

# Casavant Frères

## ***Important Elements in Evaluating Organs***

Someone once wrote that after “X” number of years there are two main aspects about an organ that will be important. 1.) How does it sound, and 2.) How well does it work. Thinking about these two aspects makes one realize just how completely intertwined they are. One without the other is virtually worthless.

### ***Evaluation: Tonal Quality***

Very few people selected to serve on a committee charged with the responsibility of making the decision to purchase an organ will have any experience in performing this task and once the work is completed it will be rare that they will have an opportunity to do it again. Therefore the assignment represents a completely new and foreign area for most people. As one approaches this work it is important to keep in mind that the purchase is for a musical instrument and it should be evaluated accordingly. The committee setting out to purchase pews for a church would not think of placing an order with a company manufacturing church seating by looking at photographs in a catalogue. They will want to experience the seating they are considering by seeing it first hand and sitting on it for a period of time in order to judge its comfort and other qualities.

Pipe organs also need to be experienced, however the difference from trying potential seating and experiencing an organ is different in that pipe organs are custom made and therefore it is impossible to see and hear the exact same instrument in another location. Sometimes people ask the organ builder to show them an organ the same size as the one being recommended in a building that looks like theirs that has a similar acoustic. Considering that virtually no two buildings look alike, even those where the architectural style is from the same period such as Georgian or Gothic, this is an almost impossible task. Under such circumstances it seems impossible to make an evaluation until one realizes that what is being purchased is not a specific “model” but the expertise and experience of the builder. When this is understood, the evaluation of different size instruments in different buildings makes sense. Evaluating the success of a builder with each instrument in its specific room will reveal the builder’s ability to work in differing situations and will lead to confidence that the builder will have success with your situation. A small instrument in a small church should fill that space and inspire the listener just as a large instrument does in a bigger space.

Many people on an organ committee will not have had any experience with listening to different organs and can be intimidated by the process, worrying that they do not have the knowledge or experience to recognize the difference between one instrument and another. Realizing that the human ear has the ability to judge infinite variations in sound is the first step in understanding that this is not an impossible task. Think, for example of the great number of people each of us knows and how each voice sounds different enough that we recognize the person immediately in a telephone conversation well before the person is identified by name. Hearing the first organ provides the basis for

comparison with the next so that once the second instrument is heard, differences become clear and, even though one might lack the technical organ terminology to describe the reasons for the difference, the comparison nevertheless becomes obvious.

In the present day, when we expect to be able to reduce everything to some form of quantitative analysis, subjective forms of evaluation are often pushed aside because they are viewed as being suspect or of lesser importance. This sometimes leads to dividing the number of pipes included in builders' proposals into the total cost in order to determine, supposedly, the best deal. One organist was overheard telling another "the reason we selected builder "X" was that we got more pipes for our money and therefore got more bang for our buck". One would suspect that the builder getting the contract undoubtedly would have been offended to hear that his instrument was judged by its "bang". Would the committee selecting the artist to design and construct the stained glass windows count the pieces of glass in the proposals to see where they got more for their money? It seems absurd to suggest this and yet too often the evaluation of an organ involves counting parts as a way of being "objective" about the choice of the builder. This type evaluation also places inordinate weight solely on the purchase price, which never represents the cost of ownership. It is important to remember that an object that costs the least to purchase often becomes quite expensive when it has to be repaired repeatedly or replaced prematurely because the lower price comes from lesser quality materials and minimal attention to appropriate construction practices.

### ***Evaluation: Materials & Workmanship***

In addition to auditioning various builders' instruments for their tonal qualities, it is important to research how well a builder's instruments have functioned over a long period of time. Look at the length of time the builder has been in existence and find out how many of the earlier instruments still exist. Make contact with a number of these churches to see what the instruments' service records have been over the years since they were installed. Workmanship and excellence of materials will play a very important part in the ability of an instrument to serve its intended purpose over many years. These elements have an important effect on the total cost of the organ and therefore the purchase price needs to be weighed against a builder's reputation and ability to show—through existing instruments—that the claim of quality is more than just advertising copy.

### ***Evaluation: Visual Design***

In observing organs in other churches it is important to remember that worship practices differ in other denominations—sometimes even within the same denomination—and therefore the placement and visual presence of the instrument within the building may be different from your own practices and preferences. What is important to note is how well the instrument is integrated into the architectural style and scale of the building. It should be in proportion and balance with the room in such a way that it looks as if the instrument and the building were conceived at the same time.

Obviously there are other important issues to be considered including the financial stability of the company and the builder's working relationships with clients. In the process of observing and judging all of the aspects of purchasing and owning a pipe organ, do not lose sight of the fact that an organ is first and foremost a musical instrument and the choice of which instrument to commission should be strongly influenced by musical issues.

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