

In the wind...

Sacred spaces

Several years ago the Organ Clearing House was assisting a colleague firm installing a large renovated organ in one of our country's great cathedrals. Halfway through the project we encountered a logistical issue requiring a hastily arranged conversation with the cathedral administration. We set up a dozen folding chairs encircling a large bronze medallion inlaid in the chancel floor, and sat there with legal pads on our laps working through the issue of the day. It was an intense and complicated conversation, but as colleagues and clients worked the problem, I was struck by the majesty of the place. The vaulted ceiling soared 120 feet above our heads. Surrounded by opulent carvings and priceless artworks, we were sitting in one of the grandest interior spaces ever built. A staccato comment, a laugh, even a cough reverberated almost endlessly. What a wonderful place for a meeting.

With the problem solved, we had a round of handshakes, a few quips, and we went back on the job with new marching orders. I was left with a strong sense of the privilege of working in such a place—sharing responsibility for the stewardship of the magnificent organ and all the other liturgical art that combines to make such a great space so special, so sacred.

When my kids were growing up, they teased me for navigating by steeples. I cared for dozens of organs in the Boston area, so if we ever lost our way in a strange neighborhood, I would catch sight of a distant steeple and head for it, knowing I'd soon be back on familiar turf. I still do that.

A lifetime of working in and around pipe organs has meant a lifetime of working in church buildings. They're not all as grand as that great cathedral, but most of them are wonderful in some way. Some are beautiful little antique buildings out in the country, some are big broad-shouldered affairs with Romanesque arches, some are stately, and while we can't deny that some are dowdy or even tacky, there's something special about sacred spaces.

Creepy corners

Once you've taken in the grandeur of the sanctuary, you're likely to find little shops of horrors when you go behind the scenes. Last week we were working in a large stone building with a heavily decorated interior. To the right of the classic Protestant Platform there's a door that leads to a little corridor that connects an outside door, sacristy, and restroom (complete with bible and hymnal!) to an awkward stairway that leads to the choir loft and a strange upstairs office. I

imagine that the architect didn't bother to draw in the stairs—he just provided a space with specified floor levels and expected the carpenter to fill in the blanks. It's as treacherous a passage as you'd care to find—a couple angled half-stairs filling in the odd spaces, and there's virtually no lighting. I imagine that plenty of choir members have stumbled there in the dark. It would never pass the scrutiny of a modern building inspector.

In older buildings we find hundred-year-old knob-and-tube electrical wiring still in use, hulking ancient carbon-smelling furnaces that have been converted from coal to gas, and thousand-pound bells hung in rickety wood frames directly above the pipe organ. One organ I cared for, now long replaced, was knocked out of tune every time they rang the bell. Another is plagued by the rainwater that comes down the bell rope.

Go inside the organ chamber and you find old gas light fixtures that predate Thomas Edison, even nineteenth-century batteries piled in a corner, left over from the days before Intelli-power, Astron, and Org-Electra rectifiers, even before belt-driven DC generators.

As Boston is America's earliest center of serious organbuilding, many instruments dating from before the Civil War are still in use in rural churches around New England. I've seen hundred-fifty-year-old candles snuggled in the tops of wood pipes, secured to the stoppers by the drip method, left from tuners of bygone eras. Imagine spending your time tuning by candlelight inside organs. How easy it would be to be distracted by a cell phone call or text message, and let the candle burn down, starting a fire in the chamber. Gives me the willies!

Many commercial and industrial buildings have purposeful departments that employ stationary engineers who plan and supervise the care of the machinery. When you have equipment such as elevators, furnaces, air conditioners, lighting controls, pumps, and pressure vessels, it makes sense to provide a maintenance budget and staff to ensure safe and reliable operation.

We find this style of operation in large and prosperous urban churches, but it's more usual to find that a church building and its operating equipment are maintained by a volunteer property committee. If a church member who lives down the street buys a new snow-blower, he'll be on the property committee before he can put down his gas can. It's wonderful to see the dedication of church members who volunteer to help run the place, but there is a time and a place for specific expertise, and the scale of the equipment found in a large church building is often greater than the skills of those who are responsible.



E. M. Skinner #692 (1928), West Medford Congregational Church, West Medford, MA



Looking down the ladder of E. & G. G. Hook & Hastings #646 (1872), St. Charles Borromeo RC, Woburn, MA

How many times has an organ tuner encountered a local custodian who simply doesn't understand how to operate the mighty boiler in the basement? Last week, in that church with the funky stairway, I asked the custodian to have the heat up for the two days I planned to spend tuning. He said it would be no problem—he'd just set the timer. When I showed up in the morning it was chilly in the sanctuary, so I tracked down the custodian. He scurried to the boiler room, emerging a few minutes later mumbling something about "daylight saving time." No question about it—he had no idea what he was doing. I know that because I've been tuning there for almost 30 years and he's been messing up the heat for longer than that.

