

Opus 54 Project Summary

Considering a good organ is built to last for centuries, not decades, the fact that Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary embarked to purchase a mechanical action (tracker) pipe organ in the late 1980s is a significant event in the history of the institution and the synod.

Interviews were conducted with Professor James Tiefel, chairman of the organ committee, Dr. Edward Meyer, Professor emeritus at Dr. Martin Luther College and organ consultant, and Martin Ott, the organ builder. Brief interviews were also made with Richard Murphy, wood pipe builder and pre-voicing expert, as well as Earl Naylor, engineer and internal architect of opus 54, and Pastor Aaron Christie, pastor and organist. Through interviews and demonstrations, *Opus 54* tells the history and impact of the magnificent pipe organ that resides in the chapel of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in Mequon, WI.

Each one of these men bring a unique perspective to the story of *Opus 54*. The Orgelbaumeister, Martin Ott, brings with him a lifetime of experience in the building of tracker organs and a crucial approach to the value and history of such a grand and ancient instrument. Professor James Tiefel explains the process of selecting and purchasing a new organ and why that particular type of organ was chosen. Dr. Ed Meyer was the organ consultant chosen to be the liaison between the seminary organ committee and Mr. Ott and tells of his role in the process of acquiring a new organ. Richard Murphy and Earl Naylor describe their work at the Martin Ott Organ Company and express the love that they have for their craft. And finally, Pastor Christie reveals what it is like to play on a tracker organ, the accessibility of opus 54, and the influence of the pipe organ on Christian worship.

The film is divided into ten distinct sections: 1) The need for a new organ for the seminary chapel, 2) The selection of Martin Ott as organ builder, 3) The selection of Ed Meyer as organ consultant, 4) How the organ was designed for singing, 5) The roles of Richard Murphy and Earl Naylor in the building process, 6) The tracker organ as the truest form of the pipe organ, 7) Finalizing the plans for the building and installation of opus 54, 8) The installation of opus 54 at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 9) The lasting impact and musicality of opus 54 and the tracker organ, and, 10) The organ as the King of Instruments.

Through the use of primary sources, this documentary tells the story of opus 54 and, in turn, acts as a resource for pastors and congregations seeking to purchase a new organ. Yet, the film goes beyond just explaining the intricacies of selecting and building a real pipe organ. It uncovers the impact that this kind of instrument has had in shaping the future of worship and the arts in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

Opus 54, and tracker organs in general, are truly stunning instruments. Not only are they aesthetically pleasing to the eye, they bring with them superb craftsmanship both inside and out, musicality that no other instrument in the world can rival, and the versatility of leading and assisting congregations in worship. It truly is the King of Instruments.

Caleb Bassett
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Opus 54 Timeline

PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

In a 1986 report of the faculty to the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary board of control the following issues were brought up: The keyboard on the Wicks is difficult to play, the pipes are in need of repair, the instrument is the wrong style for Lutheran music, the seminary master plan is now solidified enough to allow for the construction of a new organ, and the seminary needs to better model Lutheran worship for its students.

Two options were mentioned, although only one was seriously considered. One option was to re-voice the Wicks organ, but the more suitable option was the purchase of a new organ. The initial challenges included the small funding available in the organ fund (~\$30,000) and a public relations problem. The seminary had just recently completed a building project which included an electronic organ.

In this report to the board the faculty laid out the potential path forward and made some preliminary estimates on what the organ project might cost. The figure given was \$100,000 - \$125,000. The plan was to use the 125th anniversary of the seminary as the impetus to drive a low-key fund appeal to complete the organ project.

COMMITTEE MEETING - MAY 6, 1986

At the first organ committee meeting Prof. James Tiefel was elected to chairman and Prof. David Valleskey to secretary. The first order of business was to conduct interview for an organ consultant. The committee decided to first publicize the project in the 1986 Christmas Concert program.

The committee also laid out a working timetable for the project. The hope was to have the organ installed in the summer of 1988. Of course, this timeline did not play out as initially planned.

COMMITTEE MEETING - JUNE 7, 1986

At the 6/7/86 meeting the committee interviewed Prof. Ed Meyer from Dr. Martin Luther College as a possible organ consultant. Meyer discussed the benefits of a tracker action organ and explained the nature of a tracker organ to the committee. He also proposed a list of potential builders. It is interesting to note that Martin Ott was not on this first list of builders.

