

A Case in Point...

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Have you ever walked into a building with an organ and been impressed by a stunning organ case, only to be disappointed by the sound?

How much does the impression given by the case affect our perception of an organ's sound? I recently had opportunity to do some listener testing to begin to answer those and similar questions that many organ-lovers must have asked.

For my PhD (still underway at present) I needed to gather some adjectives describing the sound of a pipe organ. I made recordings of the same piece of music played on four different organs in York, and asked volunteers gathered across the internet to visit a webpage, listen to the organs, and describe each one. I picked out the most common words, and am currently studying them in more detail, but that's outside the realm of this article.

Each recording of an organ was accompanied by a photograph. What the volunteers didn't know was that the photographs were not necessarily of the organ they were listening to. Each combinat-

ion had about twenty volunteers commenting on it, sufficient to average out personal bias. The results make interesting reading.

The organ in the Jack Lyons Concert Hall at the University of York is a 1969 neo-baroque instrument by Grant, Degens and Bradbeer. As its Mixture V is very powerful, I opted for a registration of Principal 8', Octave 4' and Flachfloete 2'. When people heard it along with its own picture, they commented on its flutey but lively chorus and attractive case – not all liked it, but as neo-baroque instruments go, most thought it gave a good account of itself.

When the sound of the Jack Lyons organ was combined with a picture of St Chad's, again it received mostly positive comments. People commented that it had less fundamental than expected, but was on the whole good. Throughout the experiment, attempts were often made to guess the

registrations used, and here when that happened the stops guessed were within the terminology that might be expected of a romantic early 20th century instrument.

Finally, the Jack Lyons instrument was combined with picture of Heslington. Opinion was divided as to whether it was flutey, insubstantial and disappointing, or a small-scale and sweet sound. Intriguingly, several people specifically commented here that the sound was not neo-baroque – some even thought it Romantic. None thought that the organ and picture were unrelated.

The organ in St. Columba's URC is a small two manual Lewis & Co. of 1907, the only upperwork being a 2' in the Swell. Listeners thought that the sound was modest compared to visual impact of case, and that the rich sounding pleno was on the whole english and romantic, with nothing unusual. When combined with the



picture of St. Chad's, again, the overall impression was that there was nothing special, but here there was a lot of "noise", or variation of opinion, with one person saying "dominated by upperwork", and another saying "not enough upperwork".

The organ in St. Chad's is only a decade older than that in St. Columba's, but is in a much older idiom, with fully developed choruses including tierce mixtures in a reverberant acoustic. Most people liked its sound, with one person commenting that it sounded older than the pipe-rack case. When it was combined with a picture of St. Columba's, many listeners sensed something was wrong, and didn't believe that the picture and recording were of the same instrument. A minority of listeners were also more critical, commenting on too much reverberation.

When the sound of St. Chad's, was combined with pictures of the Jack Lyons organ, things got even more interesting. People commented on a contemporary, Baroque revival sound – some were pleasantly surprised by the lack of chuff, but some even thought there was too much upperwork. Perhaps



surprisingly, no-one commented on the acoustic being inappropriate for the picture. One person even identified it as a Grant Degens and Bradbeer from the

photograph, but did not think that the sound was inappropriate for that. Many people thought that the case-work and sound went well together.

In the real world, organ cases do not always accurately reflect their contents. Heslington Parish Church is one of these: an 1888 Forster and Andrews, which on installation in 1974 had the usual addition of mixtures and gained a new case. People consistently liked its clear tone, but several shortcomings were identified. A few listeners also correctly identified the older chorus hiding behind the modern facade.

Combined with the picture of St. Columba's, remarks were similar, apart from a few very negative comments. A lot of people didn't think the case and organ matched. Yet when it was combined with a picture of the Jack Lyons case, people really liked its bright and clear sound. One listener commented "Clearly American", another identified it as North German, and another commented "Thanks be to God we have such builders!"

Clearly the case is important in preparing people's expectations of what an organ should sound like, although the results are sometimes unexpected. From this limited sample, it could be concluded that the organ people want to hear is one with the visual impact of a neo-Baroque instrument, but a more traditional, well-developed and supported chorus



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It seems that a perceived mismatch between sound and casework provokes people to find faults with the sound that in other cases would be described as "character" – perhaps unwittingly. There is also the possibility that those talking of a "neo-baroque sound" were influenced more directly by the case. However, the experiment specifically asked listeners to describe the sound, not the organ, and in all cases they were talking in the con-

text of sound quality, not appearance, so it seems that the reasons behind it may be more subtle.

Any such experiment has limitations, but I hope others will take this forwards. One side-issue that became apparent was that judging casework is not always easy from a picture – a few comments during the experiment pointed to occasional volunteers grossly misjudging casework size, in both ways.

