

## The Forth in Praise Organist Blog Archive

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# ELECTRONIC PIANOS

## November 8, 2009

### [Electronic pianos are awful!](#)

Last Wednesday I returned to the funeral parlour after several months' absence. I had been hoping against hope, but in vain. They still have their electronic piano. It struck me yet again how amazing it is that so many churches and undertakers buy one of these things without consulting the organist or organists who are to play it.

Electronic pianos are the most difficult instruments to play in a church or service context. OK, they have their uses. As pianos, they can work well with guitar groups or with children, while their portability means they can be carried into the hall for a knees-up (none of this applies to our undertaker, of course).

But they are pianos, not organs, and for mainstream services, they are hopeless. If you are lucky, you might find two or three separate organ 'voices', but usually there is only one, which has to be used for absolutely *everything*. In the funeral parlour, half an hour of quiet music is expected before the service starts, and the sheer monotony of one organ sound for that length of time has reduced me to using this particular piano as a piano, serenading the mourners with chunks of Classic FM while trying to revitalise my own long-gone piano touch. This just about works in the cosy parlour, but Chopin, Rachmaninov and the *Moonlight Sonata* definitely do not sound right in church.

If you are accompanying congregational hymns on an electronic piano, you can't add or remove stops, mixing and matching tones as you can with a real organ, pipe or electronic. You can't build up hymn sounds verse by verse until you reach that tremendous *Songs of Praise*-style last verse. The only way you can vary the volume is by taking a hand off to operate the slider control, while the only way you can vary the tone is by using either the built-in touch sensitivity, so ridiculously alien to any organ, or – wait for it! – the sustaining pedal!

These instruments are lethal to congregational singing, and they are not cheap. They frequently incorporate 'voices' and gadgets which will never be used. For a thousand pounds *less* one could probably purchase a small, simple electronic organ that would sound far better and be a lot easier to play. And which would probably have an optional 'piano' voice if you wanted one for groups, children or a knees-up.

Suggestions for coping with a church electronic piano (other than taking an axe to it) are planned for a future post. In the meantime if anyone actually gets on with one of these things in church, please comment and tell us your secret.

## January 5, 2010

### [Getting rid of an old electronic piano](#)

In my last post on electronic pianos, [Electronic pianos are awful!](#) I said I would offer suggestions for getting rid of them to those organists who are landed with one. But first, a warning.

**WARNING!** If you are contemplating sabotaging an electronic piano, either subtly (with a screwdriver) or openly (with an axe), remember:

- It is an electrical device and could kill you.
- If you remain alive, you will be highly unpopular with priest and parish
- Either way, the police will be involved.

#### **End of warning.**

There are two types of electronic pianos, old ones and new ones. They are both equally horrible, but the new ones look better. However, the old ones are easier to get rid of.

I can't really give a precise definition of 'old' in relation to electronic pianos, but if it has been in the parish for yonks, and especially if it was bought second-hand or donated in the first place, it's probably on its way out. Technology has improved in the last 10 years or so with the introduction of sampled organ sound in these things as well as in real organs. If the tiny little organ part of the piano sounds 'electronic' then the piano will certainly be old. Even without that, the chances are good that parts will no longer be available. Impress on the powers-that-be that the piano's demise could be imminent. Tell them this will be a wonderful opportunity to get a new sampled-sound electronic ORGAN, which will probably be less expensive than a new version of the piano. Keep telling them this.

Another and more serious issue is safety. Potential danger is something I've experienced with elderly home organs rather than electronic pianos, but I would imagine aged pianos are just as susceptible. If an electronic instrument of any kind is crackling or making other strange noises, it might or might not be putting the player at risk. Unless you're a technician, you can't tell. An organist can quite legitimately refuse to play such an instrument – I certainly wouldn't touch one – but I know that some organists have been putting up with the crackles and bangs, not realising what they might mean, and not telling the church. Safety is the church's responsibility, and if they know there's a problem they will act. And, with luck, your snap, crackle and pop will be replaced by a lovely new ORGAN.

In the next post we'll look at a much bigger challenge: how to get rid of NEW electronic pianos.

# January 9, 2010

## Getting rid of a new electronic piano

New electronic pianos! Oh, how good they look, with their handsome wooden cases, seven-and-a-half gleaming octaves and a rich organ sound when you activate the single organ voice! This is what will have fooled the non-organist (probably non-musician) who went out and bought the thing in the first place. All the problems are still there: touch sensitivity, hand-operated volume slider control, lack of variety in the organ sound, etc. etc. This piano is as hopeless for accompanying church singing as the older ones, but can it be at all possible to get such a beautiful-looking new instrument, still under guarantee, out of the church and replaced with a real organ? The answer is YES!

First, you have to persuade the powers-that-be (by which I mean clergy and parish council) that this purchase has been a mistake. Their ears may already have told them this, but if not, you will need to exert all the tact and diplomacy you are capable of until you get a grudging 'Well, maybe we could look into it – not promising anything, mind'.

Then have a look at these three possibilities:

**SELL IT** and buy an organ. Offer the electronic piano for sale to any parishioner wishing to learn to play the piano. Find out who the local piano teachers are, and see if they know anyone who might buy it. Upmarket care homes might be interested. Try *not* to sell it to another church.

**SWAP IT** Suggest trading it in. If the original supplier also sells electronic organs, a straight exchange might be possible. Make sure you get to choose, or at least advise on, the replacement.

**KEEP IT** but get it out of the church. This is the best solution, if financially viable. Every church should ideally have an organ *and* a piano. As I've said before, an electronic piano can be good with instrumental groups and children, and for social occasions. Interestingly, a piano is also needed if an organist takes an Associated Board grade examination on the *organ*. The Board insists on a piano for its examiner to conduct the aural part of the exam. The little Roland in my church has been hauled out to do this duty on several occasions.

All this usefulness makes the original purchaser of the piano feel less guilty (assuming your persuasion has worked and guilt has set in). He will realise that the piano is a really good parish asset after all and that the organ he is now going to buy will be another.

Good luck!

# January 13, 2010

## Paranoia? Never!

A member of my family has told me that I'm paranoid about electronic pianos.

What nonsense! I loathe them, of course, and they make me very angry because of all the damage they have done to congregational singing. And they certainly do keep turning up in churches and funeral parlours where I am asked to play. It's as if they are following me around. Well, not 'as if'. They *are* following me around. It's part of a conspiracy to get at me for telling the truth about them, that they are planning to take over all the churches in the world ...

*Hmm. Pause.*

I think I'll stop posting about electronic pianos. The next major blog theme will be those much more rewarding objects (relatively speaking), electronic organs.

*( ... and can someone please call the police and ask them to arrest all those electronic pianos gathering in my garden and preparing to attack ... )*