

What's It Like to Be a Tabernacle Organist?

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I'll never forget that day in the summer of 1982 when Tabernacle organist Robert Cundick climbed the St. Mark's Cathedral organ loft to interrupt an organ lesson I was teaching and ask if he could speak to me privately for a minute. With apologies to my student, I descended the loft and stepped outside where Bob announced that permission had been granted to appoint another Tabernacle organist and they wanted me and "How did I feel about that?"

Several days later he appeared again and while another student waited up in the loft, he announced to me that I had an interview in 30 minutes with President Hinckley, who was then a member of the First Presidency and advisor to the Choir. Bob quickly drove to my home to snatch a suit from my wife Diane. I finished teaching that lesson, changed into the suit, then rode with Bob to the Church Administration Building. I remember his advice as we drove: "When President Hinckley asks you a question, look him straight in the eyes as you give your answer."

One thing President Hinckley said that I've always remembered: He looked at me and said, "Otis Charles, Episcopal Bishop at St. Mark's, is a friend of mine. If we hire you, what will they do for an organist?" His concern for others, including other faiths, touched me.

Among the first things I had to do as a Tabernacle organist was to videotape organ solos for my first broadcasts of "Music & the Spoken Word." In those days the organ solo for each broadcast was not actually broadcast live, but videotaped beforehand when the choir seats were empty, so that TV cameras could be set up over the seats to achieve various interesting video angles which were not possible when the choir was in place. Then we had to be sure to remember to wear the same tie for the actual broadcast. Not only that, but we had to attempt to synchronize our live performance of the organ solo for the Tabernacle audience Sunday morning with the play-back of the pre-recorded broadcast solo. We heard that play-back through a speaker mounted on the lower left side of the console. The speaker shot the sound up into the organist's left ear. You may recall seeing this speaker in photos that were taken of the Æolian-Skinner console prior to the mid-1980's renovation. So we had to play the Tabernacle organ for the live audience while trying to keep in sync with the tape. You can probably imagine our relief when small hand-held minicams made this prerecording no longer necessary!

One Sunday in the 1980's I arrived at the Tabernacle at the usual hour of 6:30 AM to warm up on the broadcast music of the day, only to find that downtown Salt Lake City was engulfed in an electrical power outage. I soon discovered that while the Tabernacle was partially lighted with power from an emergency power generator, there wasn't enough power to operate the organ blowers or the TV cameras. So Jerry Ottley and I prepared the broadcast for radio using the piano. Just 20 minutes before the 9:30 broadcast time, the full power was restored. We quickly touched up a few pieces with the organ and went "on the air" – TV, organ and all!

A Tabernacle organist is nothing if not a minute man – or perhaps I should say a second man. The broadcast is timed to 27 minutes and 56 seconds. Mack Wilberg and Ryan Murphy select the broadcast music with projected times to come as near to this target time as possible. When the music is “taped and timed” at Thursday night’s rehearsal, it is determined how long the improvised “organ pad” into Lloyd Newel’s spoken word needs to be and also whether the organ solo needs to lose or gain 5-10-15- or 20 seconds.

We get a second shot at it Sunday morning in the hour before the broadcast when we do a facsimile or fax run of the entire broadcast to find out how we actually come out. As the broadcast unfolds, the broadcast timer on the organ console tells us how many seconds plus (over-time) or minus (short) we are running compared to the projected time. We also have a stop-watch timer at the console.

Here is an example of how this works: At the conclusion of the fax run prior to a recent broadcast, we ran a bit long, so Mack asked me to shave 5 seconds off of the organ solo, Dale Wood’s “All Through the Night.” “OK,” I agreed. As usual, I started the organ timer as I started the solo. However, I got a bit carried away emoting and when I looked up at the timer during the last line of the solo, I could see that the time was further along than I planned. So I minimized the final cadence as much as I could without sounding clipped and still ended 10 seconds over, instead of 5 seconds under! Not to worry, though – I shortened the one-minute organ pad to 45 seconds, keeping my commitment to Mack after all! Truly, every second counts.