The high-wire act

A large pipe organ is a magnificent structure. A beautiful architectural organ case often serves the function of a steeple—it carries one's eyes heavenward. There's a special sense of grandeur and spaciousness when you change keyboards between a Rückpositiv that stands on the floor of the balcony and the lofty Swell, or Oberwerk, 30 feet above. Walk around behind the organ and you'll find a spindly series of ladders and walkways worthy of the Flying Wallendas.

Fifteen years ago, I was curator of the Aeolian-Skinner organ in the First Church of Christ, Scientist (The Mother Church) in Boston—one of the world's great instruments. It has more than 12,000 pipes, about 240 ranks, including 41 reeds. It's three stories high—there's a full-length 32-foot stop in the Swell box. When walking across the top floor of the organ from Bombarde to Hauptwerk to Great, one is treated to a magnificent view of the auditorium that seats more than 3,000 people. As organs go, the structure is pretty sturdy, but there are some places where you have to step across some big holes.

There's a place on the top floor of the glorious Newberry Memorial organ in Woolsey Hall at Yale University where you have to hold your breath and leap through thin air. Across the top of that heroic façade you're actually looking down on the chandeliers! It reminds me of the scene in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, when Indiana is forced to lead the evil Donovan and Elsa across the abyss to the chamber that houses the Holy Grail. Led by the clues in his father's (Sean Connery) notebook, Indiana comes to a huge open space, closes his eyes, and trusting the notebook, leans forward to be miraculously supported by a bridge that appears as an optical illusion. Once he has drunk from the carpenter's cup, poured Holy Water on his father's gunshot wound, and failed to save Elsa who falls as the temple

collapses because she won't surrender the cup, he can go ahead and tune the Solo Trumpet, Trumpet Harmonique, and the Tuba Mirabilis on 25-inch wind. Next . . . next . . . next . . .

More than 30 years ago, I was working with my mentor on a renovation of a large organ in Cleveland. The access to the top of the organ was a tall vertical ladder nestled in sort of a four-sided chute formed by the ladder, two pipes of the 16-foot Open Wood Diapason, and the wall of the chamber—narrow enough to allow the trick of climbing down the ladder with my hands full, sliding my rump against the wall. But once, late on a Friday and eager to get on the road, I jumped onto the ladder with my hands full, missed my footing and shot straight down, landing hard on my feet.

I was young then. There was a jolt when I landed, but I gathered my senses, loaded the car, and drove home. My teeth stopped rattling a couple days later.

Safety in the workplace

In the summer of 2010, the International Society of Organbuilders and the American Institute of Organbuilders held a joint convention in Montreal. It was a treat to participate in such a large gathering of colleagues from around the world. We heard some spectacular organs and marvelous artists, and I was especially pleased to finally have a chance to visit the workshops of Casavant Frères in Saint-Hyacinthe, Quebec, where so many wonderful organs have been built across the turns of two centuries. It's another sort of hallowed space.

In one of the daily programs that took place in the hotel meeting rooms, I sat on a panel with several colleagues discussing pipe organ maintenance. Each of us had chosen a particular subject to address, with the moderator blending our presentations into an open discussion.

Mark Venning, then managing director of Harrison & Harrison of Durham, England, sat next to me on the panel. Harrison & Harrison has an impressive tour of organ maintenance that includes the care of their organs in Westminster Abbey in London, and King's College, Cambridge—to name a couple high points! (So they tuned for Will and Kate's wedding—remember the verger's cartwheel?) Mark chose to discuss safety inside pipe organs. He spoke about how the ladders and walkways that allow access to the interiors of many organs are often rickety and dangerous. He encouraged his fellow organbuilders to avoid taking unnecessary risks, even if it means insisting that your clients provide budgets for the construction of new and safer access.

Throughout the twentieth century, the modern labor movement has taken great strides emphasizing safety in the workplace. The first step was limiting the length of the workday so people in reasonably good health can still be alert and focused in the later hours of the day. We have safety guards on machines, safety glasses, hearing protection, fire and smoke alarms, eyewash stations, steel-toed boots,

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and rubber floor mats to limit fatigue in feet, legs, and back. In fact, sometimes all the safety equipment gets in the way. If I had a nickel for each time my safety glasses have fogged up while running the table saw I'd have a lot of nickels.

Most modern organbuilders take great care to construct safe access to all areas and components of their instruments. Sturdy ladders hang from steel hooks so they cannot slip. Walkboards have handrails. But a century ago, no such standards were in place. If a candle was all you had for lighting, your attitude toward fire protection would be looser than what we're used to today. A simple ladder might lean against the large wood pipes at the back of the organ for access to an upper-level Swell box, providing that you could clamber off the top of the ladder and climb up the pipes as if they were stairs. That all might have been okay when the organ was new, but add 140 years to the story and things might have gotten a little rickety.

