Guidance Note

Electronic Organs

ChurchCare

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This guidance note will help you consider the choice of an electronic organ for your church.

Appearance

An electronic organ can be designed for your church, to fit with its architectural setting, and it is not necessary to accept a standard design.

Loudspeakers of electronic instruments are very much larger than loudspeakers used for speech reinforcement. The closer the imitation of a pipe organ, the more voluminous they need to be. Loudspeakers should be positioned to musical as well as visual advantage and not so far from the console that the organist is encouraged to play excessively loudly. A more accurate impression of an organ will be given if the loudspeakers are not dispersed around the building. The appearance of loudspeaker cabinets can be a serious architectural problem, especially in an historic church; they need to be designed to fit the building, and not placed within an existing pipe organ.

Cost and reliability

Overall costs not only include first cost but also depend on reliability and longevity.

Initial costs

Except where the church is very small, the initial purchase cost of an electronic instrument will normally be considerably less than that of an adequate new pipe organ. On the other hand, the purchase costs of electronic instruments designed with their architectural location in mind will not be inexpensive.

With an electronic instrument, the cost is largely determined by the type and quality of the basic equipment, the number of stops making relatively little difference. For this reason, consoles with stop-lists of cathedral proportions are sometimes found on electronic instruments in churches of modest size. Such instruments also suffer from severe problems of musical scale, each stop necessarily being a shadow of its proper self to avoid the 'full organ' sound being overbearing.

Long-term costs

Whilst the manufacturers of current electronic instruments believe them to be better than their predecessors and

guarantee them for a number of years, experience of similar technology in the computer industry indicates that an average of twenty years is a fair expectation. This lifetime is also indicated by the typical replacement age of electronic organs. Sometimes it is possible to fit new components within the console of an electronic instrument.

Making a Choice

After assessing the potential of your existing organ in relation to your needs, taking into account not only musical but liturgical and financial aspects, how is a decision to be made?

It is important to take qualified and independent advice. In addition to the organ adviser to your DAC you can get help from the Association of Independent Organ Advisers (www.aioa.org.uk). An adviser from the AIOA will be able to assist you with contractual arrangements, managing an organ project and the selection of an organ builder, matters that go beyond the role of the DAC.

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In conclusion, your choice will lie between:

1 - The purchase and installation of a second-hand electronic instrument. Because of high depreciation, such instruments are available cheaply. Although a tempting way to overcome a short-term problem, this can be hazardous, both in terms of musical quality and of reliability. It should be totally avoided if the maker is no longer in business.

2 - The commissioning of a new electronic instrument, with console and loudspeakers designed to blend with the existing architecture and furnishings of the building. The stop list should also match the scale of the building.