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## Organ finishers give voice to instrument Job is to 'bring heart to the sound'

by Patricia Bathurst

It's all mathematics. That's what Stephen Leslie, tonal finisher for the Ohio-based Schantz Organ Co. claims. Physics, really. Air is pushed through pipes of varying heights and widths; its vibration across a tongue in the pipe creates a sound. The height and width contribute to the sound, as does whether the pipes are metal or wood. That's only a crude explanation of the musical drama that unfolds when a pipe organ is played.

Leslie, 55, along with Frederick Heffner, 60, a professional voicer, are giving Trinity Cathedral's new organ its unique sound. "Once it's voiced," Leslie said, "that's the voice or the sound it will have forever."

He and Heffner have spent two weeks, with at least two more to come, working with each pipe, each key, each stop of Trinity's new 4,138-pipe organ. "Each organ made by Schantz has a Schantz sound - one that's generally called American eclectic - but each finish gives an organ a distinct, unique voice," Heffner explained.

Leslie and Heffner, who have each voiced more than 150 organs, have finished nearly a dozen as a team. "You really need to work as one person," Leslie said. That's because one person needs to be at the organ console, playing and listening, while the other is off working directly with the pipes and their mechanics. The men work within six basic parameters to finish the organ's sound: loud, soft, slow, fast, bright, dark.

"We do work exceptionally well together," Heffner said, "and that is because we trust one another."

"I hear colors of sound," Leslie explained. "Generally, on any given instrument, it takes me about 20 minutes to decide how I'll work with it."

"Your ears hear the music," Heffner added, "but your heart processes it. So our work is to bring heart to the sound."

"My job is to create the palette for the performers," Leslie said, "but it is very much how my heart feels the sounds."

Both men said it's possible to literally feel the sound created by music, especially a pipe organ, which vibrates the very air to create its sound. "Your body can't help but react to this sound," Leslie said. "When all that air moves inside those pipes, it happens to the entire room. All your senses become involved."

"We know that what we do will directly affect the audiences," Heffner said. "This organ is part of the life of this church. People will be baptized, married and buried with this organ giving voice to all the emotions of those occasions."

"And this is a near-perfect marriage of room and organ," Leslie said. "The architect really understood what would be needed here because there is an electricity in this room that is very exciting to work with."

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Clay Thompson

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