

The Organ in Christ Church

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Site survey and visit: 28-30 September 2012
Draft submitted: 4 October 2012
Final submitted: 6 October 2012

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I — EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. **The present Austin organ is a solid and serviceable instrument**, having provided dependable musical leadership for thirty-three years. The organ has been well maintained. Some parts of the mechanism that wear out and require periodic renewal have yet to be refurbished, but do not yet require such work. With continuation of this care, the instrument should continue to function for at least another decade before requiring any major attention.
2. **However, the organ is not musically distinguished.** The organ has a light, functional, bright sound, one the voice easily covers up during hymn singing. As heard on the main floor, the organ has very little bass tone, a quality that is central to any organ's effectiveness at leading hymns. As an instrument for accompaniment, the organ acquits the task but without distinction. Beyond an objective analysis of effectiveness lies the more subjective aspect of beauty. Apart from a few pianissimo ethereal effects, the organ contains few truly attractive sounds. The question here isn't about size (24 stops are plenty for an edifice of this size) but rather character, variety and loveliness of tone.
3. **Christ Church is a difficult space for a pipe organ** because, of course, it was never really designed to house something on the order of what today's liturgy requires. In my opinion, the organ and choir are in the best location possible for their sound to be heard throughout the building. However, the gallery places a limitation on height; deep bass pipes that move the floor are generally taller than the gallery can accommodate.
4. **If change is desired in the organ, it should stem from a desire for artistry and excellence.** Christ Church is a rare and beautiful Colonial survival. Its original decorative elements embody simple yet undeniable elegance. The 1975 organ tried to be sensitive to its surrounding, but ended up looking more like a giant radiator than a pipe organ. Its appearance is of a piece with the light brittle sound.

If the time has come to pursue a really first-class organ, the Church should do so without apology, on the aesthetic grounds of enhancing worship and offering up the best to God. Making a case on financial or stewardship grounds can never apply here; the present instrument is serviceable, has much useful life left, and can be rebuilt indefinitely. But in its present state, it will never produce really beautiful music, nor support an increasingly diverse music program.

The organ at Christ Church is composed of six separate elements:

- the four distinct sections of pipes and mechanism along the west wall (Swell, Pedal, Great, Choir)
- the console, with its keyboards, controls and pedals
- the blower.

References to "the organ" in this report refer to the instrument in its entirety.

II — BACKGROUND

This document comes at the invitation of Jason Abel. Having played the organ for seven years, he wanted some corroboration about the organ's effectiveness and musical worth. It is a many-sided issue. Is the organ in the proper location and does it speak as well as any instrument can to the congregation? Can the choirs hear the organ properly? Can the congregation hear choir and organ to best advantage?

To prepare this document, I spent parts of Friday and Saturday, September 27 and 28, 2012, playing the organ, testing every pipe and function, and examining the pipes and mechanism. But my charge was less about evaluating the current organ's mechanical condition and more about pondering its musical effectiveness and artistic worth. To assess the organ's musical effectiveness, I set a goal of listening to it from as many vantage points as possible with a congregation present. Thus on Sunday, September 29, I attended both choral services sitting in five different locations (main floor center; main floor under each gallery; gallery singing with the choir; gallery opposite the choir). This report is a record of my findings, along with recommendations and options for moving forward.

III — VALUATION

Knowing an organ's monetary value helps place it in context of a Church and its other embellishments. The most useful measure is **replacement value**: if some catastrophe were to strike, how much would it cost to reproduce approximately what you have now?

The 1975 Austin contains 24 voices, 31 ranks (sets of pipes) and 1,599 individual pipes. In 2012, an instrument of this scope would cost between \$850,000 and \$1,100,000, depending on quality. These figures do not include costs the purchaser usually covers when acquiring an organ, such as hoisting, insurance and site preparation. In consideration of these costs, the instrument should be insured for at least \$1 million.

An organ's **cash value**, however, is a different matter, often just a fraction of replacement value. The difference comes from an organ's size and complexity. A pianos or harpsichord can be easily transported, thus they are easily sold and moved. But an organ, even of modest size, requires disassembly, packing and shipping; very often refurbishment and possible re-engineering; then installation in a new location with various tonal adjustments. Since these costs can easily approach the cost of a new organ of similar size, the sale prices of organs have tended to run between five and ten percent of replacement value, depending on quality and desirability. One might put the cash value of the Austin between \$25,000 and \$30,000.

