

## **Concert Review: Using 'real' and digital organs, musicians give fascinating recital**

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By Andrew Druckenbrod, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The king of instruments has not been usurped, but it sure is facing a challenge.

A fascinating recital Friday evening at Shadyside Presbyterian Church brought together two superb organists, international soloist Carlo Curley and the church's own talented organist, J. Christopher Pardini. Their rapport was remarkable to witness, but it almost took second stage to their instruments. The concert, co-presented by Music in a Great Space and the Organ Artists Series of Pittsburgh, pitted two different types of church organs against each other, one digital and one pneumatic.

In one corner, well, sitting stage left on the sanctuary, was Shadyside's mighty Reuter pipe organ. Its four manuals (keyboards) operate 5,432 pipes positioned throughout the church. Placed next to it in the altar area, was an Allen touring organ. This was a three-manual console with multiple speakers and computer chips instead of pipes.

The Allen is not your average synthesizer. With sampled sounds of real pipes, given a natural randomness with algorithms and replicating qualities like the rushing of air, it sounds remarkably like its physical counterpart. I'm told that when its many speakers are properly set up, the difference becomes even smaller between the two. Gerrero, the Pittsburgh company that supplied it, simply didn't have the months needed to place every speaker where it would be most effective for this recital. Friday, the Allen's higher-pitched and lighter-toned 'pipes,' such as the flute, were nearly indistinguishable from the real thing, but it produced a tighter and harsher timbre in louder stop combinations.

I certainly preferred the Reuter. It was just a more rounded sound overall, and at full strength it really shook you. However, I don't know if I would be able to tell the difference if I hadn't known one was digital.



**Organists Carlo Curley, left, and J. Christopher Pardini rehearse for their recital at Shadyside Presbyterian Church in which two organs were used -- one digital and one pneumatic.**

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The issue is germane not just to churches, but also to the Pittsburgh Symphony. Its old Galanti organ is on its last legs, frequently breaking down. Heinz Hall's multipurpose stage prohibits it from installing a permanent pipe organ of the massive type recently installed at Philadelphia's Kimmel Center or Los Angeles' Disney Hall, so the orchestra is looking for a fully digital or composite one (with some real pipes), since they could be moved in and out. A movable traditional pipe organ would be preferable -- to match the natural instruments of the musicians -- but the cost is prohibitive. Take Shadyside Presbyterian, for instance. A Gerrero representative said that the Reuter there is a \$2 million instrument, plus maintenance, while the Allen cost \$100,000, with little maintenance needed. We'll see how this all plays out, but it simply won't be long before technology makes the decision easier.

Friday night, both organists performed their best on the Reuter, as much a matter of the repertoire they chose for it as anything. Curley performed Elgar's "Nimrod" variation, Langlais' "Chant heroique" and his own dynamite arrangement of a J.S. Bach cantata "Wir Danken dir Gott" on it, while Pardini took to the bench for Saint-Saens' E-Flat "Fantaisie." It was here that the recital reached its highest peaks artistically. Both are fabulous organists, though I prefer Pardini's more centered and patient approach to Curley's bent for showmanship. Arriving here in 2004, Pardini is a wonderful addition to the Pittsburgh organ community. But when they each mounted the steeds together, the ride was most thrilling. From Guilmant's "Grand Choeur" to Handel's "Fireworks" Suite to Mendelssohn's "War March of the Priests" and Verdi's "Grand March," the term 'real' tended to lose its meaning.

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