

The following article was written for the dedication story of our new organ at Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church in St. Louis, Missouri. It appears in the January, 2015 issue of The American Organist.

Mid-America to North Germany and Back

**By
Jack Bethards**

“A dignified and churchly ensemble” described Ladue Chapel’s new Kilgen organ in the December, 1951 dedication program. This was a special year for the St. Louis organ firm – their centennial. Famous author, consultant and organist, Dr. William H. Barnes, was the recitalist. Solo repertoire, although featured on the opening program, was clearly of minor importance in the full scheme of the church music program. This was a church organ.

Not too many years later, church organists were being advised by the academic community that they were being short-changed with instruments that were caricatures – not much better than theatre organs. The great organ solo repertoire, they said, was being either ignored or butchered in churches. After all, no one makes special pianos for churches nor violins, flutes and other instruments. Shouldn’t the organ be made properly to accommodate its own music? Certainly any organ capable of playing the great masters should be able to accompany. Accompaniment became a secondary consideration if any at all.

By 1970, the pressure to install “proper” organs in churches was great and Ladue Chapel went full steam ahead with a mechanical action organ of 40 stops, 59 ranks from Werner Bosch Orgelbau of Kassel, West Germany. This organ was special for its builder just as the Kilgen was. It was number 500 and called the “Jubilee” organ. The program description boasted that it would play “organ music from all periods, from Baroque and the majestic music of Bach to the twentieth century rhythms of Bernstein”. This instrument was the quintessential modern interpretation of the North German Baroque style. As time went on the “dignified and churchly” tone of the old Kilgen was missed more and more.

Over the years this organ went through major changes twice in an effort to increase its versatility for the continually growing music program. Finally by 2013, it was decided that further attempts at change would be unproductive and that a new organ should be built that had “churchly and dignified” tone, but was also large enough to be capable of giving a reasonable account of the wide range of solo repertoire. Once again accompaniment was first, repertoire was second in line but not quite as far back as in 1951.

We believe that there is such a thing as a church organ – an instrument specialized for church use where accompaniment takes precedence. For a small instrument this means tough choices, for example leaving out a mixture in favor of a *mezzo forte* 8' voice such as a string celeste. In a larger instrument it means adding things over and above what is required for basic repertoire such as specialty color reeds, one or even two “extra” celestes and a commanding solo reed such as a Tuba. It means having more of the organ, in fact as much as possible, under expression. All these “additions” are unnecessary for the repertoire-specific organ, therefore it could be said that

the church organ is a much more complex instrument since it must produce a wide dynamic range, an exceptional variety of tonal color and also great power when needed to accompany a large congregation. In addition to musical accompaniment, much of which is transcribed, a church organ is sometimes called upon for improvised accompaniment of the “dramatic action” of the service. The church organ must be a nimble vehicle for the creative organist.

Most important of all, a church organ must have the ability to capture and hold the interest of listeners and musicians over a long period of time. The church organ is perhaps the only instrument that is heard by and played by the same people week after week, year after year and sometimes generation after generation. If it doesn't have enough variety and the ability to make a strong emotional connection, to celebrate joy, to comfort in grief, it is a failure. The church organ has a heavy musical job to accomplish and its most important characteristics are its versatility and beauty.

If an organ has these qualities, shouldn't it be able to render the solo repertoire as well? There is no hope of such an organ playing any branch of the repertoire with absolute authenticity, that is with the sounds that were envisioned by the composer, but it is certainly possible for it to render the scores musically if it has the proper tonal architecture. By that I mean the traditional distribution of tonal families in each division at the appropriate pitches – the organ's “instrumentation”. I make the comparison with the symphony orchestra. Certainly a large orchestra in a large hall with modern instruments cannot play Mozart or Beethoven with the authenticity that can be captured by a specialized early music ensemble, but it can render a musically satisfying performance because its instrumentation fits that of the score. The same certainly can be true in the world of the organ. In the church setting, authentic performance practice is not a requirement – the ability to accompany the services, render solos musically, and project “dignified and churchly” tone are.

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