IV — CURRENT CONDITIONS

The Austin is in solid mechanical condition, as befits its age and type. Organs have few moving parts, and those that do are generally made of perishable materials — leather, rubbercloth, or felt. These materials deteriorate both from age and wear; some having longer lifespan than others, depending on application. In general, organs such as this can have, first, a half-life refurbishment (renewing the obviously failing mechanisms but leaving alone those in good shape with useful life left) and then, a full restoration (when the combination of long-lived original materials and replaced shorter-lived materials fail together later down the line). Your organ has yet to reach even that half-term refurbishment. Although I found a few dead notes, they are more likely maintenance-related than any evidence of long-term decay. The instrument should last easily another ten years before needing a full-scale refurbishment.

The organ has had two upgrades since its installation in 1975, one tonal, one mechanical. An electronic 32ft voice has been added, to create greater bass in an organ sore deprived of it. Loudspeakers, not pipes, generate these tones. The second change comes in the manner in which stop combinations are stored and retrieved by the buttons in between the keyboards. In 1975 Austin provided their tried-and-true electro-mechanical system. An electronic memory system, together with solenoids to move the stopknobs, has

superseded the original. It has the advantage of multiple memory banks; by moving from level 1 to level 2, now every button is capable of a brand new combination. This system has 99 levels, offering an undeniable convenience to the organist.

V — MAINTENANCE OBJECTIVES

Until such time as the internal leather begins to fail, the instrument shows no signs of needing anything beyond ordinary tuning and maintenance. One small pipe is choked with dirt and doesn't play; a few notes are dead; a few zinc pipes are bending and might want for greater support. Otherwise, the mechanism and console operate exactly as expected. I found just a few items:

Swell 2 Octavin	C#50, dirt
Pedal III Mixture	A#23, G32 dead
Pedal 16 Soubasse	C#14 dead
Pedal 8 Montre	D39 dead
Pedal 8 Montre	G32 – seating, dirt, speech

The expected routine of any organ maintenance program includes:

- Regular tuning, within the limitations of the voicing
- Regular (yearly) vacuum cleaning in all parts of the organ
- Cleaning of console keys and vacuuming underneath the pedalboard at each visit
- Checking the operation and lubrication of the blower
- Having the technician inform you, in writing, of any problems observed in the course of service calls
- Having the technician furnish a written report as to the precise work accomplished on any given service call (likewise)
- Keeping a log of all service, with dates.

The organ was reasonably clean and tidy on my visit, and shows every indication of being well cared for.

VI — THE LARGER PICTURE

Being asked to evaluate an organ's mechanical condition is straightforward enough. But you're asking for something more: is this an effective and beautiful organ?

ACOUSTICS: Given that Christ Church was never intended to be used as it is now for Sunday liturgy, the room functions well — if one puts away the hope good acoustics is synonymous with plentiful reverberation. There is no question that hymn singing and choral music often thrive with a good degree of reverberation. But, while Christ Church has no appreciable reverberation, the room isn't as bad as it may seem. The hard walls and ceiling disperse tone as evenly as the presence of the balconies permit, and there is an admirable clarity of tone.

Sitting on the ground floor directly underneath the choir, for instance, I was surprised that their sound wasn't more remote to me. Given the alternatives, it would seem that the choir and organ absolutely should be in the gallery. From its location the has an ability to reach diagonally to the lower corners of the room. One might argue that the choir would also benefit from being in a central location, perhaps

gathered around the console. You've already had a fine report from Kirkegaard on acoustics, whose conclusions I support. (Incidentally, Scott Pfeiffer, the author of your report, has formed his own firm, Threshold Acoustics, with the superb Dawn Schuette.)

The strongest impression I came away with was that the choir leads the hymn-singing, as much as, if not more than, the organ. During the procession, people standing underneath the right balcony sang heartily as the choir passed by. As the choir continued on, however, the singing seemed to drop off again until the choir found their way into their stalls upstairs. From that vantage, the people on the lower right hear the choir with admirable directness. As a result, those congregants started to sing healthily again. Sitting under the left gallery, with the choir now out of view directly above me, again their strength was such that they were not as aurally invisible as one might assume. A centralized choir location might balance out this effect to some extent.

