

**Lecture given at the ISO Symposium  
“How to win new friends for the pipe organ”  
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***Alert: Lead in organs***

Eighteen months ago, organ builders in the EC were alerted to the possibility that new pipe organs might become illegal. It seems an old joke now, but it was real enough then. The world was probably rather surprised to discover that new pipe organs were being built anywhere, let alone in Britain. The political battle to prevent the gradual extinction of the pipe organ, through a quirk of EU legislation, caught the imagination of those who responded to the RoHS<sup>1</sup> campaign. For a brief period, pipe organs became news, not just for churchgoers and musicians, but for the general public, who were amazed that new organs are being built, new music is being written for the organ, and brilliant young musicians are doing anything so quaint as learning to play this dinosaur of an instrument.

The RoHS threat has receded, and we feel that we can safely ignore it, although EU law itself has not yet been changed. The Institute of British Organ builders will keep a watching brief. The environmental lobby may yet again decide that organ pipes are a dangerous commodity, and must be banned to save the planet. We may need to exert pressure yet again to ensure that we can continue to build new pipe organs.

Does all this matter to any of you? Are you even interested? It is a measure of the change that has taken place in the last 50 years, thanks to the ISO, that organ builders around the world are linked by an invisible thread. We speak the same language, the language of organbuilding, and share a common purpose.

EU legislation is not the only threat that is confronting us. The Christian faith no longer underpins the order of the western world as it once did. Our calendar still records that we live in the Year of Our Lord 2007, and Christian festivals mark the passage of the year from Christmas to Easter, with many a saint's day marking our national holidays. But the church is no longer the centre of the community. Old abbeys lie in ruins, many churches are empty, and their organs silent. Yet there is a resurgence in the Christian faith in some countries, with new congregations and new churches being founded, or old churches coming to life again. In Britain the newest church communities seldom need an organ – they prefer worship songs and 'happy-clappy' music. So is this the end of the road for the organ? Of course not.

What of our experience in Britain? In the last decade or so, two new concert halls have opened, in Manchester and Birmingham, with new pipe organs installed and attracting large audiences, and other concert halls are restoring their grand old instruments. British cathedrals are experiencing growing numbers of worshippers,

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<sup>1</sup> Restriction of the Use of Certain Hazardous Substances in Electrical and Electronic Equipment Regulations 2005

and the wonderful tradition of cathedral music for choir and organ is an essential part of that cultural and spiritual experience. Many independent schools and colleges in Britain have a religious foundation, and are installing new organs and training young organists in their college chapels. The Royal College of Organists hosts training days for young organists around the country, and the standard of organ playing in our conservatoires is higher than ever. Organ competitions, such as that in St Albans Cathedral, attract competitors from around the world, and the standard of playing is extremely high. Organ recitals may not compare well with pop concerts in audience ratings, but our church music tradition contributes greatly to the continuing popularity of the instrument.

And what about funding? In Britain, the church has never been supported by the state; the state has never taken any interest in the organ, nor does it fund the training of organ builders. The success of any organ project depends on funds being raised by the community. This places great demands on local congregations, but there is an advantage too, since the effort of fund-raising can generate a real interest and sense of ownership of the organ. Work on organs is often supported by generous grants from charitable institutions, some of which insist that the organ must be used for the benefit of the whole community. So educational projects are springing up<sup>2</sup>, to take advantage of this. Money comes from various quarters, including gambling. The football pools have been joined by the national lottery, which gives large sums of money to our cultural heritage, including organs.

There is cause for hope. The organ must compete with other forms of entertainment, and with our help it can do so. We must continue to build instruments which will inspire a new generation of musicians to play them and audiences to hear them, and encourage philanthropists to provide funding. Don't let us lose our separate national identities, which give so much variety and colour to the organ. Let us unite in sharing our expertise, appreciating good work, sharing our troubles, learning from each other, and speaking together as an international community of craftsmen and musicians. Together, let us make everyone aware of the unique value and fascination of the organ in today's world.

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<sup>2</sup> The WOOFYT (Wooden One-octave Organ For Young Technologists) is just one example of how to interest school children in the organ. It requires a team of people in order to work, and has been played by over 1500 people in total.