

## Trafficking in Organs, Mr. Bishop Pipes Up to Preserve a Bit of History

*His Business Is Matching Instruments With Buyers; Electronic Music Moves In*

By JENNIFER LEVITZ

CAMBRIDGE, Mass.—John Bishop leaves the soul-saving to the clergy. He's content to save the pipe organs—and even that isn't easy.

Almost every church once had a pipe organ. But as mainstream churches merge, close, struggle to raise money, and use guitars, drums and "praise bands" to draw younger worshipers, the pipe organ is waning as a fixture in many parishes. Some are showing up in landfills.



*Above: Organ-rescue expert John Bishop found a new home for this organ owned by Lesley University.*

they are real, because they use God's air to make their sound."

And Mr. Bishop, who has a degree in organ performance and was music director of his parish for 30 years, doesn't mince words with churches that want to replace big space-consuming pipe organs with smaller and less costly electronic organs. "The electronic version is a cop out," he says. "It's like putting plastic flowers on the altar."

He was summoned on a recent afternoon by Lesley University, a private institution that bought a now-defunct white clapboard Congregational church in Cambridge to turn it into a library. Lesley would keep the stained-glass windows, but one thing needed to go before construction began this month—the 25-foot-tall, 18-foot-wide pipe organ, built in 1947.

"It doesn't have a place in the building's new use, but that doesn't mean it can't be of value to someone," says university spokesman Bill Doncaster.

Aficionados like Mr. Bishop are out to locate imperiled organs and match them with buyers. When they can't do that, they personally fetch the organs with tractor-trailers and store them in old mills.

"We think of ourselves, like the curator of a historical site or the park ranger at Paul Revere's house, as being stewards," says Mr. Bishop, the white-bearded, 56-year-old executive director of the Organ Clearing House, a Charlestown, Mass., company and part of a growing community of "organ rescue" operations.

Mr. Bishop gets a finder's fee from the buyer when he makes a match, though he often tries to talk parishes out of getting rid of their organs, churches say. He tells them the organs are worthwhile "because

Mr. Bishop, his sleeves rolled up to his elbows, eased into the mahogany console and tapped the dusty ivory keys, launching into "My Country, 'Tis of Thee."

"Ahhh! This is a fabulous organ," he said.

The pipe organ, sometimes called "the king of instruments," dates back to ancient Greece. It generates sound by pushing wind through wood and metal pipes through knobs called stops—hence the phrase "pulling out all the stops." Despite its rich history, U.S. pipe organ makers reported building only 91 instruments in 2010, down 14% from 2009 and 40% from 2008, according to the Organ Historical Society in Richmond, Va.

While high-end organs are still being crafted for concert halls and larger churches, "a small church in a suburb of Madison that might have bought a small pipe organ now maybe buys an electric organ or a guitar or a base drum," says Scot Huntington, president of the historical society. A small pipe organ can cost \$200,000 new, though it may last several generations before renovations are needed.

"We've all noticed over the last several years a decline. The economy has affected everyone," says Richard Parsons, president of the Associated Pipe Organ Builders of America, a trade group.

For churches hoping to draw more young people to worship services, the pipe organ sounds out-of-date, says Josh Hunt, a Baptist pastor and national consultant to churches trying to increase membership.

"Young people today don't listen to pipe organ music on their iPods," he says. That kind of talk makes organ lovers cringe.

"I call it the happy-clappy syndrome," says F. Anthony Thurman, director of development for the American Guild of Organists. "A lot of denominations want to appeal to people on a popular-music level as opposed to a traditional-music level. Does that eliminate jobs for our members? Sure it does."

Last year, three graduates of Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minn., started a campaign they call Old Worship New.

"Liturgical worship has been blasted as being old, out of touch and too 'traditional,'" they wrote on their Facebook page, vowing to try to revive it.

"A whole lot of contemporary music being written right now is just awful, because we don't have the benefit of years of vetting this stuff. It's just bad," says Sean Johnson, 32, part of the trio and music director at North Como Presbyterian in Roseville, Minn., where he "doesn't do a lot" with guitars and drums.

The Organ Clearing House was founded in 1959 amid urban renewal and construction of interstate highways that claimed numerous churches, leaving pipe organs homeless. The company, which also provides relocation of organs, has a listing of more than 300 pipe organs for sale. Mr. Bishop says he might make a \$1,500 finder's fee on a \$20,000 used organ.

An hour northwest of Boston, the thriving Clinton Spanish Seventh-Day Adventist Church holds services with guitars, an electronic organ, a cappella singers, skits and even a Bible-based quiz modeled on the TV game show "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire."

But the oldest instrument in the sanctuary stays silent. That is the 19-foot tall and 12-foot-wide pipe organ, built in 1868. It was here 10 years ago when the Adventists bought the then-vacant church.

"Granted it's a pretty thing to look at, but that's it; it's a pretty thing," says Nelson Guaman, head of the church's building committee. Only a few parishioners know how to play it, and it sits where the church wants to put a new office for its pastor, he says.

Mr. Bishop at first tried to encourage the parish to keep the organ, but has since agreed to try to find it a new home, Mr. Guaman says.

It can take years to place an organ, but sometimes there are matches made in music heaven. Within weeks of visiting Lesley University, Mr. Bishop found a home for its organ in a church in Texas. It was loaded onto a tractor-trailer, and off it went, the victory recorded by Mr. Bishop on Facebook.

"Another one leaves town ahead of the wrecking ball," he wrote.