Soon after I came to the Tabernacle, we began a project of renovating the Tabernacle organ which occupied the second half of the 1980’s decade. Bob and John had felt for some time that the organ needed a few improvements and expansions to make it even more perfect for accompaniment of the Choir, as well as for solo work. It was a project approached with plenty of “fear and trembling” as we felt a bit like “how do you improve upon a Rembrandt?” The eyes of the profession we certainly felt bearing down upon us. We realized that the possibility of doing more harm than good to G. Donald Harrison’s famous masterpiece was real. Nevertheless, we felt certain deficiencies needed to be addressed. Eventually Bob contacted Jack Bethards, President and Tonal Director of Schoenstein & Co. in San Francisco and a great respecter of G. Donald’s work. Jack went over the instrument and made several recommendations.

Among them were: The organ was somewhat lacking in the 8’ line, so we added another 8’ Principal (a Cavallé-Coll style Montre) to the Great and provided the Positiv with an 8’ Principal. Harrison’s 8’ Flûte Harmonique on the Great lacked the treble ascendancy of a true French Flûte. Jack pointed out also that an organ as large as the Tabernacle organ should have both 8’ and 4’ harmonic flutes on the Great (or Grand Orgue), so we moved Harrison’s Flûte Harmonique to the 4’ position and Jack installed a ravishingly beautiful new Flûte Harmonique in the 8’ slot. We also lacked a big, meaty French Cromorne and a mounted Cornet, so we added the Cromorne to the Positiv and the 5-rank French Cornet to the Great (also duplexed on the 4th and 5th manuals). Jack noted that we ought to have a 2’ flute on the Swell and a 2’ Principal in the Pedal, so they were added as well.

Perhaps Harrison's most dramatic omission was that there were no reeds in the Great division. He felt that the Bombarde reeds filled this purpose; however, he had originally proposed a 16' Great reed – actually a Euphone free reed. He left space on the Great pitman chest for notes 13-61 and had a 12-note offset chest built for the bottom octave. When that Great 16' reed was eventually axed due to budgetary restraints, the offset chest was used instead for the bottom notes of the Bombarde 16' reed. So we added a chorus of 16', 8' and 4' trumpets to the Great. Also lacking were big "crowning" reeds to punch out a line above the fortissimo choir or to solo above the full organ. To correct this, we added the Tuba Mirabilis to the south front - just behind the case - and the Trompette Harmonique in the opposite position behind the north case.

I remember the day that Jack said he knew a "genius" organ voicer whom he wanted to bring into the project from Southern California by the name of Steuart Goodwin. The voicing of many ranks was uneven. They had survived for those nearly forty years on the celebrated Tabernacle acoustics. As was not uncommon for large jobs such as the Tabernacle, the builders had not the time or the money to complete an exhaustive finish-voicing following the organ's installation in 1948. Steuart's genius paid off. As he checked every pipe in the Tabernacle organ, the famous instrument gained a shine and finishing touch beyond anything it had enjoyed previously. The Bombarde principals lost their coarseness and became so beautiful they could be used alone, if desired. The Swell mixtures were allowed to be as bright as originally designed before Harrison and Schreiner toned them down for fear of offending "the brethren." Over lunch one day, we discussed with Steuart and Jack what to do about the Swell Hautbois which sounded more like a petite trompette than a French hautbois. When we returned to the Tabernacle, Steu went to the Swell box, worked on a couple of Hautbois pipes and within a few minutes turned them into beautiful oboes. So he worked through the remainder of the rank, bringing into play the beautiful Hautbois which had been awaiting his magic touch for forty years.

Undoubtedly the most exciting project with which I have been involved in almost 30 years at the Tabernacle was the construction of the Conference Center and its monumental organ. From the 20th floor of the Church Office Building where we then had our offices, one had a "bird's eye" view of the construction site. The first months were spent in excavating the entire 10-acre block where the Conference Center now stands. I counted ten huge earth-hauling semi trucks in that hole at one time!

