

ELECTRONIC ORGANS

January 21, 2010

[Electronic organs \(1\)](#)

Most new parish organs are now electronic. The great days when a pipe organ was automatically part of any new church are long gone. Electronic organs can be really useful and sound well, if they are carefully chosen with regard to both the instrument itself and the church where it will be played.

However, these instruments come in all shapes and sizes, with endless sounds and gadgetry, and it is not surprising that the average organist, let alone the average parish priest, often just doesn't know where to start when working out the best one to buy. Here are a few hints:

WHAT DOES IT SOUND LIKE?

Quality of sound is by far the most important thing, and you don't need to be an electronics expert to judge it. If it doesn't sound good, don't buy it. Sound quality and price don't necessarily go together. Even different organs from the same maker may vary in sound quality. You *have* to try before you buy.

SHOP AROUND

There are a number of manufacturers and suppliers of good electronic organs, but not all of them have local showrooms. Nevertheless, they'll all be anxious to sell to you, so they'll happily tell you which churches have their organs installed. This can give you the advantage of a chat with the church organist, who'll tell you how he or she is getting on with the instrument. And you also hear the organ in its natural setting, a church. A local supplier may offer to install an organ in your own church temporarily for you to try out. This is an excellent way to judge the instrument, but it sometimes carries with it a feeling of moral obligation to buy. If the organ isn't right for you, resist this feeling; the supplier will understand.

THEIR LIFE IS LIMITED

Unlike pipe organs, which can go on for a century and more (the one I play was built in 1874), electronic organs can wear out after a decade or two, although this can vary considerably according to usage and the manufacturer's ability to supply spare parts. Advancing technology can also have an effect on a maker's policy towards earlier models. The crunch comes when parts are no longer obtainable. This is a particularly important consideration when buying an expensive model; it's worth finding out what kind of *pipe*

organ could be built for the same money. And this factor should also be taken into account if you are thinking of buying a second-hand instrument.

THE CHURCH ENVIRONMENT MUST BE CONSIDERED

The size and shape of the church, and the resonance of its acoustic, are factors that must be taken into account. Is amplification required?

HOW MUCH GADGETRY IS NEEDED?

Don't pay for a lot of things that you know you will never use, such as automatic rhythms, recording devices or a multitude of orchestral voices. Enquire if there is a simpler model. There usually is if you dig deep enough, and it will be a lot, lot cheaper.

Future posts on this subject will look at the basic needs of the average parish in terms of organ sounds. Also, ways to test out the organ you are thinking of buying. In the meantime, I'd like to draw your attention to that excellent booklet, *Church Organs*, produced by the Church of Scotland. It is downloadable from the SFO website. Go to [Scottish Federation of Organists](#) and scroll down the page to the section headed 'The Organ Advice Committee'

And remember, the first and over-riding consideration is the quality of the sound.

January 28, 2010

[Electronic organs \(2\)](#)

Bride (looking at organ console): Ooh, isn't it complicated!

Groom: 'Diapason'? I thought that was American for a baby's nappy.

Bride: How on earth do you know what to do with all these things with funny names?

Me (modestly): Oh well, it isn't too bad once you get used to it.

OK, maybe I was basking in a bit of jargon-glory, and implying by my demeanour that playing 'Here comes the bride' is a skill which needs years of study at some conservatoire added to a high degree of natural musical ability. You have to do this with brides sometimes to get any sort of respect.

But I said was actually true. Once you get used to what the names and numbers on the stops mean, you know what they should sound like, both in isolation and combined. And when you're investigating a new electronic organ with a view to buying it, this is information you need.

More on this in another post. But in the meantime, the following chart of stop 'families' is worth having a look at. Compiled by Robin Bell for a SCOTS* training day in 2000, it has been in use ever since, and Robin has kindly given permission for me to include it here.

Please note: a larger version of the chart is given at www.forthinpraise.co.uk/organ.php