We look to organs to lead hymns, which they do most directly by providing a strong bass line, tones that are felt as much as heard during hymn singing. This kind of air-moving energy, tones one feels in the body, move the singing along in a direct, visceral way that nothing else can match. Here, in the absence of such bass-toned grounding, the choir takes on that role through old-fashioned strong leadership.

It is often said that the best stop on any organ is the room, and its acoustics. But many beautiful, lyrical, lovely organs have been built in dead environments. Those examples give us the courage and hope that Christ Church can have an organ that sounds more beautiful.

VISUAL APPEARANCE: The four enclosures that comprise the organ at least give indication of what they are, by providing a row of pipes for each of the two center sections. Thanks to this scheme, the west windows were preserved, and with them an important continuity of daylight with the other three walls.

The downside is that in a space of simple yet definite Colonial elegance, the organ gives itself away as a child of the Modern Movement. Rather than echoing the ornamental grammar of its surroundings, it gives the impression of an industrial object. While no one would confuse Christ Church with Baroque or Victorian extravagance, an admirable sense of scale and elegance is evident in the design, particularly when one examines the delicacy of the Greek key molding, bow-fronted pilaster caps and discreet application of gold leaf. Here is a refined hand at work.

Perhaps the 1970s were never going to provide the most inspired solution for an 18th-century Colonial church. And, given the trend of exposed pipework, which in 1975 was only gradually falling out of fashion, the appearance of the Austin could have been worse. Today, interest in historic preservation is greater than at any other time in United States history. In the world of organ-building, beautiful organ cases of thoughtful design are not the rarity but a norm. Thus, it is hardly farfetched to imagine an organ of true visual beauty in the rear gallery, echoing not only the language of decoration found elsewhere in the room but those of its brethren, such as the Philip Feyring case of 1767 for St. Peter's Church, Philadelphia.

MUSICAL CONTENT: While the present organ is certainly a serviceable musical instrument, and has provided dependable leadership for thirty-three years, few would proclaim it a great work of art. The lack of bass has already been mentioned. Apart from a few pleasant ethereal-type voices, the tone trends toward the functional and impersonal just when it wants to be deep, warm and rich. In its design, it reflects the fashion of the 1960s, when all things Victorian and Romantic were at their nadir of regard. It accompanies the choir in a tolerable fashion, but it lacks stops that are both quiet *and* clear, a vital quality for the accompaniment of childrens' voices. While that task may not have been a concern in 1975, it surely is today, given the breadth and diversity of the music program.

VII — RECOMMENDATIONS

As you contemplate the situation, it seems that there are three possible courses of action.

1. **Do nothing beyond maintenance and eventual refurbishment.** After all, the organ is in good condition, has done its job serviceably these past thirty-three years, and with routine maintenance promises to keep going with the least possible financial exposure. An overhaul would cost, at least in my rough 'desk' estimate, about \$200,000-\$250,000 when the time comes.
2. **Improve the tone slightly.** In this approach, certain pipes remain as they are, others are revised to make a more pleasing tone, and still others are replaced outright. The financial extent of such a job varies with scope. For some churches, this is an attractive option; at Christ Church, I see more limitation than potential. First, without complete mechanical reconsideration, there would be no opportunity to introduce deep bass tone, thus perpetuating the organ's greatest weakness. Second, keeping the present instrument means living with its physical appearance.
3. **Design and commission a new organ.** A new organ of the same size as the present one, or smaller, could offer more musical effectiveness, beauty and variety while being an object equal in physical beauty to its surroundings. Such an instrument would run from \$850,000 to \$1.1 million at today's prices.

There are certain conditions under which most churches buy new organs. Perhaps a new edifice is being built, or an existing instrument is clearly failing, or it has come time to replace a temporary small organ with one more appropriate to a church's size and stature. These conditions do not apply at Christ's Church, where the shortcomings of the present instrument are entirely aesthetic in nature. Therefore, to make a case for a new organ is to enter into several different philosophical discussions.