The auditorium has a tremendous concrete semi-circular back wall on which the ceiling trusses rest. It stretches from Main St. and South Temple to West Temple and 2nd North. During the construction of that wall, head Church architect Lee Gray took John, Rick and me deep into the construction site after we all donned hard hats. In the center of the pit were men assembling rebar. We were told that the largest gauge rebar made was used in that back wall. I asked the construction manager when was the last time he had a project that called for that large gauge rebar. He thought for a moment then answered, "in the building of a dam!" Lee pointed out to us the concrete footings being built in the ground of the highest corner of the site (i.e. Main St. and 200 North). He indicated that the organ would be built atop those footings.

On another occasion months later, we were taken inside the concrete walls of the now roofed-over auditorium site to a hole in the back wall. Here Lee indicated that doors to the auditorium would

eventually be placed. From that vantage point we gazed across the concrete to the opposite corner which would be the front where the organ would eventually be built. It seemed so far – a city block away – and we wondered if the organ case would look like much more than a postage stamp in that gargantuan room!

When Jack Bethards and Steuart Goodwin were renovating the Tabernacle organ and going over it “with a fine-toothed comb” in the 80’s, we didn’t realize that the Lord was also preparing them to eventually design and build an organ for the Conference Center. In the intervening seven or eight years since completion of the Tabernacle organ renovation, they had not collaborated on any other projects. Jack realized the need to create a consortium if he was to be bold enough to “throw his hat into the ring” of potential Conference Center organ builders, but he had no idea how Steuart felt about Schoenstein’s recent work. Well, it happened that Steu visited Jack’s new 64-rank, four-manual Schoenstein at St. Paul’s K Street one day while on other business in Washington D.C. Steuart was so impressed that he gave Jack a phone call to enthusiastically compliment him on that instrument. Knowing that Steuart was in harmony with his recent work, he discussed with him the possibility of collaboration on the Conference Center organ, made his proposal, and the rest – as they say – is history.

I’ll never forget the first time I heard the low C of the 32’ Diaphone. The Conference Center chief sound engineer made his way from a back corner of the auditorium where he had been working and exclaimed, “What IS that EARTH-SHAKING sound?” He recognized that his loud-speakers could not produce such an impressive fundamental as this stop which sounds on 25” of wind pressure. It operates according to Hope-Jones foghorn technology which 21,000 people can feel in the seat of their pants!

Several particularly memorable performances during my years at the Tabernacle leap to mind. One of the most unique was performing with the Mormon Youth Chorus and Symphony for the crew of the aircraft carrier USS Ranger in the empty hanger of that giant vessel. Among the most spiritual performances I would include singing of “The Spirit of God” with the Tabernacle Choir in the Kirtland Temple, “Praise to the Man” at dedication sessions of the Nauvoo Temple, and the accompanying of “Crossing the Bar” for the funeral of President Hinckley at the Conference Center. Another thrilling experience was playing the monumental Willis/Harrison & Harrison organ at Royal Albert Hall in London as over 5000 people sang with all their hearts that beloved English national hymn “Jerusalem” at the outset of our 1998 European tour.

We were the closing performance for the ACDA (American Choral Directors Association) national convention in downtown Los Angeles at the Walt Disney Concert Hall which has perhaps the cleanest acoustic in which we have ever performed. One could hear with utmost clarity every single note. The hall was packed with our choral-directing peers from all over the country who sat on the edge of their seats from the time we entered the stage. You could feel the electricity flowing in every direction. At the conclusion, the audience erupted with a sustained and exultantly deafening ovation. When Mack took his bow you would have thought him a rock star. It was as though they had climbed Mount Olympus and heard the very Zeus himself! A more gratifying experience for a performing group is impossible to imagine.

And finally, I suppose the most remarkably splendid evening of them all was the first of our Olympic Arts Festival Concerts February 9, 2002 in the Tabernacle. Flags of the world's countries ringed the Tabernacle, and perhaps a hundred children of the International Children's Choir wearing costumes from around the world set the stage. The U. S. Army Herald Trumpets in their white uniforms performed with breath-taking precision. Frederica von Stade performed music of Bernstein and Copland. John Williams, himself, conducted three of his own works! To be in the middle of all this at the organ console was an experience I'll forever cherish.