at church. This organ was not built for this purpose – it is like taking your Ford Focus on the race track and competing with the Indianapolis cars. A Focus is an excellent consumer vehicle but its purpose is not the race track!

Don’t buy a “theatre organ”. There are some instruments which are a bit bigger than a home organ – they probably have two keyboards which have more notes than the home organ and are equally set out and perhaps a pedal board with longer keys and perhaps two octaves or more of notes. They are larger instruments with more stops and effects. They may be used at home, but can also be used sometimes as legitimate entertainment instruments in, for example, clubs for wedding receptions.

Why not buy this? They may or may not suffer from the problem of being “underpowered”, and the size and disposition of their keyboards is not necessarily opposed to the way legitimate church music is laid out. However, the stops they use are not “church stops” – they are voiced differently, and the relationship of the stops to each other is different. They also have a lot of “bells and whistles” (sometimes literally bells and whistles!) which can’t be used in church music. You are paying for half an instrument that you won’t use! But more importantly, you are paying for an instrument that will make a hymn sound like “South Pacific” at one of those wonderful old movie palaces.

Don’t buy a digital keyboard. It’s a bit hard to talk about these because the term “digital keyboard” means many things. On the one hand it may mean something you can carry under your arm and purchase for about a hundred bucks from Target or Kmart. Some more expensive ones may be portable in the sense that one person can carry the keyboard with two hands and you put them on a fold up stand. And then some are quite large and more permanent. They may have a huge variety of sounds, and a huge variety of sounds with many effects and often many effects such as percussion, midi

capability, and the possibility of recordings songs for playback etc. Some of them will have one or many organ sounds. They may or may not be “touch sensitive”.

This might seem like a much better option. And one can play certain church music on such instruments. But they were designed for the general market, not the church market. Their church capabilities are an “add on”, and a limited one at that. They don’t have a pedal-board, they don’t have two keyboards as many church instruments do. There is not much variety in their church sounds, and they don’t have the possibility of the kind of stop changes that even a limited purpose built church instrument has.

So far I have noted three “types” of instrument that you shouldn’t buy (and shouldn’t receive as a gift, even though it may be very tempting to accept it) but you should also know about some issues which underlie these instruments.

Technology: These instruments are “consumer” instruments. Like other consumer products they will be replaced quickly by other models and there is a limit to the amount of time that manufacturers will keep parts in stock for repair. (Already I have had to throw away an expensive Apple IPOD because the parts were not available to repair it!) They are also not built with the assumption of “professional” use and not intended to last for long periods of time. You need to purchase a church organ with the assumption of a life of 50 years or more, not a life of seven or eight years or so. You need to know that the parts are available to repair it, and you need to be reasonably sure that the manufacturer will be in business for that time to support your purchase.

Time Frame: Many churches have lamentably short-term goals in purchasing an instrument. One hears statements like “we know that the experts say we should purchase ‘such and such’ but Mrs. Jones is our organist and she is old and has an ABC organ at home and so she wouldn’t feel comfortable playing anything else. So we are going to buy an organ similar to hers”. This may sound fine, and the pastoral concern for Mrs. Jones is admirable, but consider the implications:

- The church gets an organ not suited to it (according to the above);
- The church is setting its music policy according to its short term needs, not its future needs;
- The church is placing a “ceiling” on the future development of its music and musicians. The advantage of purchasing a good instrument in this circumstance is that a very important purpose of your church instrument is education. You can’t train good organists on bad instruments, and good instruments are generally found only in churches. **They are too expensive for an ordinary person to buy to practise at home as you would a piano or trumpet. If we are to have good organists for the future, they can only be trained on the church instrument.**

Ease of Use: There is also often an unspoken assumption that a “real” organ i.e. a pipe organ or a very good digital organ, is harder to play than a home organ. Of course, every instrument is as hard or as easy to play as you make it. So yes, a piano is hard to play if you are playing “The Flight of the Bumble Bee” but it is easy to play if you are playing “Twinkle, Twinkle little Star” with one finger. Yes, the pipe organ is hard to play if you are playing one of the major Bach Preludes and Fugues, but Mrs. Jones doesn’t need to play one of the major Bach Preludes and Fugues. She can play a simple hymn using one keyboard and no pedals. And the church can probably have the organ builder or retailer set it up so that she needs to do just two things to play – turn on a switch and press one button.

This article is not intended to be “negative”, but is intended to clear away some of the “deadwood”. So if we now know “what not to buy”, what should we buy?

That of course requires an article in itself, but also requires a legitimate expert to give tailored advice for your particular church situation. The two words” legitimate” and “expert” are both important. One needs someone who is an expert, not just an interested spectator, but also an expert in this field.

Let me give an example from medicine. If I am ill with severe pain, I don’t ask my neighbour for medical advice – he or she is not trained to give that advice. But if my GP tells me it seems to be a potential heart problem, the casual conversation with the ear, nose and throat specialist that I met at a party on Saturday night does not constitute appropriate advice. The neighbour is of course well meaning, the GP well trained, and the ENT man is a specialist, but I need the advice of a trained cardiologist! The best instrument to buy requires an expert in the field of advising churches on organs.

This article may not be immediately relevant to many readers of CMA. But it will surely be useful to someone in days to come. Cut it out and paste it into your “Church” or “Organ” file for future reference – Ed.

