

Detroit Lakes church to unveil 37,800-pound 'organ on steroids'



Holy Rosary's pipe organ in Detroit Lakes, Minn., is an instrument that has many organists marveling at its digital abilities.

Brian Basham / Forum News Service

DETROIT LAKES, Minn. – It isn't the Westminster Abbey, but Holy Rosary in Detroit Lakes will soon be sounding a lot like it.

A new pipe organ is being built and installed that, for visitors, will both knock their socks off and rock their worlds.

"I call it an organ on steroids," laughed Scott Mehlhaff, an organist who is overseeing the project. *"It is going to be an instrument that is larger than anything in the area, including Fargo. It will rival those in the Twin Cities and will, in some ways, be even grander."*

The pipe organ is being built by Moe Pipe Organ Company out of Wadena, which happens to be one of the few companies in the country dedicated to this type of pipe organ construction.

After roughly 12,000 screws and bolts, 3,843 individual pipes of all sizes and metals, and 4,500 man hours to build it, the regal 37,800-pound pipe organ is almost ready for its audiences.

The organ is a compilation of different pipe organs all taken apart and put back together to build one, massive instrument.

“We are using all of the pipes that we had before (in the old Holy Rosary pipe organ), some pipes out of a church in Iowa and some other pipes that Allen Moe had from other instruments that he has collected,” said Mehlhaff. The vintage pipes are cleaned, repaired and “re-voiced” to work with the new organ.

The casework of the organ is designed to mesh with Holy Rosary’s interior, with smooth, lacquered red oak, while the interior structure features strong southern yellow poplar woods.

And while the instrument appears nothing short of regal, with polished, copper trumpets shooting out horizontally from the facade of the organ, it’s really the digital guts of the organ that will produce the astounding sound.

Digital enhancements will take normal, 16-foot-pipes and convert the sound into something heard from 64-foot-pipes.

The organ is being constructed with 34 digital voices that will play on 14 audio channels over 12 full-range speakers.

“We could never afford to have this kind of sound without having a digital element to it,” said Mehlhaff, who says without the digital enhancements, it would cost roughly \$1 million to build an organ with this type of sound.

The electrical system contains about 25 miles of wire, as well as over 15,000 individually soldered electrical connections.

“The electrical system of the organ is computerized and comprised of various solid-state electronic components that work together to translate the organist’s movements at the console into the music you hear from the pipes,” said Allen Moe, who is building the organ. *“Each of the 3,521 pipes has a small electro-mechanical valve underneath it which controls the flow of air to the pipes. When the appropriate key is pressed the valve opens and allows the pipe to play.”*

“We put something in there called a digital midi (musical instrument digital interface),” said Mehlhaff, who says that will allow musicians to transpose. *“So if there is a hymn that is too high for people to sing, you can push a button and it changes the key.”*

If organists aren’t available during church time, no problem. The digital midi also allows them to record music to be played back at a later date with the simple push of a button.

“I’m very excited about the potential that this instrument has,” said Mehlhaff, who hopes to create a concert series with it. He says there has already been a lot of buzz radiating from this pipe organ from organists around the region.

“Organists from Fargo and Minneapolis and beyond are intrigued because of the digital component,” said Mehlhaff. “Not many have the technology to do this. Huge churches like Notre Dame in Paris just put in a brand new counsel that can do the same thing as ours.”

The organ will be in place for use by Easter, but isn’t expected to be completely acclimated and through with its “tunnel voicing” until early fall.

It’ll be exciting to have something like this in town, and I want the whole community to have access to this and use it,” said Mehlhaff. “This is something that shouldn’t just be enjoyed by Holy Rosary, but something special and unique like this should be used by the whole community.”



Alen Moe is building the Holy Rosary pipe organ with vintage pipes that he cleans and “re-voices”. DETROIT LAKES TRIBUNE/Brian Basham