

Taking the Organ to the Public: THE SHOPPING MALL

BY CARL B. DODRILL

Have you wondered how many people personally hear a pipe organ even once a year? While none of us know the answer to this question, all of us would say, "Not nearly enough!" Most pipe organs are in churches, but most people are not. A few hear organs in pizza parlors and concert halls. If we do not do something to bring the organ to the public, most people may never hear a decent organ, pipe or electronic.

Our recent past-president, John Walker, raised a possible answer to this dilemma by suggesting that we take the organ *to* the people instead of waiting for them to come to it. He specifically mentioned airports, train stations, and shopping malls, but he admitted to difficulties in transporting organs to such places. Finally, he asked for "creative visions" to "promote the organ widely throughout our society." The present report is of one chapter's effort to bring the organ to the public. It is written with the hope that other chapters will undertake similar programs.

Getting the Project Started

I was dean of the Seattle chapter when we brought the "organ in the mall" idea to a chapter board meeting in May 2015. With informal support, I presented it to the membership the next month at a chapter meeting and asked for volunteers. Eight volunteered to serve on an Organ in the Mall committee. When it was later evident that the project was truly workable, the board formally approved it with a budget of \$400. In retrospect, these steps of gaining support from the chapter board and chapter members were essential for the ultimate success of the project.

Selecting Sites, Dates, and Times

While we know that only a fraction of the population attends a church or synagogue, nearly everyone goes to a shopping mall. Therefore, we selected the mall as the ideal place to bring the organ to the public. Initially we did not know whom

for several reasons, not the least of which was that the malls are heavily occupied with shoppers. We were fortunate in that we were able to schedule the first mall for a Saturday (December 19, 11 A.M.–4 P.M.) and the second mall for the next day (1:30–6 P.M.) as this facilitated the transport of the organ. The first was the Factoria MarketPlace Mall located just east of Seattle; the second was the Crossroads Mall located east of Bellevue, Wash.

Both malls had places for us to perform with high visibility but that did not interfere with merchants. We placed a large placard on an easel near the organ that read, "Music Provided by the American Guild of Organists, Seattle Chapter."

The Organ

In 1999, Marceau and Associates Pipe Organ Builders built a portative pipe organ for our chapter and the PipeWorks educational program. It is a tracker-action instrument with three stops: 8' Holz Gedekkt, 4' Spire Flute, and 2' Principal. It has a four-octave (49-note) keyboard and a two-octave (25-note) pedalboard. The organ can transpose to play in standard pitch (A=440) or low pitch (A=415). It is equipped with an electric blower; it can also be hand-pumped. At 78 inches in height, it is designed to fit through a standard door. It has built-in handles and the top is typically removed and placed upon a custom-made dolly for transport.

This organ proved to be ideal for the mall setting. It easily attracted attention and interest, it was loud enough but not so loud as to be a problem either to merchants or to other events in the mall that included photographs with Santa Claus about 75 feet away in one mall. The organ was hauled in a rented covered



Will and Erin Simpson perform holiday music at Factoria MarketPlace, Bellevue, Wash.

to approach in the shopping mall administration for entry, but we ultimately learned that it was typically the marketing director. We approached six shopping malls in the greater Seattle area, got favorable responses from two, a refusal from one, and no responses from three. We went to the two malls that accepted us with a "no funds exchanged" arrangement, i.e., we did not have to pay nor did they not have to pay us for entertaining the shoppers.

We selected the Christmas holiday season



David Nichols and Sharon Nichols presented interesting organ-plus music

trailer from one place to the next. The most difficult aspect of the procedure was lifting the top off the bottom, which required four lifters as the weight of the top part containing all the pipes (including those of lead) exceeded 400 pounds. The pipes were designed with tuning mechanisms resistant to jostling and as a result the organ can be moved a number of times before touch-up tuning is required.

The Organists and the Music

An invitation to play was extended to all members of the chapter and 30-minute time slots were offered. Twelve chapter members volunteered to play. As there were 19 slots available, some took 60-minute blocks so that the organ was played almost continuously for 9½ hours in the two malls on the two days.

Organists were encouraged to select holiday music familiar to the general public. Christmas carols and popular tunes of the season (e.g., "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer," "Winter Wonderland," "Frosty the Snowman") were selected by each organist. Some played from the *Readers' Digest Christmas Carol Book*. Organ-plus music was encouraged, and four organists invited other musicians to accompany on the organ for part of their time slots, including vocalists, a flutist, a violinist, and even a small children's choir of eight voices.

Responses to the Event

The organists said they felt especially gratified, even energized, after their playing. They thought it was truly rewarding and well worth the time involved, even if it added to their already-busy season.

The public offered a number of spontaneous comments that were extremely positive. It was common that cell phones were used by the audience to record some of the playing. Children were especially intrigued and sometimes came to the bench during the playing or danced in the aisles to the music.

The malls were also very positive and both extended invitations to return the following year.

Comments and Thoughts for Other Chapters

One can only view this event as having been extremely successful in reaching the public in a delightful and "just plain fun" way. The inclusion of other musicians with the organ (especially children) proved to be very appealing and attention-getting. While some of our chapter members could not participate due to heavy music schedules at this time of year, it seems likely that some of these people will make this event a priority in the future.

The total monetary cost to the chapter was just \$118 (trailer rental, gasoline, cost of placard on easel next to the organ). In terms of effort, the malls had to be con-

tacted and visited in order to secure permission, locate performance sites and routes for easy entry and exit of the organ. The event had to be organized and advertised to chapter members in the chapter newsletter, and the organists had to be scheduled. Also, a monitor was appointed for each mall who greeted each player, gave them any necessary information, and assured a smooth transition from one organist to the next on schedule. Having a member take pictures was extremely important. Probably the most difficult thing about the event was moving the organ from one place to the next. Nearly all of these tasks were taken on by our committee with no complaints. We view the event as extremely successful and we definitely urge other chapters to consider a similar event as an effective way to reach the public with the organ.

Carl B. Dodrill is past dean of the Seattle chapter and president of the Pipe Organ Foundation. His work has focused on encouraging young people's interest in organ and also on making the pipe organ appealing to and available to people in the general population. He can be reached at carl@dodrill.net.

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