

The Place for the Church Organ.

IN a large majority of our Scottish churches the organ occupies a position so prominent and commanding as to suggest that serried ranks of metal pipes have a profound significance in the symbolism of our worship.

Several factors contributed to this unfortunate circumstance. Congregations wanted to *see*, no less than to hear, the instrument upon which they had lavished so much money. To place the most expensive individual piece of furnishing in the church where it could not easily be seen, was unthinkable in the age of Victorian prosperity and ostentation. Organ-builders naturally wanted to advertise their instruments as prominently and advantageously as possible, particularly when, in the early years of the century, congregations were being encouraged to acquire organs by the exceedingly generous grants offered by the Carnegie Trust. And what more prominent and advantageous position could be conceived than behind a centrally placed pulpit, to which all eyes were directed !

Generally the console was beneath the pulpit, with a curtain behind the organist to screen, partially at any rate, his movements. But the introduction of pneumatic and electric action made it possible to detach the console, which in most cases was brought forward, often obscuring the Communion Table. Incredible though it may appear, the console was sometimes made to serve as the Communion Table. This practice obtained in a city church where the writer held his first organistship. The detached console enabled the organist to arrange his choir in a semi-circle around him, facing the congregation, and thereby giving him, it was alleged, better control over it. The final effect was to make the church more like a concert hall than ever.

Yet this arrangement is popular, and was recently carried out as an "improvement" in the Parish Church of S. Margaret, Dalry, a large church with galleries. The organ pipes tower above the pulpit, and the console was underneath it. The improvement consists in bringing the console far forward to the front seat of the church, and sinking it in a well so that it will not obscure the Communion Table. Modelled on up-to-date theatre organ designs, it is

in full view of the congregation, who no doubt watch enthralled its skilful manipulation by the organist. That an organ can be built in this position behind the pulpit without the disadvantages we have mentioned, is exemplified in Gilcomston South Church, Aberdeen, where, about forty years ago, Binns erected one of the first of their fine instruments in that city. The organ is built in an apse behind the centrally placed pulpit, but completely hidden by a beautiful walnut screen, so that no pipes are visible. The console is detached only a few feet, and reversed, so that the organist sits with his back to the pulpit. The choir is accommodated in choir stalls, forming with the back of the console three sides of a square in which stands the Communion Table. Here, then, the organ is in front of the congregation but completely hidden. The console is detached, but so placed that the organist cannot be seen. Only the back of the console is visible, toning with, and merging into, the beautiful woodwork of the pulpit and screen behind it. The choir is conveniently near the instrument and the organist, and there is nothing whatever to distract the attention of the worshipper. This is by far the best treatment I have seen of any scheme which places the organ behind a central pulpit.

In churches where there are chancels—and most modern churches are being so built—the pulpit is generally at one side of the chancel steps, the Communion Table is given the central and elevated position it ought to occupy, and the organ is built in an organ chamber on the north or south side of the chancel, but usually on the same side as the pulpit. The pipes are visible, but not obtrusively, and may be ranked on both the side walls of the chancel.

Somehow or other the impression has become almost general that this is the proper and orthodox place for the organ. There is no authority, either of tradition or of commonsense, for this view. No organ can effectively serve its function shut up in an organ chamber in a chancel—usually a ridiculously small and stone-walled chamber at that. Ample space above and on three sides of the instrument is essential. A moderate-sized and comparatively inexpensive instrument, given these conditions, will frequently be much more effective than a considerably larger one built in a confined space. It is not only the quantity, but the quality, of the tone that is adversely affected when the organ is denied sufficient air-space around it; for the instrument has to be voiced much louder than is consistent

with pure tone, in order to be heard ; while the large sixteen foot pipes are usually so hidden away behind the instrument as to be scarcely audible in the church, and the Mixtures seem doubly shrill and strident by contrast. Moreover, if we are to have good tonal quality, the organ must have reasonable breathing space *within*, as well as air-space without. In the usual chancel chamber, the organ has to be so "crowded" as to leave little interior empty space. Dr Hopkins, in his "History and Construction of the Organ," writes : "It is a fact always worth the remembrance of those who would limit an organ-builder too strictly in regard to space, that one of the secrets of the good effect of many old instruments is their comparative emptiness." Sir Frederick Ouseley used to speak of the organ-chamber as "that abomination of modern invention."

That the chancel is the "traditional" place for the organ—or for the choir—is, of course, quite erroneous. It was only under the influence of the Puseyite movement that parish churches, imitating the great cathedrals (where the choristers sit in the choir and the organ is situated generally in the rood-loft), brought choirs to the chancel, and perforce had to bring the organ with them. If there be a "traditional" place for the organ in a church, it is the west gallery. Both on the Continent and in England, this was the customary position.

All things considered, the west gallery still remains, in the majority of our churches, the most suitable place for the organ and choir. It affords the favourable conditions of space ; allows the tone, both of instrument and choir, to float unobstructed throughout the church ; and, being floored with wood, gives greater resonance to the instrument. In this position the organ does not usurp undue prominence, and distracting factors are removed from the observation of the worshippers. The choir, too, can be more effectively grouped in a gallery. The closer the proximity of organ, organist and singers the better. In a cathedral or large parish church, where the choral service is frequently treated antiphonally by the Decani and Cantoris sides of the choir, the usual arrangement of the choir stalls is understandable and effective. But to divide our Scottish church choirs in this way, separating sopranos and tenors from altos and basses by a wide intervening space, is simply to sacrifice effective singing for a silly convention that has nothing to commend it.

If a church has reasonably sized transepts, there is no objection to the organ being built in one of them. This is

perhaps the best alternative to the west gallery and may even be preferable to the gallery if, for example, a valuable west window were to be blotted out (there are windows, of course, that would be much better blotted out), or if the church were not sufficiently high to give ample air-space above the pipes.

It is very regrettable that the Church's *Committee on Artistic Questions* is not more frequently consulted by congregations contemplating the installation of a new organ or the alteration of an old one. It is highly desirable that the new churches that are being built under the Church Extension Scheme will not perpetuate the ineffective, and often offensive, arrangements which so generally obtain at present. It is not only congregations, but church architects, who need education in this matter. The organ-builder is only indirectly at fault. He may prefer that his handiwork be given a conspicuous place in the church ; he will certainly prefer to have ample space in which to build the instrument ; but he will carry out the directions given him, if these are wise and practicable.

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