

MR. FORBES' OPUS

BY KRISTIN JOHNSON



AFTER TWO DECADES OF PLANNING and over a year in construction, the Performing Arts Center on the Cal Poly campus has become home to one of the world's finest pipe organs, the Opus 129.

The one-of-a-kind instrument, located in Harman Hall, was the dream of local music enthusiasts. It became a reality through a generous gift from Bert and Candee Forbes, along with the efforts of community members and pipe organ professionals at C.B. Fisk Inc. of Gloucester, Mass.

The late Charles Fisk founded his company in 1961, the first American to leave behind the 20th-century electro-pneumatic pipe organ and return to the historic and time-honored mechanical or tracker action – the kind that inspired so many great composers.

Today, in addition to the instruments at Cal Poly, Stanford University and Pomona College, Fisk organs are found in 22 other states, as well as Switzerland and Japan.

With the distinctive exterior lines of the Christopher Cohan Center inspiring the architecture of the Opus 129, the facade is adorned by polished, burnished tin pipes, ranging from the size of a pencil to 32 feet tall, according to Cal Poly Music Professor Emeritus Clifton Swanson.

The power of a pipe organ this size – 2,767 pipes in total – can generate a pitch so low that it's almost beyond the range

of hearing and can actually cause walls to shake.

Closely replicating the traditional 17th and 18th century European pipe organs, the tracker action used in the Opus 129 creates a direct flow of air from the blowers to the air chests. The keyboard and pedal board are directly connected to the pipes by carbon fiber rods, opening and closing the air supply as needed. The simplicity of this process allows for superior longevity, due to the lack of an elaborate electro-pneumatic system with components that wear out.

Although many less traditional organs are built with curved pedal boards – so the organist doesn't have to stretch so far when playing – the pedal board on the Opus 129 is flat, a characteristic of organs made in former centuries.

Historically, most instruments were designed with a style of music in mind, such as German, French or Italian. However, the Opus 129 and many other modern pipe organs are created intentionally as an international blend of styles, Swanson explained.

The Opus 129 opens up opportunities for a wider range of repertoires and performing groups for Cal Poly and San Luis Obispo. "Sometimes perceived as strictly a recital instrument, it will accompany orchestra performances and choral music concerts," said Swanson.

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