

Church Musicians: Space for Musicians

Below are some additional examples of churches who created more space for their accompanying musicians.

This content supplements an article from Worship the Lord, #26, September 2007.

Christ, North St. Paul, MN added space for musicians in a remodeling project and Mount Olive, Shakopee, MN planned for ample space for musicians in the construction of their new church.

Christ, N. St. Paul: BEFORE



Fixed pews, dim lighting, carpeted aisle



Organ console, piano, filing cabinet. This photo is not a deliberate attempt to make the old design look bad. It really was terribly crowded.

Church Architecture: Reclaiming space for Musicians

By Rev. Joel Gawrisch

As music programs grow and more instrumentalists become involved in worship, older churches may find musician space severely limited. Original architects and church planners may not have anticipated the need for over-all space - and flexibility within that space - required by musical rehearsals and performance. Balconies serving as musician space can be particularly challenging with organ consoles, organ casework or speakers, and pews for additional seating claiming much of the available space. But some

careful planning and efficient use of space can alleviate many of the space-challenges musicians face in cramped quarters. Consider the balcony of Christ Lutheran in North St. Paul, Minnesota.

Before

In the early 1960's this growing congregation needed to build a new worship and education facility. As the worship space was planned, little space was required by a music program consisting of a choir, an organ and a handful of musicians. The end design resembled a megaphone - the narrow, box-like balcony was to project sound to a rising sanctuary. Other architectural inadequacies like lighting and duct work would become quickly evident. But sound and space would be challenges for more than 40 years.

Budget constraints prevented the congregation from purchasing a new organ for the facility, so the congregation moved the old electric, tube-based organ across the street and into their new home. The organ speakers were placed in the balcony, in the casements reserved for organ pipes, and served the congregation well. In the 1970s, the congregation replaced the organ with an electronic organ, with more speakers and a larger console. The speakers were, again, placed down in the organ pipe casements. Later, the congregation built platforms above the casements, and placed the speakers on the platforms. Sound improved for the organ, but created volume issues for choirs and others seated in the balcony. In 1996, the congregation purchased its third organ, a digital instrument, after it was determined that the organ pipe casements were not properly designed for organ pipes. The organ pipe casements took up over one-third of the available balcony space, and would never be used for organ pipes. The new organ's main speakers were placed in cabinets mounted outside of the balcony, and suspended in the back corners of the nave. Antiphonal speakers were positioned above and behind the reredos in the chancel for augmentation. Balcony speakers aided the organist and choir who found themselves challenged by their position behind the sound of the main speakers. But issues from the balcony merely shifted to the sanctuary as back pew worshippers were drowned by the excessive volume necessary to fill the worship space. Speaker issues were finally resolved in 2002 with the installation of additional speakers around the perimeter of the nave, allowing for reduction in volume for the main speakers.

As the organs changed, so did the congregation's music program. With these blessings came additional challenges. A space originally designed for the organ, the choirs and over-flow seating took on additional roles: brass accompaniment for choirs, a flute choir, guitars, timpani, an electronic keyboard, the Lutheran Elementary School classes singing in worship, all competing for space and struggling with fixed pews, odd sightlines, larger organ consoles and the ever-present booming echo of almost any footstep on the hollow risers. The question "What can we do with the balcony?" was asked among Christ Lutheran's organists, choir members and musicians for years.

After

Many and varied solutions were suggested. But a 2002 School of Worship Enrichment led to the formulation of a balcony remodeling plan. The concept sought to balance necessary improvements, flexible space, and acoustics with financial efficiency and, of course, limited funds.

The new design included:

- ✦ Removal of the old organ casework, increasing useable balcony floor space by 50% and allowing for musician friendly deeper risers.
- ✦ 48 inch deep risers to accommodate seated musicians with music stands.
- ✦ Sound dampened risers made of two layers of ¾" material, insulated joists, sheet-rock backing, and laminate flooring with its foam underlayment.
- ✦ Risers moved up and to the back for better sound projection into the sanctuary. (A "choir shell" effect.)
- ✦ The organ console shifted from the center of the balcony to one side, providing better sight lines for the organist and others.
- ✦ An "orchestra pit" in the front of the balcony for a keyboard and musicians.
- ✦ Additional and controlled lighting for brightness as well as musical performances during evening and *tenebrae* worship.

- ✦ A new and lighter shade of paint brought additional brightness to the space.
 - ✦ Stackable chairs, instead of pews, to allow for flexibility.
 - ✦ Padded chairs, rather than carpeting, to further dampen floor noise without significantly diminishing sound projection.
 - ✦ Re-wiring for centralized control of bell, microphones, mixer, and computer, network connection.
- New duct work for more balanced climate control

Additional Benefits

From demolition to final touches, the project took 4 months to complete. 22 volunteers came to help with demolition and nearly 30 volunteers gave of themselves to complete it. Most of these volunteers were not musicians but music appreciators with specialized skills, excited to have a part in Christ Lutheran's music ministry. This volunteer labor along with recycled materials from the original structure and careful research provided significant cost-saving measures. With original estimates in excess of \$40,000, final cost of the project came in at about \$16,000, due to significant volunteer labor. The bulk of this cost was the specialized chairs, designed for musicians and choirs.

N St. Paul: AFTER



“orchestra pit” in front, movable seating, improved lighting, 50% more space with organ casework removed

Mount Olive, Shakopee, MN

On the back page of *Worship the Lord*, issue 26, there is a picture of the new (2004) sanctuary at Mount Olive, Shakopee, MN. The musician space is visible at the far left, but the obvious focus of the church design is the area of the means of grace: the pulpit, the baptismal font, the serving table for the Lord's body and blood.

The location of the choir area is perhaps one of the best choices we made. We had debated the pros and cons of the choir up front versus in the back or even a balcony. The compromise turned out to be the best option of all. (Pastor Mark Schwertfeger) People can sit and see the choir from just about any pew or chair in the nave. If they choose not to look at the choir they aren't forced to do so. They can listen intently and look forward if they desire.

Self-conscious choir members found this to be far superior to "going up front." It allows for worship without the idea of putting on a show or being on display.

The advantage of having the choir area very near the warm-up room with door access on the side and back was a stroke of genius.

The choir warms up prior to the service, gowns up, and then proceeds into the choir area from the side door in an elegant procession that is not showy.

The back entrance allows a late coming choir member (such as the Pastor) to "sneak in" without too many people noticing.



There is an oak floor surface that matches the chancel flooring 20-25 ft. away. Both do an excellent job of not allowing the sound to disappear into the walls, pews, coats, clothing, or ceiling. The "ribbed" walls in the sanctuary are designed for the same purpose.

In Lutheranism the musicians are not thought of in terms of performance or taking center stage. They regard themselves as assisting the congregation in its worship. Luther advocated the use of all kinds of instruments to join the people's song (not to entertain)...

Rev. Wayne Schulz