

# Charles Fisk

## Pipe Flueways

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HERE IN THESE PAGES I would like to stir discussion of a voicing question that has troubled American organ building for 25 years. *How narrow should we be making our flues?* (Remember, the flue, or windway, is the little slit that takes the air from the pipe foot and forms it into the wind sheet, which in turn undulates across the upper lip, causing the air column in the pipe to vibrate. The flue is where the nicking goes.)

American flue history reads like this: From Hook and Erben in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to pre-war G. Donald Harrison in the 20<sup>th</sup>, flues were kept open. An ordinary Principal pipe had a flue whose width approximated the metal thickness of the lower lip. Naturally it was also endowed with copious nicking. The tone was often rich but without chiff. Nobody in America worried about nicking until experts of the postwar German “organ reform” pronounced that, for Bach and his predecessors, nicking was *verboten*. In the 1950s American voicers everywhere began trying to do without nicking. They discovered that one got a pleasant “chiff” that way, but also a sustained and most unpleasant frying sound—as of bacon and eggs in the skillet—unless they greatly narrowed the flue. They then found that if they narrowed the flue to a hairline crack they could get rid of the frying sound, but at the cost of a certain boldness and character in the tone. Most American voicers of the 1950s were sensitive to this loss of character but went along with the change toward narrower flues because so many organists were demanding what might be called “the neo-baroque sound,” and increasingly were seeking to satisfy their wants with imports. Voicing with narrow flues and very light nicking is common in most American organ shops today.

The trouble is that the German experts’ version of the Bach organ was only partly right. True, most organ pipes from Bach's time and before have little or no nicking, but the flues are almost never hairline. Often in old work the flues are as wide as the lip metal thickness, particularly from 1' pitch upward. These pipes seem able to “have their cake and eat it too.” They possess the open-flued boldness and easy character of Hook's and Harrison's best work, yet they speak with the incisiveness that comes from leaving out nicks—all with no eggs frying. How can this be?

Compare a 17<sup>th</sup>-century pipe to a 20<sup>th</sup>-century pipe. The new pipe glitters; the old looks up at you dully with sleepy eyes and a yawn. The flue of the new pipe is neatly chiselled as if machine-made; the flue of the old pipe has an acutely distressed look. Moss seems to be growing on the languid; often there are tool marks roughly made in that tenderest of all

places, the languid's lower leading edge. In short, the old pipe looks as if its maker just didn't care. Yet its tone and speech belie this notion.

Here in the Fisk workshop we have always worked with open flues. We have done this by using just enough nicking to attenuate the frying sound, mean-while retaining boldness and a, pleasant chiff. To us the tone achieved is good, but it is never quite like the sound of the old organs because the nicking, being itself an artistic ingredient, introduces a certain grainy quality to the tone, a shimmer, sometimes even a silvery quality, that is a specialty in itself. It is this very quality imparted by the nicking that gives Hook's and Harrison's organs some of their particular character.

The question remains: How can we produce sounds as beautiful as the oldest sounds? The answer is elusive, but it surely includes keeping flues open without using nicks--seemingly impossible in a newly made, undistressed organ pipe. Probably the answer also includes the use of the *Gegenphase* or counter-face (what Cavallé-Coll calls *la saillie*), which is to be found in literally all of the old work including that of the 19th century, and which consists of an almost microscopic vertical faceting or blunting of the languid's lower leading edge.

But there are no easy answers. If we American organ builders and organists are to learn what the old organs really have to teach us, we should be turning our full attention to this problem of the flues. And we should listen not to whatever doctrine may be currently fashionable but to the musical sounds themselves.