

The art of the organ  
Shelf improvement

## The art of the organ

At ASU, pipe dreams become realities

By Oriana Parker

Mention the words “organ music” to the average person on the street, and the sweeping preludes or postludes heard at weddings or funerals might be the first things to come to mind, or perhaps the haunting organ melodies from the Broadway musical “The Phantom of the Opera.” But in its heyday, the organ was a rock star among musical instruments and organ melodies were familiar to many.





Kimberly Marshall, Patricia and Leonard Goldman Professor of Organ and director of the School of Music, makes adjustments to the Fritts organ at ASU.

(opposite page) The 1,900-pipe Fritts organ, built specifically for ASU, was installed in 1991. Except for a few hardware items, the organ is completely handcrafted, representing 13,000 hours of individual labor.

Iconic classical composers often paid tribute to the instrument with their work. Johann Sebastian Bach wrote scores of organ fugues, toccatas and preludes, while Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart referred to the organ as “the king of instruments.” Organ music was popular in America from the mid-19th until the mid-20th century, when squabbling between divergent schools of thought about the legitimacy of electronic organs eventually turned off audiences.

After a half century of obscurity, it appears that organ music is making a comeback. ASU is home to two organs considered among the finest in the country, and it is using those instruments as tools to train students in the School of Music’s Organ Performance program to pursue careers as serious musicians.

Kimberly Marshall, Patricia and Leonard Goldman Professor of Organ and director of the School of Music, noted that the Valley of the Sun is an oasis for organ music lovers and organists. An abundance of churches and other venues with quality instruments provided ample opportunities for her students to ply their trade.

“Phoenix is a major urban area with many churches that prioritize fine liturgical music,” she said. “All of my eight graduate students have part-time jobs as organists that pay between \$15,000 and \$40,000 annually.”

#### KEYS TO GREATNESS

ASU is among the institutions that local organists praise for its exceptional instruments. It was the quality of ASU’s organs that initially attracted Marshall to lead the music school and direct the organ program, she said.

Two organs anchor the program. The 1,900-pipe Fritts organ, built specifically for ASU, is utilized for teaching, practice

and recitals. Except for a few hardware items, the organ is completely handcrafted, representing 13,000 hours of individual labor. The instrument was purchased by ASU for \$330,000 in 1991; today, its value is estimated at more than \$1 million.

The other “king” currently residing at Organ Hall is an Italian Baroque instrument built by Domenico Traeri in 1742. The instrument, which is currently on loan to the university, is utilized for performance, special classes and lessons. The recent installation of this 300-pipe organ makes ASU one of only four U.S. academic institutions – and the only one in the Southwest – to house an Italian Baroque organ.

Marshall said the Traeri gives listeners a taste of how organs were played in the era before recorded music.

“The Traeri allows concert-goers to experience what it must have been like to hear organists play centuries ago,” says Marshall.

#### HITTING ALL THE RIGHT NOTES

Beyond housing organs (pardon the pun) with great sets of pipes, ASU also shines in the world of organ performance thanks to the musicianship of Marshall, who has taught organ at the Royal Academy in London and Stanford University and performed throughout Europe, including at London’s Royal Festival Hall and the Chartres Cathedral in France. After spending time under her tutelage, Marshall’s students frequently compete against the best organists in the world and often do well.

Ilona Kubiacyk was a recent participant in the 2011 Dublin International Organ Competition, one of only a dozen musicians selected to compete. Kubiacyk, who is slated to graduate in May with a Doctor of Musical

Arts degree, said the event offered an outstanding opportunity to hear master organists from around the world.

“Three colleagues came from the U.S., while the others came from Austria, England, Germany, Ireland, Japan and South Korea,” she said. “The event was a fabulous forum for intercultural dialogue, inspiration and personal growth.”

Christina Hutten ‘09 M.M. competed in the 2008 International Organ Competition in Tuscany, Italy, and placed second in the event’s final round. In all, three of the nine semifinalists that year came from ASU. After completing her degree at ASU, Hutten was awarded a grant from the Canada Council for the Arts to study the organ throughout Europe.

Hutten credits her recent success to her training at ASU, noting that she was taught how to write an eye-catching resume and successfully compete for grants in addition to learning how to create and perform engaging concert programs.

“What really sets ASU’s organ performance program apart is the way that it prepares students for the business of music,” she says. “A musician needs the very same skill set that any entrepreneur needs to build a successful business.”

It seems sweet music – and results – will continue to waft out of Organ Hall in Tempe in the future. Marshall and her students are preparing to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Fitts Organ with a special concert on Jan. 8. In this celebration, as they did during its installation 20 years ago, guest organists from around the world promise to pull out all of the stops.

*Oriana Parker is a freelance arts writer based in Scottsdale.*