- The purpose of a new organ would be not a larger or louder one, but to provide a first-class instrument appropriate to the diverse mission of today's music program.
- Visual appropriateness can generate strong appeal. In this case, an instrument that looks less like an industrial fence and more like an elegant Colonial-era organ could re-unify the entire decorative atmosphere. In that regard it might be argued that a new gallery organ can be seen in terms of completing an important element of the church's interior.

- Many people interact with architecture, music and worship at a level beyond quantifiable understanding. They may not know why they respond to carved wood or a lofty interior any more than they understand the communal recitation of psalms or the singing of hymns. But the power of these surroundings becomes an indelible aspect of why they attend Church and what worship means to them. In these semi-conscious impressions, sound is a vital yet ephemeral aspect of what people experience, particularly in a parish where music plays a central role. Singing together in Church may be the only time most parishioners actually make music, let alone in the company of others. Since adults sing so infrequently, they tend to be timid vocalists, thus the nature of their accompaniment becomes a delicate matter. Too little, and people will feel unsupported; too much, and they may be intimidated, feeling the organ is somehow doing their job for them. Beyond the degree of sound lies the nature of its tone. If it is strident, weightless or antiseptic, the degree of tone matters less than its having a pleasing tendency to compel people to sing along.
- Organists appreciate that their most important task is to lead the congregation in the hymns. Their only allies in this vital job are good acoustics and a fine instrument. Good hymn accompaniment is particularly challenging with an organ that lacks variety, not in numbers of stops or pipes, but in the color and range of tone available. Much the same holds true for choral accompaniment, where a large instrument isn't as important as the right sort of sounds, properly flexible, having an energy that however exciting remains subordinate to the human voice.
- Today's priorities have generally reverted to providing a church organ first, a concert organ second. Also, tastes today are more in line with a long trend of thinking from 1840-1940, with warmer, darker, richer tone intended to sit under the human voice instead of eclipsing it in brilliance. I don't imagine that a recital instrument is of much concern to Christ Church, but rather an organ that handles, with distinction, all the accompanying duties for hymns and choral anthems, of choirs both delicate and robust, Sunday Evensong as well as Eucharist. If that is provided, solo repertory should still be eminently possible. A truly musical organ will, in some fashion, play most repertory in a musical fashion.

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Thank you for your warm welcome and the opportunity to be of service in this interesting process of discovery. Please don't hesitate to be in touch with any questions, or if I can help in some other way.

Yours sincerely,

Jonathan Ambrosino
/jea

attached: photos with comments



The grilles of the two outermost sections of the organ were doubtless intended not to draw attention. But the size of the enclosures coupled to their *lack* of decoration makes them somehow stand out all the more.



The central console location permits simultaneous conducting and playing.



Whether playing the organ or piano, it's easy for the choir to see the conductor. The congregation downstairs, however, might hear the choir more evenly if they were somehow gathered around the console. This is an easy experiment to make.



The façade pipes have dents, casualties of being along a high-traffic corridor.



