Advisory Committees for the Care of Churches of the Dioceses of Coventry and Leicester

ORGANS

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Introduction

The organ is very much taken for granted in the parish church. When the organist suggests that perhaps the time has come for some work to be done on it, PCCs are bewildered, and the church treasurer on the defensive. “It sounds all right to me” is the typical reaction.

Yet the organ is a mechanical instrument, and like all mechanical things requires careful maintenance, cleaning and overhauling. It is probably the most expensive article in the parish church, and its replacement cost would run into many thousands of pounds, so it is common sense to take good care of it over the years. Well maintained, a church pipe organ will last for well over one hundred years.

The Essentials

1. Tuning and Maintenance.

Organs are constructed of wood and metal - both of which are subject to temperature changes. Any violent changes in temperature can wreak havoc on the tuning of the instrument. Ideally this should remain at a constant 65/66°F if at all possible. Constant temperature ensures minimum tuning requirements. When arranging for the organ to be tuned try to make sure that the temperature in the building is that which it will be for worship (normally at the week-end), and has been at that temperature for some hours.

Hot-air systems are to be avoided at all costs, (if you value your organ!) as they dry out the woodwork and play havoc with the tuning.

Dirt and dust also affect the tuning and working of the organ. It there is to be any work carried out to the church building which will create dust it is essential that the organ be properly protected. Your organ builder is the best person to make sure the instrument is sealed off. The ordinary every-day accumulation of dust can be minimised by the use of vacuum cleaners or damp mops rather than brushing.

Damp in the church may severely affect the mechanism. If the dampness is persistent then a damp-chaser should be installed. Any water penetration from the roof over the organ can be disastrous.

With minimum temperature variation an organ will need tuning once or twice a year.

The cleaning of the organ should be seen as a normal maintenance expense and take place about every twenty-five years.

2. The Blower

The electric blower is very often totally overlooked and left to operate year after year until it packs in - or is the source of a fire. The replacement of the organ blower is a costly business. It may well be that your organ tuner is not qualified to maintain the blower. This should be carried out by a electrical engineer. Some blowers have asbestos linings and PCCs should have this checked out to assess the risks posed and, if necessary, arrange for the asbestos to be removed.

Fires in churches are most often found to originate in the organ. The organ loft should not be used for storage of combustible items – it should, in any case, be kept clear to enable safer and better access to the organ. Make sure that the appropriate fire extinguisher is readily available and its whereabouts known.

3. Insurance Cover

The organ should be realistically insured. To replace it may well cost more than you would think.

A New Organ

If you are considering the purchase of a new instrument obtain at least two quotations from reputable organ builders. The DAC can provide you with a list.

They will need to visit your church and consult with the organist and incumbent. The DAC Organ Adviser will be willing to assist.

The placing of the instrument in the building will be of crucial importance for egress of sound and it's relationship to both choir and congregation. A large instrument is not necessarily appropriate, even in a large church.

If the installation of a new organ is part of a major re-ordering it is good to remember that organs benefit from a reverberation time of at least one and a half seconds. Carpets, especially wall-to-wall, ruin the acoustic.

With an increasing number of churches being made redundant there is often a good organ available which may be purchased and installed at reasonable cost. This is always worth looking into.

Any contract agreed with an organ builder must contain the following ingredients:

Specification, Type of action, Organ Case - material together with major components, Price (allowing for wage increases, inflation etc), Terms of payment, Guarantee, Date for delivery

If your organ tuner/builder is an accredited member of the British Institute of Organ Building you can rely on his workmanship as the work of his firm will have been inspected by at least three reputable builders.

Electronic organs

To purists these are an anathema! However, they have a history of over fifty years now, and need to be taken seriously as musical instruments in themselves. They are not pipe organs and will never replace them as the 'King of Instruments'.

However, the performance of electronic instruments has considerably improved over the years, both tonally and acoustically. They have not the depth of tone which most associate with the pipe organ and their life span remains an unknown factor and should be borne in mind when contemplating purchase.

Electronic organs operate with two types of technology: additive synthesis and sound sampling. Additive synthesis gives much more flexibility for voicing than sound sampling but each system has its merits. An electronic organ console should be just as good as a pipe organ console and should last for many years. Electronics can always be re-built if it becomes necessary or desirable because of new technology. Amplification systems need to be very carefully designed and positioned.

The DAC is, normally, reluctant to advise replacement of a pipe organ with an electronic one if it is adequate for the church's needs and capable of being restored and maintained at a realistic cost.