

Organ failure

University seeks new home for magnificent Centennial organ

For nearly 30 years, Chico State's magnificent Centennial pipe organ has been without a permanent home.

During this time it has "temporarily" resided backstage at the Harlen Adams Theatre, sequestered among the fly ropes and screens. It was consigned there when it was learned that its intended home, in Laxson Auditorium, posed asbestos safety issues.

But the new location presented its own safety issue: The organ blocked the line of sight between the theater fly rail (the pulley system for raising and lowering equipment) and the stage. The university has known of this problem for 25 years and, unable or unwilling to solve it, has used "great caution" to avoid any injuries.

by
Robert Speer

robertspeer@
newsreview.com

Catch it while you can:
The Centennial Organ will be featured as part of the Glorious Sounds of the Season holiday program, Dec. 6-7, 7:30 p.m. and Dec. 8, 2 p.m.
Tickets: \$20

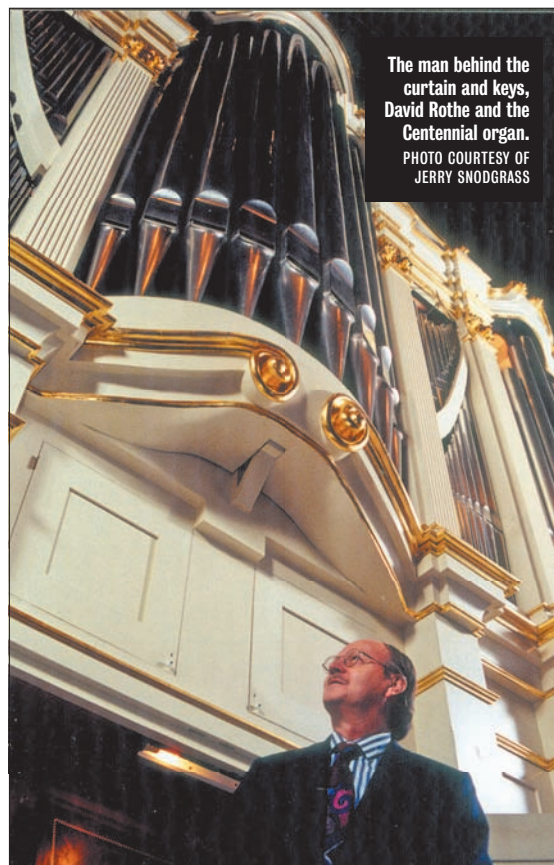
Harlen Adams Theatre
Chico State
898-6333
www.csuchico.edu/soa

However, the National Association of Schools of Theatre now has indicated it will pull the university's Music and Theatre Department's accreditation if there is no plan to move the organ by Feb. 1, 2020.

Unfortunately, nobody knows where to put it. In a recent phone interview, Tracy Butts, interim dean of the College of Humanities and Fine Arts, said there was no site on campus suitable for an instrument that is 27 feet tall, 20 feet wide and 10 feet deep. Unless a site off campus is found, it will go into storage.

To the many lovers of this world-class, historically significant instrument, that would be sacrilege.

The organ is the brainchild of David Rothe, a long-time Chico State professor of music (now emeritus) known for his prowess on the organ and love of J. S. Bach's organ music. It was he who convinced the university administration that creation of such a magnificent instrument was a perfect way to celebrate the school's centennial in 1987. And it was he who located the organ's designer and builder, Munetaka Yokota, and convinced him, in 1984, to come to Chico.



The man behind the curtain and keys, David Rothe and the Centennial organ. PHOTO COURTESY OF JERRY SNODGRASS

Lacking a professional construction team, Yokota spent a great deal of time training the many volunteers—more than 100 altogether—who signed up to help. As a result, the organ took six years to build, but what emerged was the first major pipe organ built entirely on-site since the Middle Ages.

It's truly a product of Chico. For example, its 2,200 pipes were cast from lead reclaimed from spent bullets in the Bidwell Park gun range. Much of the woodwork came from the historic Hooker Oak. Construction took place in a barn at the University Farm, and cow shin bones were used for the organ keys.

Despite being semi-hidden backstage, the organ has been played fairly often over the years. "We've done some wonderful concerts in the Harlen Adams Theatre," Rothe said during a recent interview. "With careful lighting, people don't see the ropes at all."

Rothe will be playing the organ as part of the annual Glorious Sounds of the Season concerts next month (Dec. 6-9).

Still, it's not a fitting architectural or acoustic home for such a magnificent instrument.

Responding to criticism that the decision to move the organ was made without consulting people in the Music and Theatre Department, Butts said that it was an issue of safety, not academics. "We don't need to have a vote on something that involves safety," she added. "The university had no choice in the matter."

She shares with Rothe a hope that a suitable off-campus site can be found. The most likely would be one of the city's many churches.

After all, originally grand organs were built for churches, and locating the Centennial Organ in a local church would be an ideal solution. This magnificent instrument really is a creation of the entire community, and it deserves to find a home here.

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