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VOX HUMANA: Knobs

While looking at the specifications of a digital organ recently, the peculiar cohabitation of new and old technology caught my attention in a sense that I had not contemplated before. This was not a question about the sound of new and old instruments, or acoustical or digital technologies, or the philosophical issues that both divide us, or economics, or ethics. What caught my attention were the funny little handles that have been there since the dawn of organs – stopknobs. Here, in addition to simply drawing a stop, organists could customize kind of stop, and even the voicing of that stop at the switch of another knob. Lurking behind this one innocuous knob were multiple stoplists… knob upon knob.

The point is this: what do these draw stops and the words engraved on them insinuate? If I pull something called "Principal 8'," then change it at will to a "Diapason", or "Spitz Principal", or "Geigen", or "Montre," what has happened to the linkage (both figuratively and literally) to a rank of metal pipes, open at the end, with a certain geometry? And if the sounds change with the flick of a switch (or click of a mouse), do these knobs come engraved in pencil?

Unlike the observation of E. Power Biggs who, after he had recorded some concertos on an old instrument in England, said, "I handled the handle that Handel handled," this moment evoked he comment of Gertrude Stein that "there is no there there." (She was, if I recall, commenting on Oakland, not organs.) Consider the difference. In the old world, knobs were the tips of levers attached to some sticks and pivots that eventually pulled out a flat slider in a big box full of wind that allowed that wind to pass through pipes planted above once other levers got pulled - all very crude and all permanent. The "Prinzipal" that Arp Schnitger sketched next to the carved knob was not about to change into "Stentorphone" any day soon. New technology, however, facilitates change and depends on making things transient (and this is no negative value judgment either). Who'd sit at a computer typing only letters using one font when you can still buy a (new) manual typewriter (for about $100)?

Naturally, this all begs the bigger question. Why are these knobs here? They don't pull out sliders. They don't really connect to anything at all. They are ultimately fancy switches just as they on the vast bulk of electric action organs for the past century. So, how wrong could it be to replace these with buttons that light up, or stop keys, or tilting tablets, or computer keyboards and screens? Didn't the theatre organ builders do that almost a century ago? Could it not be said that a Wurlitzer horseshoe console is a more honest expression of technology than a Skinner drawstop console? Stop tongues never pulled sliders; they were designed and made to be the electrical switches that they were. And, lest aesthetics and panache not factor in, a Wurlitzer with its panoramic, multicolor, wrap around stoprail cuts a magnificently grandiose picture.

Today, for a few hundred dollars, you can order software or modular black boxes that, with an adequate audio system, take care of the sound producing part of the organ.

Why attach that to a huge oak box with these old handles everywhere (which we then move by programming other data onto buttons so to *avoid* touching the knobs)? Some suppliers sell MIDI keyboards that can be stacked to replicate the dimensions of an AGO standard console. Add a MIDI pedal board and the 21st century console is born. Select stops from a touch sensitive screen? Surely, this is ergonomically healthier than reaching for old levers in hard to reach and pull places especially when n the space of an eighth rest in the left hand. And, if it is pistons with unlimited levels of memory that we really push rather than knobs that we pull, then why not be honest and use only those as programmed to some electronic list of available stops? Why the intermediate chunkiness of moving knobs?

Ever see a recitalist play an entire program reaching for nothing other than the "next" piston of a stop sequencer? The rest of the buttons, knobs, lights and levers might just as soon go away. The staging could be reduced to the sleek minimalism of a solitary figure in black from head to toe sitting at three or four minimal keyboards. A colleague who does live performances with synthesizers actually uses black tape to cloak visible lights from his equipment so as to enhance such an image.

So what are these dozens of knobs still doing in front of us? What drives us to crave these dinosaurs?

By my lights, they symbolize an ancient past not wholly dead or forgotten. In some few fortunate places, we can actually draw sliders and experience the brawny toil of making organs make music. There's nothing like four or five hours of tracker practice to unleash the endorphins. The "burn" is proof of the art. To feel inertia at work, pulling against us is as if to say "if you want to make me play, just work a little." No noiseless LED blinking can ever match that. Some Sundays, sitting at my own console in quiet moments between music, I sometimes find my hands running up and down the knobs, feeling their faces with my knuckles just to gain a little validation and touch the face of the past. Odd things these knobs.

- Haig Mardirosian