

Casavant Frères

What Does an Organ Cost?

Organ committee members sometimes ask organbuilders, “What is the average cost per stop or rank for your instruments?” This is a difficult question to answer not because the builder is trying to obfuscate, but because of the numerous variables involved from one organ to another. Since all pipe organs are custom built with each design very different from another, the seemingly unlimited possibilities can appear confusing or even daunting to those outside the field.

Builders price an organ by calculating the individual costs of each element that is included in a particular instrument with the figures representing the cost of materials and labor to produce each part. A sixteen-foot principal rank contains almost 1000 pounds of metal, while a two-foot principal rank weighs less than 20 pounds. One person can carry all 61 pipes of a manual two-foot principal rank, while it takes more than one person just to manoeuvre the largest pipe of the sixteen-foot stop, the longest pipe of which is over twenty feet in length. Therefore the materials and labor for both of these principal stops would represent a very different cost element in the same organ. The obvious physical difference in these two stops makes it easy to understand why the cost would be very different between the two. If we look at a reed and flue stop of the same pitch we have eliminated the basic size differentiation but have introduced another variable that also represents a difference in cost between two stops found in virtually every organ. If we evaluate the time involved to voice—that is to say, bring the pipes to speak their proper pitch and tonal quality—the 61 pipes of a manual eight-foot Flute and eight-foot Trumpet we discover that the Trumpet takes five times as long to voice as the Flute. Therefore, although both speak at the same pitch level, a Trumpet 8’ is more expensive than a Flute 8’.

Finally, most organs built today have an important visual presence in the form of façade pipes¹ and casework. An organ case is designed in the architectural style of the building in which it will be placed and built like fine furniture. The larger the instrument the more significant will be the amount of woodwork needed to enclose it. If the architecture of the building is an important historical style such as Gothic, appropriate mouldings and carvings must be hand made and fitted to the casework thus causing the woodwork to be higher in cost than an equivalent size case built in a simple modern style. Where appropriate to the visual aesthetic, hand painting and other appropriate decorative elements such as the application of gold leaf will add to the total cost of an instrument.

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¹ The term *façade* in organ building refers to the pipes and woodwork that make up the visual presence of the organ in the building. The pipes selected for display almost always are drawn from speaking pipes in the organ and therefore the implication that they are mute does not generally apply to present day practices in organ visual design.