

The American Organist Magazine

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VOX HUMANA: Show me the money

My shopping list:

Pipe organ - \$25,000 or more per stop from a better builder.

Concert Grand Piano - \$90,000 - \$100,000.

Choir room piano - \$20,000 to \$40,000 for a small grand.

Music stands - \$47.50 each for the best, the kind that everyone steals.

Choral octavos – about \$5.00 to \$7.00 each for anything “classical.”

Choral music filing cabinets - \$1,034 each.

Professional choral singer at big city prices - \$100 and up per service call.

Conductor’s swivel chair - \$132.

Choir vestments - \$35 and up each.

Cost of a B.Mus degree at a better private university - \$160,000.

Anyone care to go shopping? And we haven’t even priced a pair of organ shoes, or audio equipment, a good looking concert suit, or begun our annual salary negotiations at budget time. Ours is an expensive business.

To boot, we musicians frequently find ourselves as participants in, if not actually manager of transactions summing up to considerable dollars, and often in the service of institutions that are hard-pressed to ante up such funds. How else could we explain away the nervous sweat on our brows while sitting in music committee meetings contemplating such big ticket musical costs? Nothing, but nothing, hammers at the dichotomy between artistic ideals and real-world pragmatism than the tension within while saying to oneself, “I know that ideal organ will cost \$1.2 million but I should just be grateful that they’re willing to spend \$100,000 for a brand new digital with money enough left for a new set of handbells.” When and how are we able to advance the case that top dollar investments are the best investments? How do we truly manage such transactions in order to affect meaningful economies? How can we indemnify ourselves and our institutions from momentous miscalculations and mistakes? Can we detect musical snake oil?

These gnawing questions throw cold, harsh light on the traditional fissure with the stereotype of the artist unaware and disinterested in things temporal on the one side, and the manager willing, if not even eager, to sell out any lofty abstraction in order to save a nickel on the other. Functionality, for the laity, suffices while everything *we* instinctively hunger after demands top dollar. Art and money, it seems, cannot mix.

Resources on the topic are scant. Unlike self management, that is, financial management, tax, and record keeping for those engaged in the trade and for the benefit of the self (and there are numerous books and CD-ROMS ready to help there), help on how to deal with big ticket items is in short supply. Ours is a niche market. While it is also true that help abounds at the home consumer level, given plentiful articles or Websites

dedicated to advice on how to buy a piano, or home theatre electronics, disinterested third-party advice is harder to locate at the institutional level.

Responsible consultants can be a significant help (and that is the topic for another day, if not a whole other book). As for organs, there are a few books like the late John Ogasapian's *Church Organs*. But, by and large, effective big ticket musical equipment procurement is still the province of the self-taught.

Want to buy an organ? Ask around. Take bids from a few builders. Analyze them. Ask the opinions of professionals like lawyers, accountants, and management people. Dismiss anything they say that diminishes artful end results. Verify the typical standards of the industry. Ask other recent buyers you may know to share their stories and a glimpse at the proposals they obtained. Use your ears and artistic insights. Buy the best that you can. Avoid preconceived ideas. Consider cost benefit, not just cost. Forecast long term care and replacement prices. That's only good stewardship. Mostly, apply skeptical critical judgment. Do not buy emotionally, for it is easy to see oneself sitting at that shiny new concert grand and hard to walk away from a bad deal. Above all, use your nose.

An academic colleague talks about his father's old law partner who would only defend a case if it passed the "stink test." No matter what the facts in a case, what was discovered, how credible the principals were, he would never take the matter on without sniffing the air. If it smelled good, then he'd go to work. And such intuitive analysis, in the end, brings things full circle. Perhaps the same artistic nature that leads us to crave the best, the most artful, can also show the way to effective negotiation, pricing, and investment as well. What if *we* had something to teach the bean counters?

- Haig Mardirosian