

Acquiring a Church Organ at Streetsville United Church - 2002

The receipt of a significant donation in the summer of 2002 triggered a series of events that, within five months, resulted in the execution of a contract for the acquisition of a new organ to replace one which had become somewhat unreliable and expensive to repair – when spare parts could be located. Furthermore, it turns out the acquisition or rebuilding an organ is one of the highest value purchases most churches will make, beyond the basic church structure itself.



This document provides a brief overview of the entire acquisition process, including: issues we faced, determining options, generating congregational acceptance for what amounts to a relatively new technology in some respects and obtaining congregational approval to acquire an organ that will provide much more versatility and reliability. The bottom line is that we feel we have made an acquisition that will make, with relatively low financial outlay, a significant enhancement to our worship accompaniment and inspire new directions for our music ministry.

Founded in 1821, Streetsville United Church has been serving the Streetsville community as a Methodist Church to Church Union in 1926 when it became a member of the United Church of Canada. At the turn of the millennium our ministry took many forms:

- Nurturing and spreading our belief through public worship lead by our ministers and choir
- Caring for those within the fellowship through a variety of programs that generate Christian fellowship
- Offering a spiritual oasis for many different kinds of people with a common need for uncompromising faith.
- Reaching out to the extended community through an Outreach program in support of both local and worldwide missions
- A dedicated Youth Ministry program

The receipt of an unsolicited donation for an organ in the summer of 2002 challenged us to rethink our ministries and the role of music, and specifically an organ, within our congregational life:

- Our current organ was unreliable, creating great frustration for our choir

- We had just acquired a new concert grade piano for the sanctuary
- We had three bands providing weekly evangelical musical leadership in our worship services
- A majority of members felt very strongly that a reliable organ was needed to continue to play an inspirational role in worship and other activities.
- We could probably spend in total up to \$125,000 without severely encumbering our other activities.

Our Musical Heritage

Records of the presence of an instrument to accompany our music ministry date back to 1848. When the congregation moved to the current site in 1876, the original Melodeon was found to be “nowhere near loud enough” for the size of the new sanctuary. However, it was 1891 before a replacement was purchased for the grand total of \$287.50 only after the ladies had agreed to raise most of the cost.



The current organ's origins go back to 1920; it has been modified, expanded, moved and generally upgraded about every twenty years subsequently. The current organ, installed in 1960 and upgraded in 1980, by Keates Organs of Acton, Ontario, has 2 manuals along with a pedal board, 825 pipes, 21 stops and 13 ranks. In 1995 we established an Organ Fund to set aside funds for regular organ maintenance.

However, in 1998 the Worship Committee was advised that parts were becoming either very expensive or unavailable and the next major refit would have a cost well into six figures. The organ was periodically showing signs of unresponsiveness to the organist's keystrokes; it was becoming somewhat unreliable with its unique and sometimes uncontrollable whistles. Furthermore it appeared that the most recent supplier of services had gone out of business¹.

Triggering the Search for a New Organ

In the summer of 2002 we received an unsolicited donation for a new organ; this donation triggered the formation of an organ committee to search out and recommend a replacement. Furthermore our donor had offered to supply additional funds up to 80% of the cost (including installation and choir loft modifications) provided the church raise the balance (the cofunding).

The Organ Committee established the following objectives:

- To maintain or enhance the traditional pipe organ sound of the current installation, taking into account the sanctuary acoustics
- To determine a configuration that would be reliable and robust with minimum future maintenance costs
- To determine any musical enhancements available while not seriously impacting costs
- To minimize changes to the current physical structure and appearance of the sanctuary
- To seek out any flexibility available to adapt to changing musical tastes and requirements
- Bottom Line: to find and recommend a solution that provided authentic pipe organ sounds capable of providing the inspiring music associated with a traditional pipe organ while serving as appropriate primary accompaniment for our church worship services and other aspects of our music ministry.

¹ We later found the business had been acquired in a merger and moved to another town.

The committee researched three options with the associated costs:

- The repair to and/or the replacement of parts and components of our current organ such as to restore the current instrument to a reliable performance level.
- The repair and/or replacement of appropriate pipe organ parts and accessories with appropriate electronic organ components such as to restore/create an instrument similar to the current installation while producing a good quality sound at a reliable performance level.
- The replacement of our current pipe organ with a digital pipe organ, capable of producing an authentic pipe organ sound at a reliable performance level with minimal change to the current physical structure and appearance of the sanctuary.

The Findings

We requested assessments of our current organ and potential replacement recommendations from two suppliers. Our committee's research into the organ market found:

- The cost of a pipe organ would be roughly C\$12,000 per rank; our current organ had approximately 13 ranks with 21 stops across 825 pipes.
- A digital pipe organ using the latest digital sound sampling technology could provide about 50 ranks² with an equal number of stops, effectively having the flexibility of an organ with ~3100 pipes.
- The sound experienced by the listener is a combination of the organ itself and the

² Note that one traditional pipe organ manufacturer recommends allowing an average 10 sq. ft. per additional rank – a 300 to 400 sq. ft. area for 30 to 40 additional ranks is simply not physically available within our structure.

acoustical characteristics of the sanctuary or hall within which it is installed.