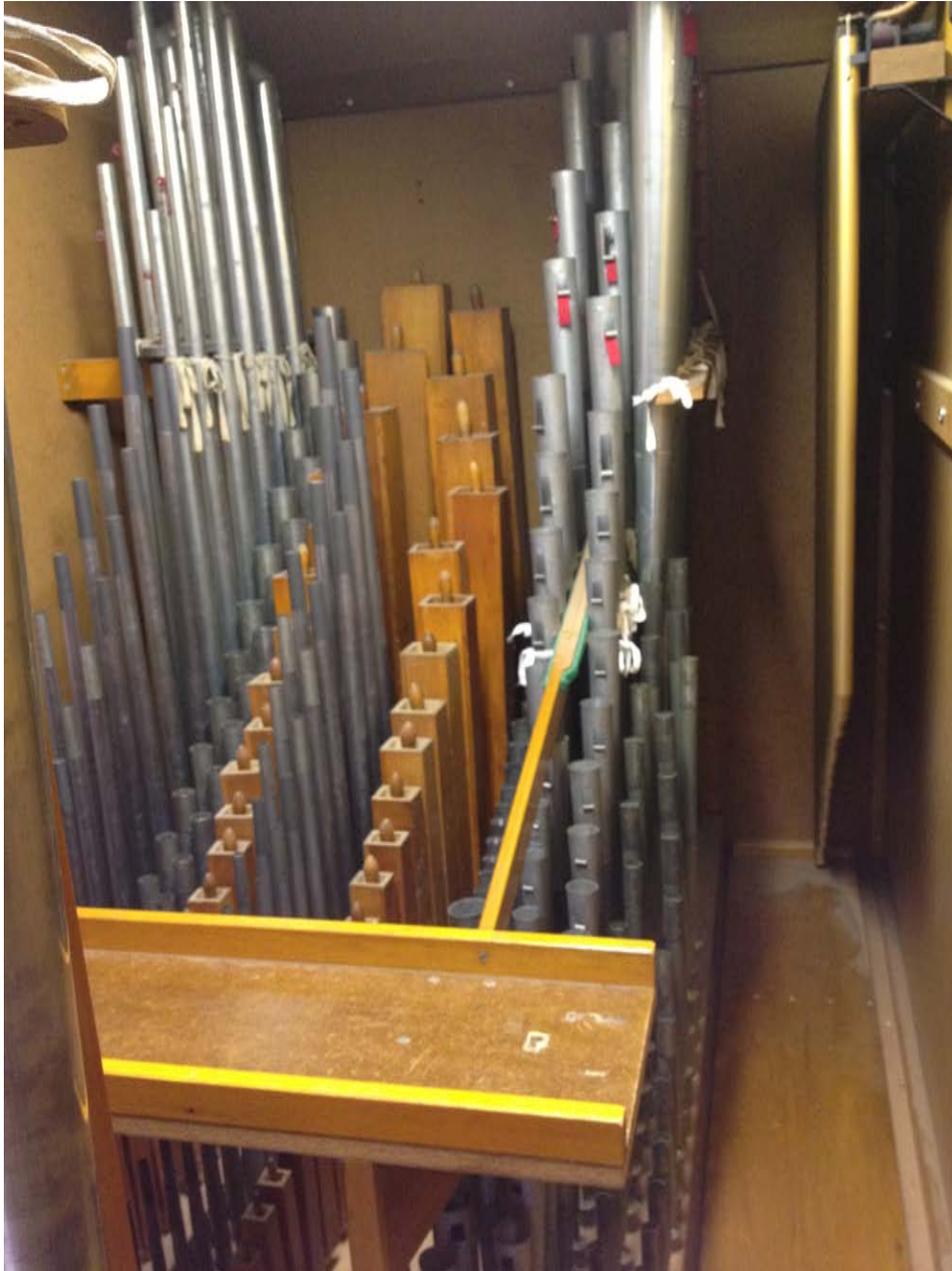
These façade pipes pre-date the 1975 Austin; they were reused from the previous instrument. Their small semi-circular ears, some of which have been torn off, are not characteristic of Austin manufacture.



From downstairs, the pipes look truly fence-like, while the four organ enclosures look particularly boxy.



The organ wind is supplied by two small blowers underneath the window benches. You can just see the motor peaking out here.



Inside the Choir division (the enclosure on the far left as you face the instrument), the pipes are arrayed in orderly rows. On the right are the tubular chimes. Some stops, including the wooden Stopped Diapason, Trompette, and Clarinet, were retained from the previous instrument.

THE AUSTIN ORGAN
IS GIVEN TO THE GLORY OF GOD
AND IN LOVING MEMORY OF
RACHEL B. STEVENS
AND
DR. WILLIAM HARRISON SPRING STEVENS
AND IS ALSO AN OFFERING
OF
APPRECIATION FOR THE MINISTRY
OF MUSIC BY
A HOST OF MEMBERS AND
FRIENDS
OF THIS CONGREGATION
1975

Any discussion about the organ should engage members of the Stevens family.



Christ Church abounds in objects of simple elegance, artfully disposed. The chalice pulpit, sounding board, escutcheons with the Apostles' Creed and Lord's Prayer — all form a composition in tandem with the east windows.



Architectural elements are simple without being plain. Discreet classical motifs and tasteful application of gold leaf set the decorative tone.



The Greek key detail is particularly delicate here. The lack of painting inside the moulding lends depth when seen at a distance.



The curving pilaster caps are especially subtle in their elegance. Once more, discreet gilding adds the final touch.

All these elements offer considerable precedent and inspiration for the designer of a new organ case.