

“A Link in the Chain: The Pump Organ’s Role in the History of Christian Worship”

By Jacob R. Johnson, 2nd place winner, 2018

Tucked away in an inauspicious display in the Dunnam Bible Museum at Houston Baptist University is an eclectic musical instrument once used in a Texas Baptist church. Although it is somewhat of an oddity in today’s world of electrified praise bands, it is in fact an important part of the fascinating and evolving story of the millennia-old tradition of worship music in the Christian church.

The Ross Avenue Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas was the original user of this pump organ, made in the 1890s by the Jesse French Piano and Organ Company. After the church decommissioned the instrument, Elijah and Ruth Propps, a couple wedded at the church, restored it for home use. After the couple passed, the pair’s children, Gregory Dean Propps and Greta Collins, donated the organ to HBU (museum exhibit).

The Jesse French Piano and Organ Company was headquartered in Nashville. It had a huge retail presence in the South and Midwest, augmented by 100 traveling salesmen. Although its fortunes were largely tied to the popularity of ragtime music, its instruments obviously found their way into churches as well (Joyner).

Pump organs, while lacking the tonal versatility of their pipe organ cousins, are not built into a building’s architecture, making them portable. This allows them to be used at a variety of venues. In this particular case, the organ was used at tent meetings before the church constructed a building. Additionally, due to being much less mechanically complex, they are significantly smaller, lighter, and cheaper (Huivenaar).

Though aesthetically similar to upright pianos and played similarly to pipe organs, pump organs, also known as harmoniums, reed organs, and melodeons, are nearly mechanically and

acoustically identical to accordions. Through the use of bellows, traditionally operated by hand or foot but later controlled by an electric motor, air is pumped through metal reeds, with access being controlled via corresponding keys on the keyboard, or manual. Pump organs can contain only one series, or rank, of reeds, or they can contain several ranks. In instances where the instrument has two or more ranks, there are an equal number of manuals, with each manual corresponding to a certain rank. Volume of the ranks is controlled by knobs, known as stops, which limit the amount of air available to certain reeds.

Although the pump organ was an invention of the late nineteenth century, it can trace its origins in Christian worship to the ancient church.

The organ is one of the oldest musical instruments of the Western World, with hydraulically operated variants of Eastern Mediterranean origin dating to three centuries before Christ. For centuries it, along with the clock, was considered the most complex device invented.

During the infancy of Christianity, musical instruments were usually shunned from liturgical uses, due to negative connotations of their use in other religions (Coffman) and court entertainment (Harland).

Ironically, the organ was first popular in the Christian East and used extensively in secular settings, but failed to make its way into the worship of the ancient Eastern Church (Bush 327). However, beginning around the eighth century A.D., organs were slowly being incorporated into western worship (*Worship Training*), and eventually became the musical staple by the fifteenth century (Coffman). After the Protestant Revolution, churches became more common and more diverse. With many decentralized sects, many congregations simply lacked funding for buildings and therefore pipe organs. The pump organ was the perfect remedy for less affluent churches facing this problem. With peak popularity in the early 1900s, the pump organ

met its demise with the advent of the analog electronic organ in the 1930s. Due to patent laws, manufacturers of pump organs were legally required to use vastly different, and usually convoluted, mechanisms, which, due to their complex natures, were prone to failure and required specialist repairs. The electronic organ's lack of any such overly complicated apparatus led many to abandon the pump organ in favor of the former. An additional reason for the rapid adoption of the electronic organ was due to its ability of much more accurately emulating the sounds of a true pipe organ. However, a debatably superior gadget, the digital synthesizer, eventually succeeded even this type of organ. Whereas the electronic organ could only partially match the acoustic and tonal qualities of a pipe organ, synthesizers could use authentic pipe organ samples, allowing them to almost perfectly match the real instrument. Additionally, the electronic organ was usually limited to producing sounds similar to those of a pipe organ. On the other hand, synthesizers could use samples from essentially any instrument, including vocals and percussion. In addition to its ability to mimic any acoustic instrument, the synthesizer is capable of producing its own unique sounds, sounds that acoustic devices could not possibly generate. However, even with the prominence of this much more flexible and affordable technology that requires notably less money, space, and maintenance, many prefer the genuine pipe organ, whose sound, some say, can never be rivaled by any electronic device. While smaller congregations typically opt for the synthesizer, larger, more affluent churches will frequently employ a legitimate pipe organ.

Although the pump organ's time as a central element of Christian worship was brief and has passed, it nonetheless played a short but important role by allowing smaller, less affluent churches to use a version of the instrument that had been integral to the music of the church for centuries.

Works Cited

- Bush, Douglas E. *The Organ: An Encyclopedia*. Routledge, 2015.
- Coffman, Elesha. "When Did Churches Start Using Instrumental Music?" *Christian History / Learn the History of Christianity & the Church*, Christianity Today, 8 Aug. 2008, www.christianitytoday.com/history/2008/august/when-did-churches-start-using-instrumental-music.html.
- Harland, Mike. "Does the Church Organ Need to Go? – by Mike Harland." *Worship Life*, Worship Life, 1 Apr. 2015, worshiplife.com/2015/04/06/does-the-church-organ-need-to-go-by-mike-harland/.
- Huivenaar, Louis. "History of the Reed Organ." History of the Reed Organ, www.harmoniums.com/hist_en.htm.
- Joyner, David. "Piano Rags, Jesse French, and Their Relationship to the Starr Piano Company." *Jesse French Pianos*, www.frenchfamilyassoc.com/FFA/FAMOUSFRENCHES/JesseFrenchPiano.htm.
- Museum Exhibit. *Pump Organ: Jesse French Piano and Organ Co., 1890s*. Dunnam Bible Museum, Houston Baptist University, Houston.
- Worship Training. "The Organ In Worship." *WorshipTraining*, Worship Training, www.worshiptraining.com/media/the-organ-in-worship/.