**SCOTS is the Scottish Churches Organist Training Scheme, of which Robin is the Administrator.*

STOP NAMES

DIAPASONS	FLUTES	REEDS & STRINGS	MIXTURES	MUTATIONS
<p>the name given to the fattest, loudest and most important organ tone;</p> <p>the nearest equivalent in Germany is <i>principal</i> and in France, <i>montre</i>;</p> <p>found in families or <i>choruses</i> of 32'. 16' 8' 4' and 2';</p> <p>note that the <i>stopped diapason</i> is in fact a flute stop;</p> <p>the term <i>octave</i> and <i>prestant</i> may also signify diapason tone</p>	<p>similar in tone to the orchestral flute;</p> <p>to be found in various tone colours and all octaves;</p>	<p>intended to initiate orchestral instruments;</p> <p>useful as solo stops;</p> <p>can add volume and richness;</p> <p>in reeds, the sound is produced by air blowing across a metal tongue, causing it to vibrate</p>	<p>a bank of high-pitched pipes connected to one note on the keyboard;</p> <p>referred to as a <i>rank</i>, hence <i>three-rank mixture</i> = three pipes for every single note played;</p> <p>adds brilliance and glitter to the sound;</p> <p>usually adds octaves and fifths above the note played</p>	<p>high-pitched stops which play a note a fixed distance from the note played;</p> <p>e.g. <i>tierce</i> which sounds two octaves and a third higher than written;</p> <p>adds colour to a solo line</p>
<p>Examples:</p> <p><i>Open diapason</i> 16'</p> <p><i>Open diapason</i> 8'</p> <p><i>Principal</i> 4'</p> <p><i>Prestant</i> 4'</p> <p><i>Octave</i> 2'</p> <p><i>Fifteenth</i> 2'</p> <p><i>Dulciana</i> 8'</p> <p>(a very quiet diapason, sometimes with string tone)</p> <p><i>Geigen diapason</i> 8'</p> <p>(a diapason with a stringy tone)</p>	<p>Examples:</p> <p><i>Bourdon</i> 16'</p> <p><i>Stopped Diapson</i> 8'</p> <p><i>Gedeckt</i> 8'</p> <p><i>Liebtlich</i> 8'</p> <p><i>Spitzflöte</i> 8'</p> <p><i>Hohflöte</i> 8'</p> <p><i>Clarrabella</i> 8'</p> <p><i>Waldflöte</i> 4'</p> <p><i>Recorder</i> 2'</p> <p><i>Gemshorn</i> 4'</p> <p>(usually found on the Swell)</p>	<p>Examples:</p> <p>REEDS:</p> <p><i>Bassoon</i> 16' (<i>Fagotto</i> 16')</p> <p><i>Cornopean</i> 8'</p> <p><i>Oboe</i> 8'</p> <p><i>Clarinet</i> 8'</p> <p><i>Cromhome</i> 8'</p> <p><i>Trumpet</i> 8'</p> <p><i>Clarrion</i> 4'</p> <p><i>Taba</i> 8'</p> <p><i>Posaune</i> 16'</p> <p><i>Bombarde</i> 32'</p> <p>STRINGS:</p> <p><i>Gamba</i> 8'</p> <p><i>Salicional</i> 8'</p> <p><i>Violine</i> 16'</p>	<p>Examples:</p> <p><i>Mixture, Fourniture, Gymbale</i></p> <p><i>Cornet</i></p> <p>(unison, octave, octave and a fifth, two octaves, two octaves and a third)</p> <p><i>Sesquialtera</i></p> <p>(a two-rank stop which sounds notes higher by an octave and a fifth, and two octaves and a third)</p> <p><i>Voix celeste/Unda maris</i></p> <p>(a two-rank stop of string tone, one rank tuned slightly sharp to produce a tremolo effect)</p>	<p>Examples:</p> <p><i>Tierce</i> 1³/₅'</p> <p><i>Twelfth</i> 2²/₃'</p> <p>(sounds an octave and a fifth higher)</p> <p><i>Larigor</i> 1¹/₃'</p> <p>(sounds two octaves and a fifth higher)</p>

March 3, 2010

Pianists (3) Electronic organs (3)

(Same message as before to experienced organists)

Following from last week's post, here are some photographs of organ stop groups. See how quickly you can spot the diapasons and the flutes.

The first one is from a very straightforward pipe organ (the Salicional is a string stop, and the Twelfth a mutation).



Next, part of an electronic.



Diapasons 8', 4' and 2' are there, but the word 'diapason' doesn't appear at all. Note the consecutive numbers running across the top of the stops. These can be helpful if you just want to note a setting without thinking it through, but you don't learn anything from them. The important numbers are the 16, 8, 4 and 2 at the bottom. Also note the 'II/I', second from the right. This is a coupler.

If you are in a showroom trying to assess the potential of an electronic organ, it's a good idea to take with you

- one or two rousing hymns
- something more thoughtful like 'Dear Lord and Father of Mankind'
- a quiet voluntary
- a strong recessional voluntary
- the SCOTS chart of organ stops (see above).

Always check out the diapasons and flutes first. If their sound isn't right for what you want in your church, go no further and turn to the next instrument. If the sound *is* OK, have a look at the other stops – reeds, mutations and mixtures – which we haven't gone into, using the chart. Try reeds such as Trumpet or Oboe as solo stops against, say, flutes on the other manual. Listen to the string stops. Try each mutation and mixture on top of one or more basic hymn or voluntary settings. Test out the couplers.

Lastly, as I've said before, avoid unnecessary gadgetry. What you *don't* need are automatic rhythms, non-organ voices (e.g. orchestral or jazz), recording facilities or any other similar gizmos. They don't help in mainstream church services, and they add to the price, sometimes quite considerably. There is usually a much simpler model, and if the supplier hasn't got one in stock for you to try, it is worth either waiting until he has, or finding out which local church has one installed and asking to try it.

And finally, just to demonstrate that nothing changes, here are the Great and Pedal stops of my own 1874 instrument, which is not a large one. The Gamba is a string stop, and the Bourdon is the only Pedal stop. But diapasons and flutes are all present and correct.

