

# Restoring a treasure

**A treasured campus icon is taking a two-year sabbatical from which it will return as good as new.**

And that's really saying something.

Hope's Skinner organ, a prominent fixture in Dimnent Memorial Chapel since both were dedicated in June of 1929, is being removed for a complete restoration. The process began in January, and the organ will be away until late in 2006.

**"[The Skinner organ] came from a builder who is regarded as certainly the most important 20th century American builder."**

**— Dr. Huw Lewis, professor of music**

Audiences who have heard the instrument played during worship services, concerts and formal events such as Opening Convocation and Baccalaureate know well its quality. And, according to Dr. Huw Lewis, college organist, the many world renowned guest organists who have given concerts in Dimnent "readily acknowledged that it's one of the finest instruments that they've heard or played."

"Everybody who has played it, from both Europe and America, and American builders have readily acknowledged that

it's one of the finest instruments that they've heard or played," said Huw Lewis, who is a professor of music at Hope.

And well it should be.

"It came from a builder who is regarded as certainly the most important 20th century American builder, Ernest M. Skinner," Dr. Lewis said. "In his heyday, his company was thought of as the Rolls Royce or the Cadillac—the industry standard—for quality construction and sound."

What's more, the organ was built during a golden era in the company's history. Skinner, Dr. Lewis noted, was willing to share his knowledge with others, and became friends with the owner of the Willis organ company of Great Britain, which was itself highly regarded. Eventually, one of Willis's employees, G. Donald Harrison, came to the U.S. and started working with Skinner.

"And the instruments from that period, starting in 1928 for about maybe three, four or five years—the 'honeymoon period'—represented this fantastic marriage of the ideas of two great builders," Dr. Lewis said. "And Hope's instrument is a product of that period."

The reputation of Hope's organ is also high amongst today's organ builders. One expert who recently examined the organ, Dr. Lewis recalled, even went so far as to say that ultimately Hope's organ will stand as one of the top three masterpieces produced by Skinner.

It's also fortunate that the organ has survived. Hope's organ, like the others of its day, is an "orchestral" organ, large in range and sound. In the 1960s, such organs fell out of vogue, and there was a movement to return to the Baroque sound of earlier centuries. Many of the Skinner organs, Dr. Lewis observed, were modified accordingly, and some were even destroyed. Hope's organ, then, is one of a relatively few that remain authentic his-



Those attending this year's Christmas Vespers services were able to enjoy the final performances of the college's historic Skinner organ before the instrument's removal beginning in January for restoration. Pictured is senior David Bellows of Rochester, N.Y.

torically. (Hope also has an example of a Baroque instrument, the Pels and Van Leeuwen organ installed in the chapel's balcony in 1971.)

As fine as the Skinner organ is, it has been showing its age. In all of its 75-plus years, the organ never had a major restoration, although the project has been envisioned for some time—and, Dr. Lewis noted, was far overdue.

"The project has been on the docket since before I came in 1990," he said. "It's a testament to the quality of the instrument that it has continued to play and sound so beautifully."

The restoration, which will preserve the organ's original character, is being done by the Thompson-Allen Company of New Haven, Conn. Responsible for instruments such as the large Skinner organ in Woolsey Hall at Yale University, the company is, Dr. Lewis noted, "revered worldwide for restoring Skinner organs."

The company's services are so in demand that it would normally take about 10 years to work into the firm's schedule. As it happens, however, a project contracted for 2005 and 2006 fell through and the slot became open to Hope. Happily, funding became available at the same time, through the recent *Legacies: A Vision of Hope* comprehensive campaign.

The entire organ is going to New Haven, from the console, to all 2,932 pipes, to the pieces in between. All of the parts will be examined, and when replacements are needed they'll be constructed to the original specifications. In the meantime, the chambers in Dimnent that house the pipes and other out-of-sight components will be renovated.

The organ resulted from the cornerstone ceremony for the chapel in October of 1927. As he closed remarks prepared

for the event, the Rev. Henry J. Veldman, a member of the Board of Trustees and 1892 graduate, saw John Nykerk of the faculty in the audience, and, as a light-hearted and impromptu aside, said, "And now, Prof., as head of the music department I hope you will provide that beautiful chapel with a suitable organ."

Others were listening. Shortly after the ceremony, William Arendhorst approached Professor Nykerk and offered to donate the instrument with his father Bernard and brother John.

**The entire organ is going to New Haven, Conn., from the console, to all 2,932 pipes, to the pieces in between.**

The organ and the chapel chimes were dedicated on June 17, 1929, 10 days after the dedication ceremony for the chapel. Period accounts place the organ's cost at \$25,000, which was 10 percent of what it cost to build Dimnent.

*Note: Provisions have been made to fill the void resulting from the Skinner organ's absence. The Pels and Van Leeuwen organ remains, of course, as does the J.W. Walker & Sons organ in the teaching studio completed in 2000, but the college is also renting a large electronic organ from the Westfield Organ Company—the same firm that supplies instruments to the Grand Rapids Symphony for concerts.* ✍



In January, the Thompson-Allen Company began dismantling the organ so that it can be shipped to New Haven, