

Silent-film festival showcases historic organ

Louisville instrument has unique features

By Sheryl Edelen
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When it comes to entertaining, the 77-year-old pipe organ in Memorial Auditorium has gone from city royalty to relative recluse.

"Before there was a Louisville Orchestra or Louisville Ballet ... this was where people would come to hear good music and be entertained," Tim Baker said.

Baker has been the organist and caregiver for the Memorial Auditorium instrument for the past 33 years. He and others have kept it working, but Baker said Memorial Auditorium now has only about 15 events a year that call for organ music.

This weekend, he and other members of the William H. Bauer Foundation, a non-profit group dedicated to the organ's restoration, are holding their 12th Annual Silent Film Classics. Bauer, a Pilcher organ enthusiast, had access to the Memorial Auditorium instrument and introduced Baker and Phil Hines to it when Baker was about 16. The pair have maintained it ever since.

The event will feature black-and-white silent films from early in the last century with icons Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and Laurel & Hardy.

The movies will be accompanied by organ music played by Baker, a St. Regis Park-area resident who also is the organist at



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Harvey Browne Memorial Presbyterian Church on Browns Lane and St. Frances of Rome Catholic Church in Clifton.

Proceeds from the event will go toward a planned \$110,000 upgrade of the organ's electrical system — part of an overall \$600,000 phased restoration effort.

The organ fundraising group, formed in 1995, has managed to raise about \$30,000 to keep it in working condition.

According to the Louisville Encyclopedia, the Memorial Auditorium pipe organ was the largest built by Henry Pilcher's Sons, an organ-making company that relocated to Louisville from Chicago in the 1870s and dominated the area's organ industry until World War II.

Known for their exceptional quality, about 2,000 Pilcher organs graced churches across the United States, and, by the early 1940s, more than 100 Louisville religious institutions used them.

Organists from around the world visited to play at Memorial Auditorium until about

the mid-1950s, when other entertainment and venues began competing for audiences.

These days, Dale Royer, Memorial Auditorium's executive director, said the venue books about 100 dates a year; Baker said he plays the organ for only about 15 events each year.

In addition to being the largest Pilcher organ, Baker said that Memorial Auditorium's organ is also unique because of its ability to serve as both a concert and theater instrument.

Through a series of stops and gears it plays real xylophones, snare drums, triangles and other instruments stored in another room.

All that lends itself well to movie scores, some of which Baker admits to improvising as the movie is playing.

"Very few of these movies had scores. I just watch the movie along with the audience, and when there's a love scene, I play romantic music; a chase scene, I play chase-type music," he said.

John Ball, a pipe organ technician, organist and history buff, said he enjoyed past festivals and the chance to see the organ in action.

"They're fun, very different," the La Grange resident said of the silent films. "Anyone who has an interest in anything historical and in what was going on 100 years ago and how far technology has come forward, should go."

In the midst of it all, Ball said, the audience should also take a moment to appreciate what the organ, built and installed for \$75,000, represents.

"It would cost more than \$1 million to re-



Photos by Keith Williams, The Courier-Journal

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place now, I'm sure," Ball said. "It's very much a part of the city's history. It should be kept and it should be played."

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