- It is possible and feasible to maintain the full look and feel of operating a conventional pipe organ from a traditional console with familiar responses to the various operating actions.
- Recently developed (1998 and later) digital technology³ made it possible to have a full organ console with authentic organ pipe sound reproduction for under \$100,000.
- Such an organ would also provide:
 - Multiple “Voicings” (or organ styles); choices⁴ included English, Baroque, French, etc.
 - A wide range of orchestral and keyboard instrument sounds
 - An industry standard MIDI interface for remote or unattended operation
 - Flexibility to incorporate additional “Voicings” or to modify the initially installed Voicings
 - Potential to become a hybrid organ, combining generation of the digitally generated sounds with those of traditional pipe organ ranks.
- Any “replacement” installations had managed to install the speakers within the existing pipe chambers, sometimes supplemented by a new, physically remote, location for, say, the Choir speakers.
- The physical space available for a console would limit us to a console with approximately 50 stops.

³ A combination of faster microprocessors and much lower cost memory chips developed during the 1990's were as critical to this as the quantum improvements in the actual process of recording and reproducing sound samples.

⁴ Actually English, French, German, Baroque, American, Romantic were amongst the choices available.



At the end of the assessment phase there was such an apparent difference in quality, technology developments and feature sets that we decided to proceed further with only one vendor, Phoenix Organs. Other features that we found worth considering included:

- Most importantly: to the organist, it must look, play and respond like a conventional pipe organ; the organist should be able to just walk up to the console and feel comfortable playing
- It is necessary to hear reference organs in their installed setting; if possible, during a service or other event that incorporates the presence of a congregation or an audience
- Speakers should be distributed across the sanctuary or hall to further enhance the true pipe organ experience of distributed sound sources. There should be an independent set of speakers for each manual and the pedal keyboard.
- The digital processing system must not only produce individual notes but also take into account the “wind” dynamics of a traditional pipe organ, including the rise and fall of the notes and swell effects.
- At one church the minister commented that, with the arrival of their new organ, congregational singing has been “raised to new heights”.

Issues and Concerns Raised and Addressed

The one major concern initially raised was the ability of a digital pipe organ to deliver authentic pipe organ sound reproduction. Phoenix is quickly becoming recognized as having achieved this for the following reasons:

- In the evaluations, all agreed there was no discernable difference between the sound of the Phoenix organ and that of a pipe organ.
- Their digital sampling technology involves significantly different sampling techniques such as to capture the full “resonance” and other acoustical characteristics, such as the “natural random motion” found in pipes.
- Their technology involves sampling every note of a rank:
 - Utilizing many samples across the keyboard to authentically duplicate the rank, and
 - Using long samples to capture the character and edge tone found in pipes.
- A pipe has to fill with air before the full, tonal quality develops. Long samples capture that tone, thus leading to better ensemble and authenticity.

By the time of our final recommendation report, pipe organ sound authenticity was not an issue.

Being a church with not only an active ministry within the local community but also an extensive outreach support program, the Executive Committee and Official Board debated the merits of a new organ installation within our overall priorities and programs. In the end the conclusion was:

- An organ plays an inspirational role within the context of the worship service

- The organ is a complement to the other musical instruments used in the course of the service (piano, guitars, etc.)
- Many members *expect* the organ to play a role within the worship service
- Since the source of funds was a directed donation, we, in fact, were enhancing the opportunities to deploy our other resources and funds for ongoing ministry projects
- A new organ would be one more opportunity to enhance and encourage membership as well as to launch new activities that would extend the church's ministry within the community.
- Provide frequent update information in weekly bulletins as well as congregational newsletters.
- Keep organ funds separate from ongoing operational funds; publicize this separation
- Ensure all the approval processes are scheduled and adhered to:
 - Initial recommendation was to the Worship Committee (a standing committee)
 - Who then recommended to the Official Board
 - Who then recommended to the Congregational meeting that approved the purchase

We also found the following administrative procedures facilitated the research and approval processes significantly:

- Assigning subcommittees and delegating responsibilities amongst (i) organ specifications (and, on installation, acceptance to those specifications), (ii) site visit arrangements and (iii) business and financial criteria, distributes the committee workload.
- Developing a specification document as the evaluation proceeds, including involvement of a qualified organist
- Effective use of e-mail minimizes committee meetings while keeping all participants fully informed

Obtaining Congregational Approval

Getting the congregation involved to support the project:

- Ensure that as wide a range of congregation members as possible has the opportunity to hear either the organ or a representative sample CD.
- Where available, freely distribute sample CD's demonstrating the organ's capabilities; it should include individual stops as well as playing of full pieces, such as familiar hymns.

