

TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Pipe organs essential part of Pittsburgh's big churches



The couplers of the pipe organ at the Westminster Presbyterian Church in Upper Saint Clair on Sunday, August 12, 2012. Stephanie Strasburg | Tribune-Review

By **Mark Kanny**

TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Published: Saturday, August 25, 2012, 9:09 p.m.

Updated 22 hours ago

When Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart called the pipe organ “the king of instruments” he was speaking from 14 years of first-hand experience. He began playing the instrument when he was 7 and continued to play pipe organs on his travels in Europe until at least 1789, two years before his death.

Apart from earlier and smaller instruments in monasteries, somewhat larger pipe organs began to appear in cathedrals and abbeys in the mid-14th century. After two centuries of development by organ builders, instruments began to be built which continue to serve as inspiration for organs being built today.

Pipe organs are an essential part of Pittsburgh’s biggest churches, with instrument specifications proudly displayed on their websites and serious money allocated for

About Mark Kanny

Tribune-Review Classical music critic Mark Kanny can be reached [via e-mail](#) or at 412-320-7877.

maintenance and upgrades. Outstanding instruments made by Beckerath, Aeolian-Skinner and Reuter have thousands of pipes, which provide a wide array of colors controlled by “stops.” The power and range can be awesome. The stone floor of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Upper St. Clair can be felt to shake from the strength of the Austin organ’s low notes.

“The pipe organ has the power to envelop a large church or a large cathedral,” says Bill Goff, one of three organists at Heinz Chapel in Oakland. “It’s a sound we associate with worshiping the divine. I don’t know any other instrument that has its breadth of sound. I think the organ lends itself masterfully to the worship of God.”

Much of the effect of the pipe organ, apart from any corresponding effect in architecture, is its extraordinary ability to support congregational singing, says Paul Johnston, an Anglican Church priest and an artistic lecturer in music at Carnegie Mellon University.

He emphasizes that the organ is a wind instrument, like the human voice. The sound of instruments such as piano, percussion and harp begins to decay immediately, whereas wind instruments, and strings, too, can sustain notes and even crescendo during them.

“If you’re a person who likes to sing, it is so much easier with a pipe organ,” says Johnston. “If you have a congregation of lusty singers, they’re not going to drown it out the way they would a piano. In fact, one could argue that a good pipe organ encourages lusty singing.”

Don Fellows counts himself lucky to be playing the Beckerath organ at St. Paul Cathedral in Oakland, where he is director of music and organist. Rudolf von Beckerath worked for the German government as a restorer and inspector of historic instruments in Germany after World War I. When he began building his own instruments, he was deeply influenced by what he had learned, especially from examples of 15th and 16th century North German organs.

“Almost universally, the organ pipes were located high in the balcony at the central access to the building,” Fellows says. “I think organ builders and architects and acousticians were aware that, for the best sound, the best location was high on the central axis of the building.”

The Beckerath uses the traditional mechanical action to connect the organ console to the pipes. Modern designs use electronic links, which has advantages beyond being able to move the organ console.

Edward Alan Moore, organist and music director at East Liberty Presbyterian Church since February 2011, plays on an Aeolian Skinner organ that was substantially renovated in 2007.

There are four facades for divisions of organ pipes on the left and right sides, plus an antiphonal organ at the back — all controlled by solid-state electronics for the connection between the organ console and the pipes, and for registration, which can be preset like a car stereo.

“The most important part of organ building is the “voicing,” the adjustment of the pipes with each other. “The most important stop on the organ is the room,” Moore says. “You could have the same organ in two different rooms, and they would be completely different.”

Fellows agrees, saying he considers comparing pipe organs as akin to comparing apples and oranges because of design differences and the question of placement of the organ pipes in the building.

Moore sits far from the organ pipes, and members of the congregation are at varying distances from them. The electronics of the Aeolian-Skinner let him use a MIDI computer program to listen to his registrations from a congregant’s perspective.

“With any instrument, but especially with mine, it’s very important to register the organ, to choose my sound, for the people who are out in the room,” he says. “You might say I have one of the worst seats in the house.”

The first time Bill Gesin played the Casavant organ in Calvary Episcopal Church, he found it intimidating. A pianist by training, he’d been playing organ since high school. But he’d been playing a small, two-manual, 15-stop organ before he was hired as assistant organist at Calvary, where the organ has four manuals and more than 200 stops.

“I had a lot of assistance early on from Alan (Lewis, Calvary’s director of music), just about registering on that organ. It was great for me because it forced me to do more practicing than I’d

done in quite a while,” Gesin says.

Gesin, 34, says it took six to nine months to feel really comfortable playing Calvary’s organ. Now, he revels in the immense possibilities provided by the great pipe organ. He’s naturally attentive to the palette of colors it can produce. But he’s also come to appreciate the spatial possibilities in Calvary, which has an antiphonal organ with its own stops at the back of the church.

“A lot of things can connect with each other using the antiphonal,” he says. “It’s awesome to do it that way instead of just with tone color.”

Johnston is not alone in believing that the vertical lines and high ceilings of tradition church architecture “naturally lifts one’s eyes up, and, if I may say, one’s heart and spirit.”

The splendor of a great pipe can magnify the religious experience, particularly through singing. The combination has been part of the classic church experience for more than half a millennium. Mark Kanny is classical music critic for Trib Total Media. He can be reached at 412-320-7877 or mkanny@tribweb.

Copyright © 2012 – Trib Total Media
