

Worcester Auditorium organ set to roar once again

By Richard Duckett
Telegram & Gazette Staff

WORCESTER — When organist William Ness starts “pulling out the stops” for Richard Wagner’s stately and powerful overture to “Die Meistersinger” around 4 p.m. on Oct. 9, it will be the first time the “Mighty Kimball Pipe Organ” at the Worcester Memorial Auditorium will have been formally heard in a public concert since 1992.

Expect to be impressed during the Worcester Memorial Auditorium Festival Concerts Oct. 9 and 14, which will include three organ performances. “It has this gorgeous sound. It’s thrilling,” said Will Sherwood, dean of the Worcester Chapter, American Guild of Organists, as he sat at the console of the organ recently in the auditorium’s Great Hall.

The console looks rather small relative to what it can command, such as 6,841 pipes, chambers on each side almost 40 feet tall, and 100 miles of wiring. When Sherwood began playing some keys and the Great Hall

became full of rich music from seemingly all directions, you could understand what he was talking about.

The formal opening recital on the Kimball organ took place on Nov. 6, 1933, (with organist Palmer Christian of the University of Michigan) just weeks after the then state-of-the-art auditorium had opened to much fanfare and civic pride. As part of that, the organ represented a style of organ building and manifested a high quality of construction that we are not likely to ever see again, Sherwood said.

Sunday will also be the first time public concerts have been seen at the auditorium in quite a while.

The building fell into disuse for a number of reasons, but when the city of Worcester in conjunction with Preservation Worcester began an initiative to rekindle interest in the facility, the Worcester Chapter AGO let it be known that it wanted to have an instrumental role.

Sherwood said he told people, “‘Hey folks, this (the Kimball organ) still exists.’” Public tours in August

Worcester Memorial Auditorium Festival Concerts 2016

Featuring the 1933 Mighty Kimball Organ

When: 3 p.m. Oct. 9; 6 p.m. Oct. 14

Where: Great Hall and Memorial Hall, Worcester Memorial Auditorium.

How much: Free. \$5 chair reservation (\$2 commemorative program book is free with chair reservation). For complete information, visit www.worcaud.com

included demonstrations of the organ.

“We brainstormed possibilities, and this came together,” Sherwood said of “Worcester Memorial Festival Concerts 2016 - Featuring the 1933 Mighty Kimball Organ.”

“It’s coming back to life. Reincarnating the musical life of the building,” Sherwood said.

The program for Oct. 9 and 14 includes chamber music vocal ensemble concerts in Memorial Hall (mosaic



Will Sherwood of the Worcester American Guild of Organists plays the organ at the Worcester Memorial Auditorium. The organ will be featured in a series of concerts Oct. 9 and 14. T&G STAFF/CHRISTINE PETERSON

gallery), and organ concerts in the Great Hall of the auditorium.

Ness, interim director of music/organist at the First Church of Christ of Hartford UCC (and formerly of First Baptist Church of Worcester), will perform a recital at 4 p.m. Oct. 9, and organist, conductor and music educator Peter Krasinski will play an organ accompaniment to a screening of the epic 1927 silent film “Wings” at

6:30 p.m. There will be an Honor Guard presentation. Renowned organist Peter Riordan will perform a program at 4 p.m. Oct. 14.

“Wings,” starring Clara Bow, Charles “Burrhead” Rogers, Richard Dix and Gary Cooper in a silent film, would launch his career, was set in World War I. Its realistic

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aerial dogfights helped "Wings" to be the first film to win the Academy Award for Best Picture.

"If you haven't seen this film before, get ready for a very emotional experience," said Krasinski. "It's going to be quite something, and in that space, all I can say is - hold on."

It may not be a standing-room-only experience, but there are no seats in Memorial Hall or on the floor-level of the Great Hall because they've been removed. The Great Hall's balcony is not open. You can stand, sit on the floor, bring your own chair or rent one for \$5 (a limited number are available; for reservations visit www.worcaud.com).

The festival is sponsored by the Worcester Chapter AGO, the city of Worcester and the Worcester Cultural Coalition.

