

# The American Organist Magazine

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VOX HUMANA: The Wars

No, not terror, not Iraq, not even Peloponnesian. The thermostat wars!

It's the dead of winter and, once again, we face one of the infuriating, insurmountable annoyances of the profession – the indoor environment and its effect on the organ. Consider the scenarios. 1.) Overheated, stuffy (in a few rare cases, smogged up with incense) American churches. 2.) Icy cold sanctuaries where fuel costs fast outpace the dwindling offering plate. 3.) Frugal, “smart” places (often run by computer), with ice by week and mighty hell-fire blasts on Sunday morning followed by the big chill at about noon.

What else is common to these scenes? A bickering gaggle of congregants all complaining of “too hot... too cold.” Ecclesiastical temperature intolerance outflanks any domestic disturbance – one householder asleep during a blizzard with the window akimbo, another bundled in multiple sweat shirts, comforters, wool blankets, and the basement fires alit. Clearly, we are a nation divided over the thermostat.

And the poor organ! Hear at those reeds sliding from “dead in,” to “musically rich,” to “French,” to “what key are they in?” all within the space of a few short hours on a Sunday. Hear the groaning and creaking of the precious hardwoods in case and console, drying and warping, and swelling anew. Hear the wind grow louder and louder as winter creeps along, just like the champion athlete awakens one morning the asthmatic cripple of advancing years. As a dreadful finale to winter's ravages and human's intolerance, hear the heart-stopping whack of a sere wooden pipe's seam busting open as low G# becomes like the sound of something too indelicate to mention in the company of a polite readership, but not at all unlike the smarmy analogies often fabricated for the sounds of the bottom octave of short-resonator 32' reeds played alone.

In times like these, the rich always seem to have it easier. Like the place where, despite the raised eyebrows and bad-tempered words of committee-folk and clergy, the organist can convince the church to operate both air conditioning and heating for the sake of the organ. It runs 24/7 to a precise 68 degrees and 50% humidity. It's got to make an organ builder glow with warm (but properly humidified) satisfaction.

Consider this incongruous scene. A few decades ago, while playing recitals in frigid Germany (where, as a matter of national pride and policy, no indoor space should ever be warmed past the threshold of removing a thick sweater and where, the heavier the mechanical action, the colder the church must be) and practicing in a very large and well-known city church, the atmosphere seemed oddly warm. Suddenly, in the console mirror, there was the host organist (as big a name as the church itself), sloshing water out of big buckets right in the middle aisle, which passage was, surprisingly, carpeted). He eventually explained that, with all

the heat in the room to maintain the tuning of the illustrious instrument in the place, it took water and lots of it to keep the humidity up!

So, here's this odd scene in liturgical thermostat, a ritualistic communal interaction transcending every theological, dogmatic, political, cultural, or denominational border. It's Sunday. The temperature has just increased about 30 degrees in two hours and the organ is now a 40-rank reed celeste on which you are about to demonstrate that Scheidemann sounds more dissonant than Messiaen. First, the head usher runs up to the thermostat and cranks it fully counterclockwise (or maybe just pushes digital buttons like crazy until hearing the furnace burp to a halt in the basement). Simultaneously, his associates fling wide the gates. Congregants flood the place, each bringing a gust of arctic breeze that, per its genetic programming, aims straight at the organ first. No longer are the reeds a factor, for entire divisions have been tuned as celestes!

Congregants remove their outer wraps and, thus, there begins the litany of complaints. The building committee czar (or Junior Warden or whomever) leaps into decisive action as the well-worn thermostat dial hits the stops in the other direction. The fire breather comes to life again. Scorching fires sear the nave. In moments, the now rewarmed organ has lost any semblance of tuning *within* a division. We are reduced to playing the processional hymn on the 8' Stopped Flute. As the choir processes, the heat overwhelms the singers, who begin to faint, pass out, and leave seeking aid. So, the anthem has been trimmed from four voices to one, as sung by a sole surviving bass who had once endured extremes of climate while trekking in Nepal. No matter. The only stop still close enough to A440 for an accompaniment is the Choir Dulciana (up in the corner of the box where the fires and ice can't reach).

And who are ecstatically unaware of this climatic turmoil? The clergy. And later, we learn, they wear shorts beneath their cassocks and carrying pocket warmers just in case!

Colleagues, we can't win this. And what do populations under siege do when faced with insurmountable odds? Fight fire (if you will) with fire. Listen to the wisdom of one organ technician who suggested a non-violent and effective strategy based on his observation in a place where these wars raged for decades. The organist secretly engaged a heating contractor, had the existing thermostat disconnected, and wired in a new thermostat innocuously mounted on the other side of the wall. It was set to a reasonable 70 degrees.

Every time parishioners felt a chill or hot flash, they walked up to the old thermostat, adjusted the setting, and sat back down feeling contentedly comfortable. Meanwhile, the Franck never sounded as tight!

- Haig Mardirosian