Funding considerations:

- Around 1995 our congregation established an Organ Fund which took ½% of envelope donations to build up a fund to cover potential repair expenses. While used for one requirement in 1998, this fund had built up to a level such that it provided 40% of the cofunding requested by the donor.
- All funding of the organ would come from a directed fund; no funds were to come out of ongoing church operating funds.
- The balance of the cofunding funds would be raised via an initial recital with a featured organist capable of demonstrating all the organ's features.
- In practice, by the end of 2002, we had received unsolicited donations such that the launch recital need only raise 30% of the cofunding amount.

The Recommendation

Our Organ Committee's final recommendation was for the Phoenix Organ assembled and installed by Aria Systems of Peterborough, Ontario. Our selection was based on the following criteria:

- In every instance the reference organs delivered authentic pipe organ sounds, capable of being as inspiring as a traditional pipe organ
- The console was totally familiar to the organist with minimum training required to provide a transparent transition from the current organ to the new one.
- The organ would have three “voicings”: English, Baroque and English with true orchestral sounds, meeting requests of both the music director and congregational members
- All orchestral sounds (percussion⁵, wind, brass and string) can be played directly from the manuals
- The musical specifications of the organ were fully customizable to any modifications requested by the music director (who is also a trained organist)
- There will be minimum impact on the sanctuary configuration and none of any significant consequence
- Speaker sets (for each manual and the pedals) can be distributed across the current pipe chamber locations
- To the greatest extent possible, the organ uses traditional organ components including drawstops, pistons and other ancillary items; the console has the traditional organ “look”
- The level of flexibility for future modifications:
 - Voicings or styles can be modified should organist tastes change over time
 - There is capacity to add another Voicing (style) if required
 - Should funds become available, pipe ranks can be added (or some of our current organ’s ranks incorporated)
 - Individual stops can be readily modified, especially as new pipe samples become available

⁵ Harp, harpsichord, glockenspiel, chimes

- A digital pipe organ is not sensitive to temperature and humidity fluctuations that occur over the four seasons⁶
- Ten year parts/five year labour warranty

Comparison with the current organ:

Feature	Phoenix Organ	Keates Organ
Manuals	3: Great, Swell, Choir	2: Great, Swell
Stops	51 x 3	21
Stop Format	Drawstop knobs	Tabs
Pedal	Yes	Yes
Keyboard		
Pipes	~3100	825
Voicings	3: English, Baroque, English with Instrumental	1
Ranks	Effectively 51 per Voicing	13
Longest “pipe”	Sub Bourdon 32’ Contra Violone 32’	Bourdon 16’ plus 2 other 16’
Couplers	15 (including 4 to MIDI)	7
MIDI Interface	Yes	No

Finally this was an instrument within our budget resources that would serve to adequately meet its role in providing appropriate inspiration in worship while leaving other financial resources available to assist with missions in both the local and worldwide communities.

⁶ The long cold spell of February 2002 has resulted in a problem denying us the use of our current pipe organ for at least a couple of Sundays due to the shrinkage effect of low humidity on the wind chest wood causing a stop to become defective and issuing a whiny piercing sound when the blower is turned on.

Final Approval

This recommendation was approved at a special congregational meeting on December 15, 2002. The final motion read:

"Moved that Streetsville United Church purchase a Phoenix Model PD 351 Organ as specified in the attached proposal document. The total cost for the Organ and installation is not to exceed [amount inserted] (after GST rebate). Funding for the Organ is to come from the existing Organ Fund with any shortfall to be made up by donations specifically designated to this Fund; the Church is to supply interim financing of the shortfall to a maximum of [shortfall amount]. The Organ Subcommittee of the Worship Committee is to be charged with negotiating a final contract, including specifications, payment terms and other conditions appropriate to protecting the interest of Streetsville United Church."

An additional motion was passed:

"Moved that a plaque be installed on the new Phoenix Organ suitably acknowledging Bill and Alma Tolton for their donation that made the purchase of this Organ possible and that an official letter of thanks be sent by the Chair of the Official Board."

A contract covering specifications (as an Appendix), installation requirements (another Appendix), pricing and payment terms, delivery and installation schedule, intellectual property rights, customer and vendor obligations to facilitate cooperation, confidentiality and non-disclosure conditions was then negotiated and executed with Aria Systems, North American rights holder to Phoenix Organs.

Recommendations to other Organ Search Committees

In summary, our major recommendations are:

- Review and assess the role of an organ within your overall church mission, especially its role in worship, and its priority relative to other activities being carried on at the church
- Ensure that an authentic pipe organ sound is being obtained – visit reference sites and obtain CD samples
- Involve a range of congregational personnel on the committee, including a qualified organist and at least one financial/business person
- Keep the congregation fully informed as the evaluation proceeds
- Build a complete contract⁷ outlining not only the organ specifications (as an Appendix) but also the business conditions of the purchase
- Keep financing independent of any other church financial funds and operating budgets

⁷ Copies of our specification document and the organ contract (without pricing) are available on request.