The committee also discussed interviewing John Stowe of UW-Madison.

COMMITTEE MEETING - AUGUST 11, 1986

At the 8/11/86 meeting the committee interviewed John Stowe of UW-Madison as a possible organ consultant. Fees, style of instrument, and other necessary considerations were discussed.

COMMITTEE MEETING - NOVEMBER 15, 1986

Prof. Ed Meyer had been selected as the consultant for the project and recommended procedures to move forward with the project. Meyer recommended three builders: Casavant, Dobson, Schlicker.

The committee discussed the doubts about a tracker instrument, and a music journal article that stated trackers were no more musical or desirable than a good electronic instrument was discussed. The committee did not feel the doubts warranted re-thinking the project.

COMMITTEE MEETING - DECEMBER 17, 1986

The report from the acoustical engineer, Riedel, was discussed. His analysis of the chapel space concluded that raising the ceiling would not provide an increase in acoustical quality.

At this meeting the committee eliminated one of the alternate builders, Taylor and Boody. Their cost was too high and their timetable was too long. The committee at this time was leaning heavily toward Dobson as the builder of choice. The price was good and the case would be a beautiful oak design.

COMMITTEE MEETING - DECEMBER 30, 1986

Finance was the topic of this meeting. The business manager, Dave Martin was in attendance. The possibility of borrowing funds for the organ project was discussed. The business manager was also asked to report back with a list of funding contingencies the seminary could use to cover any shortfalls that might happen during the project. Still, at this meeting the committee was leaning on the anniversary thank offering to provide most of the funding.

REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE TO THE FACULTY - JANUARY 15, 1987

The committee went over the problems of cash flow. Major seminary projects would have to be postponed or delayed to cover the funding needs if the offering did not come in as expected. At this point, money was the sole problem.

COMMITTEE MEETING - JANUARY 26, 1987

The committee learned that Siebert would not give any funding to the organ project and that if the seminary wanted to take a loan to pay for the organ it would require special approval from higher authorities. Dave Martin gave a report after his analysis of the seminary finances. His conclusion was that going forward without the necessary cash in hand would put the seminary in a precarious financial position for the foreseeable future.

REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE TO THE BOARD OF CONTROL - JANUARY 29, 1987

The committee was apparently very confident in the pending thank offering and recommended to the Board of Control that the seminary contract with the Dobson organ company for an instrument at the cost of \$146,000 in spite of the very uncertain financial situation.

The board of control did not feel comfortable signing a contract for the organ with the financial situation so unclear and did not accept the committee recommendation.

COMMITTEE MEETING - JULY 5, 1988

Either there are meeting minutes missing (which doesn't seem to be the case) or the financial delays had been a major setback since the committee didn't formally meet for more than a year.

The committee discussed the publicity efforts, which had reached 40% of WELS congregations and also included two WLQ articles.

REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE TO THE BOARD OF CONTROL - JANUARY 24, 1989

Now that the thank offering has been collected new bids were called from organ builders. The Dobson bid increased to \$208,000, an increase of 42% over the couple of years since the previous bid. The committee decided Dobson was no longer an option. Martin Ott was brought up as a possible builder and the committee authorized Meyer to visit Ott. Meyer reported on his visit with Ott - he was impressive and generous as a builder.

COMMITTEE MEETING - FEBRUARY 11, 1989

Bids from various builders again brought in and Ott's was the lowest and the best value, since his instrument was not really considered a step down from the other builders. The committee recommends the seminary contract Martin Ott to build the organ.

COMMITTEE MEETING - MARCH 20, 1989

The style of the organ is discussed. It will be a red oak case. Maintenance was discussed.

CONTRACT SIGNING - MARCH 28, 1989

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary formally signs the contract with Martin Ott to construct the pipe organ.

COMMITTEE MEETING - MAY 8, 1990

The case design was formally accepted and the decision was made to go with a stained finish on the oak. The committee initiated dedication plans, hoping to provide a festive occasion suitable for the dedication of the instrument. Part of the dedication celebration would be a commissioned organ work (for which Martin Ott offered to pay as a gift).

The committee also decided to allow the use of the organ by DMLC students for their own organ recitals in the Milwaukee area. The committee decided to draw up an organ use policy to keep good order and to preempt any problems that may arise from multiple parties requesting to use the organ.