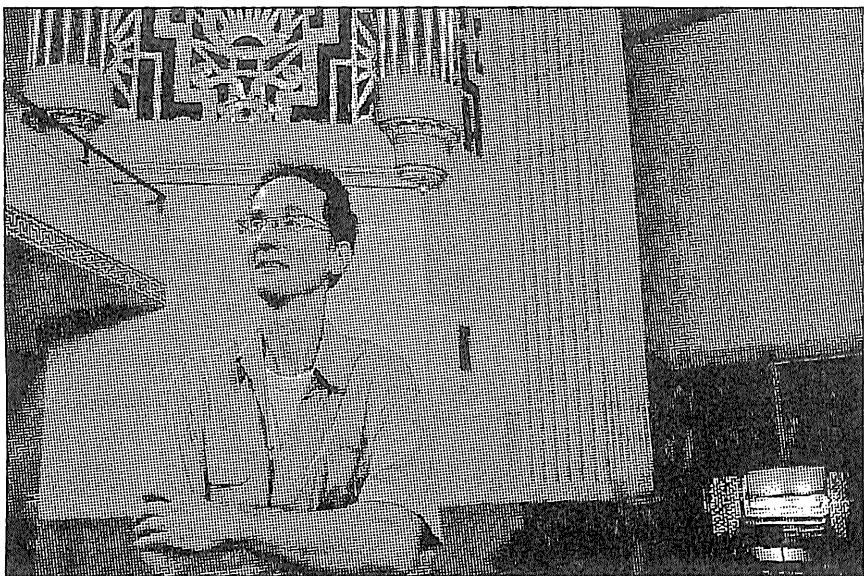
"We're trying to honor history and this jewel that we have that's laid fallow for so many years," Sherwood said.

The Kimball organ was unfortunately long neglected, even when the auditorium was still functioning as a public venue. But in a twist of fate, "ironically, because of the neglect it has fared very well," Sherwood said. No one bothered trying to alter the organ, so "it is our great good fortune that it is intact." Indeed, the Kimball is the only unaltered major municipal organ in the United States.

But one significant problem was a roof leak that got into the organ's chambers and affected some of the wiring.

"Not everything works," Sherwood said. "It's playable for a public concert that's not your academic Ph.D (examination recital)."

Technicians have taken a



Will Sherwood of the American Guild of Organists discusses the Worcester Memorial Auditorium's Kimball orga, which will be featured in concerts on Oct. 9 and 14. T&G STAFF/CHRISTINE PETERSON

look. "If we hadn't had the roof leak, it would be 90 percent perfect," Sherwood said.

A complete up-to-date refurbishing would cost about \$5 million.

"We would hope that the building is embraced by some group or company, and the organ is embraced and refurbished," Sherwood said.

It has been done in Worcester. Sherwood is also director of music and organist at First Unitarian Church in Worcester, and principal organist at Mechanics Hall and artistic director of the Mechanics Hall Organ Concert Series. At Mechanics Hall there has been the restoration not only of the hall but the historic E. and G.G. Hook Organ. "That organ was completely restored and is maintained in a superlative way," Sherwood said.

When it was built and dedicated in 1864, the Hook Organ was completely mechanical. The 1933 Kimball organ is electropneumatic, and in fact organists don't have to pull out the stops but instead press a button.

The Kimball Organ Co. of Chicago was one of the largest organ builders of the time, but times were also changing then and the company would close its organ business in 1942, concentrating on pianos

instead.

"I think they wanted a big splash to say we're here and we're doing exquisite work," Sherwood said of Kimball making a defiant statement with the auditorium organ.

"They had some extra features that most organists wouldn't even think of having. They made it easy to use, capable of playing very complex pieces conveniently."

The cost was \$50,000. "I think they gave the city a deal."

In its heyday at the auditorium, the organ was used for recitals, was played during some orchestral and Worcester Chorus concerts, and was a mainstay at events such as high school graduations.

"It was live music. It was quite versatile," Sherwood said.

Sherwood played the organ at concerts in the 1980s and early 90s.

"It was amazing back then. Now that I'm on in years, I appreciate it more," he said.

"Our culture has become so artificial, synthetic. This is the real thing. It's worth it to restore the instrument."

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