We care for an instrument in Boston that was built in the early 1970s, with a snazzy contemporary case that gives a modern interpretation of the classic *Werkprinzip* concept. The lowest keyboard plays the Rückpositiv, located on the edge of the balcony behind the organist. The top keyboard plays the Swell, which is behind shutters just above the keydesk. And the middle keyboard plays the Great, located above the Swell. The Pedal is in a separate free-standing case. When you walk behind the main case, you see a ladder fastened to a concrete wall on which you can climb to two walkboards. The first, about five feet up, allows access to doors that open to expose the tracker action and pallet boxes of the Great. Climb up another story to the walkboard from which you tune the Great. Let's guess it's twelve feet up, about the height of a usual balcony rail. When you first get on, it seems wide enough—maybe two feet. But, there's no railing. Move around up there, opening and closing the wide access doors, sitting for hours tuning the Mixture that's buried behind two reeds, and you realize that it would be mighty easy to miss concentration and step off the edge.

And—the entire case is coated with gray semi-gloss paint with a fine surface. The dust that collects on that painted walkboard feels like ball bearings under your feet. Are you risking your life to tune a Trumpet?

I started this ramble thinking of the awe-inspiring buildings in which we work, and it follows that sometimes we are working up against priceless fixtures. In that same great cathedral, we build a studs-and-plywood house around the ten-ton, 40-saint marble pulpit so there would be no chance of dinging a carved nose with a Violone pipe. Years ago, my first wife Pat was working on our crew as we dismantled a large organ for re-leathering. Suddenly she announced that she finally understood organbuilding: "Organbuilding is carrying long, heavy, dirty, unbalanced things with lots of sharp stuff poking out of them, down rickety ladders, past Tiffany windows!"

A little rule that's common among organbuilders says that you pay attention to each step you take, especially if you're not familiar with the organ, and especially if the organ is old. You really can't assume that the guy who hung that ladder in 1897 was thinking about you in 2013, or that he really knew what he was doing in the first place. He had never heard of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

Friday morning, my colleague Joshua Wood and I went to do a service call on

a 130-year-old organ near home. The organist had noted that there was a cipher in the bass octave of the Great, so I took a couple tools and climbed to the walkboard. Josh poked around the notes and we found that several were ciphering. Because they were chromatic neighbors I guessed that it might be the adjustment of the big action rail that was causing the cipher. I retraced my steps to the ladder and stepped out on the two-by-four-ish beam on which it was leaning. I heard a loud crack, a series of rattles, and a heavy thump. The thump was me, landing flat on my back after a six-foot drop. I was Galileo's cannonball.

I am no longer young. If it's middle age, I guess I'll live past 110. (The next day was my birthday.) Breath came back slowly, but pain was prompt.

I lay on the walkboard that covers the pedal tracker action—thank goodness that held—for twenty minutes or so. Before trying to stand, I wondered if we'd need to call for help, but strangely, I thought of the organ. We've all seen the teams of firefighters and EMTs arriving at a scene, big swarthy guys in steel-toed boots with

40 pounds of tools hanging off their belts. No way should they come pounding into that sweet antique organ. So with Josh's support, and perhaps foolishly, I found my feet, left the organ, and lay on the floor of the choir risers until the friendly crew arrived. Funny, turned out that two of them had grown up in that church.

Wendy joined me in the emergency room for a lengthy day of poking, waiting, prodding, waiting, wondering. I got off with a titanium brace, a cracked vertebra, bruises, strained muscles, and a potent prescription. As I write now, I'm waiting for the clinic to call to give me an appointment for follow-up with the spine guy. I'm hurt, but I got off easy. The auto mechanic two beds over? Not so much. He caught his hoodie in the turning driveshaft of a car he was working on, was flown by helicopter from Cape Cod to Boston, and was being rushed into surgery to correct his broken neck. Woof. I'll be fine. ■

Note

1. The Skinner Organ Company instrument in West Medford, Massachusetts (Opus 692) was installed in 1928 by a team from the

factory in Dorchester that included a 24-year-old Jason McKown. I met Jason in 1984 (he was eighty!) when I succeeded him as curator of the organs at Trinity Church, Copley Square and the First Church of Christ, Scientist (the Mother Church). Jason had cared for the Trinity Church organ for 50 years, and the Mother Church organ since it was installed in 1952. He subsequently introduced me to many other churches, including that in West Medford. He told me that Mr. Skinner had personally worked on the installation of that organ. I took over its maintenance in 1984—there have been only two technicians caring for that organ for over 85 years.

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