

## Organ Historical Society's national convention showcases fine instruments in region

### Preview

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By Andrew Druckenbrod, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Michael Henninger/Post-Gazette

Kevin Birch of Bangor, Maine, poses for a portrait in front of an 1872 Derrick & Felgemaker organ before a performance at St. Benedict the Moor Church, Uptown.

Some of Pittsburgh's most prominent landmarks are indoors.

Amid the city's beloved bridges, stairs, rivers and buildings, a panoply of pipe organs has long put it and the region on the atlas of enthusiasts and performers.

"Pittsburgh has some very good unaltered instruments," says James M. Stark, co-chair of the Organ Historical Society's 2010 National Convention meeting here this week.

"Pittsburgh has a wealth of superb pipe organs -- some small, some enormous, in a vast array of styles," says Paul Jacobs, the organ phenom from Washington, Pa., now chair of the organ department at the Juilliard School. "On the national scale, Pittsburgh is known to have an exceptionally rich concentration of magnificent organs, many of which are meticulously maintained."

The Organ Historical Society, based in Richmond, Va., has been presenting recitals and lectures on about 30 organs around the Pittsburgh region to showcase what committee co-chair J.R. Daniels calls its "gems of instruments." The organization also has handed out citations to honor five local instruments of "historical, musical, technological and cultural significance": the 1838 Joseph Harvey organ in St. John's Evangelical Protestant Church, Zelienople; the 1872 Derrick & Felgemaker organ in St. Benedict the Moor Church, Uptown; the 1905 Austin organ in First Methodist Church, West Newton; the 1931 Kimball organ in Harbison Chapel, Grove City College; and the 1962 Beckerath organ in St. Paul Cathedral, Oakland.

These instruments join two others in Pittsburgh with earlier citations: the 1895 Farrand & Votey organ in Calvary Methodist Church and the 1907 Kimball organ in Rodef Shalom Congregation in Shadyside.

#### Organ Historical Society 2010 Convention

Remaining free recitals:

- Wolfgang Rubsam, 8 tonight, St. Paul Cathedral, Oakland.
- Neil Stahurski, with Yeeha Chiu, piano, 8 p.m. Saturday, Eastminster Presbyterian Church, East Liberty.

For more information, visit [www.organsociety.org](http://www.organsociety.org).

That brings the region's total to seven, which is no small number considering that, of the more than 100,000 pipe organs that have been built in North America, the Organ Historical Society has awarded only 393 citations. And the seven cited don't include several other local important pipe organs in the area, including Calvary Episcopal Church's mighty Casavant (Shadyside), East Liberty Presbyterian's Aeolian-Skinner and All Saints Roman Catholic Church's Hook & Hastings (Etna) instruments.

It's a wide array of instrument types, ranging from the intimate -- the single manual (keyboard), no-pedal, four-rank Joseph Harvey organ of St. John's -- to the epic scope of the four manual, 138-rank Calvary Episcopal Casavant. A rank is a complete set of pipes, which sound when a depressed key opens a stop (allowing the flow of air to the pipe). Organists can select one rank or several to create different timbres.

Ranks of pipes also add to the visual splendor of organs, and an excellent example is the recently restored Beckerath in St. Paul Cathedral, which was modeled after "great antique European organs both in the concept of organ sound, as well as an organ's architectural concept," says cathedral head organist Don Fellows.

But the Organ Historical Society isn't just satisfied with honoring the past. It is a preservation society and wants to restore these instruments to their former glory -- or rather, to persuade others to do so. And its local chapter has two pipe organs in particular in its sights: Rodef Shalom's four-manual, 54-rank organ and the four-manual, 126-rank but now silenced organ of Carnegie Music Hall in Oakland.

"What we do is attempt to put pressure on organizations to save and restore those organs that are very good," says Mr. Stark. "We haven't arranged the convention for that reason, but the Kimball at Rodef Shalom is good enough that it was cited in 1980. We think it is worthy of preservation. When we show up with 200 some people, we are saying we think this is important."

"We try to get the instrument playable, and often that will inspire a church to repair it," says Mr. Daniels, who is organist at SS. Simon & Jude Parish in Scott. "When the Rodef Shalom organ was installed in 1907, Kimball was one of the leading builders. One of the things that set that company apart is that they used the highest quality of wood and metal. Originally it had tubular pneumatic action, but they electrified it in 1929.

"It is a Romantic organ with warm sound orchestral imitating stops instead of the bright sound of baroque or neo baroque instruments. Of this vintage, there are maybe only two left in the world."

But the problem is the organ is only about half playable, something that Rodef Shalom's organist Don Megahan is keenly aware. "I am happy that it turns on every week," he says. "This is the largest still surviving instrument from its era still playing anywhere in the nation. But the top manual is almost completely unplayable and there are various stops over the other manuals that do not play."

Mr. Megahan estimates the cost to repair the instrument to be about \$1 million, a prohibitive amount in the present economy. He appreciates the support of the Organ Historical Society, but he differs with its members in that he wants the Kimball updated rather than restored.

"I wouldn't want to destroy the integrity of the original sound of the instrument, but I am not interested in putting it in pristine 1907 condition -- that just doesn't work in the 21st century," he said. "There's no MIDI capabilities and it would be nice to have some brighter upper ranks and reed stops."

Mr. Megahan says he would prefer to save as many of the original pipes as possible.

It's the eternal debate between preservationist desires and contemporary needs, especially in a temple with the active worship life of Rodef Shalom. "We don't even do the same literature as in 1907," he says.

But Mr. Daniels echoes the general Organ Historical Society sentiment with the response that, "the organ restored could play 90 percent of the literature out there. No instrument will be able to play everything." But he does suggest one compromise: "They could restore it to the way it was, especially the rare art nouveau console, and put multi-levels of combination action and MIDI in a hidden drawer."

There's less debate about the grand old organ of Carnegie Music Hall, which was inaugurated in 1895 with Andrew Carnegie in attendance. It saw an amazing amount of activity in the decades that followed -- 4,737 concerts in all -- but it fell into disrepair soon after a recital by Paul Koch in 1981 and has been mute ever since.

There's been many a cry for its restoration, but leave it to the Organ Historical Society to stir the pot a bit.

"We billed it as unplayable, but it ended up that some of it does work, enough that I can pull out every stop that you can get an idea of what it sounded like," says Mr. Daniels. "We are going to a lecture [today] at 4 p.m. and we are going to surprise everyone by playing a hymn on it that we can sing. It is going to be a fairly big sound."

"It is an extremely important instrument," says Mr. Stark. "Everyone played there at one time, including Edwin Lemare, Virgil Fox and E. Power Biggs."

"Considering Andrew Carnegie's own passion for pipe organs, it would be both appropriate and thrilling for Carnegie Music Hall to restore its pipe organ to be used with orchestra and in solo performance," says Mr. Jacobs. "This could add an exciting new dimension of musical offerings to the Pittsburgh community."

If that is a, well, pipe dream, it and other instruments are still worth fighting for, according to Mr. Stark.

"We want to save all these organs."

Andrew Druckenbrod: [adruckenbrod@post-gazette.com](mailto:adruckenbrod@post-gazette.com) or 412-263-1750. Blog: [Classical Musings at post-gazette.com/music](http://classicalmusings.post-gazette.com/music).

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