

University plans to restore 50-ton 1931 pipe organ

By James S. Tyree

Published: Wed, October 25, 2006 12:00 AM

NORMAN — Christmas came early this year for the University of Oklahoma's organ program. Instead of receiving a shiny new bike with some assembly required, though, OU got a pipe organ completed in 1931 that weighs 50 tons, has about 6,500 pipes and will require up to three years to put back together. This gift from the University of Pennsylvania is old and dusty, but is virtually incomparable.

John Schwandt, an OU associate professor of music and American Organ Institute director, said there are only three in the world exactly like it. One M.P. Moller Opus 5819 pipe organ is in Britain and the other has spent the past two decades in storage in Minneapolis.

"This is priceless," Schwandt said. "The Kimmel Center in Philadelphia paid \$6 million for a similar-sized organ, but you can't get another organ today quite like this one."

Its pipes' lengths range from 35 feet down to six inches. Most are metal, but hundreds are made of thick, solid wood that Schwandt said has no knots.

The organ has two consoles, concert and theater, that have 244 keys and 32 pedals between them.

The smaller theater console actually controls more of the pipes, but the concert console has many color-coded switches to pipes that emulate brass, strings, percussion instruments and even the human voice.

Schwandt said such classic organs put synthesizers to shame.

"The organ is not dead, not by a long shot," he said. "No matter how good the technology gets, it'll never be as good as this."

The organ once was housed in the Pennsylvania Convention Hall in Philadelphia, but had spent the past few years in storage. Its storage building was set for demolition and the grand instrument could have gone down with it, had officials at the universities of Oklahoma and Pennsylvania not struck a deal.

Schwandt said OU paid \$1 for the organ along with moving expenses of about \$100,000.

"We are confident that OU will provide an excellent new home for the beloved organ," said Kevin Mahoney, senior vice president of the University of Pennsylvania Health System.

"Our decision to donate the instrument is due in large part to OU's commitment to restoring the organ to its original glory, assuring the legacy of the Convention Hall will be enjoyed by many future generations."

The organ eventually will move to the Catlett Music Center, but it will not replace the large pipe organ in the center's Gothic Hall. By comparison, the Gothic Hall organ has more than 3,000 pipes.

The new acquisition for now, is at an OU storage center in far north Norman, where it will become a valuable teaching tool for Schwandt's students.

Lesson No. 1 came two weeks ago when students spent four days helping professional organ movers unload the instrument's parts from five semi-trailer trucks.

Schwandt said OU will hire five or so professionals to oversee the cleaning, restoration and putting together of the organ in a shop to be built inside the storage building, and students will assist along the way. The professor hopes the process will begin during the spring semester.

The organ will be reconstructed in sections and then moved to Catlett Music Center.

Bradley Fitch, a doctoral student who followed Schwandt this year from Indiana University, said the experience will be "amazing."

"This is one of the reasons why I'm here," Fitch said.



John Schwandt, center, a University of Oklahoma associate professor of organ, shows the console of a donated 6,500-pipe organ to organ students Janci Bronson, left, Aaron Laws and Bradley Kitch in a warehouse on Monday.

BY MICHAEL DOWNES, THE OKLAHOMAN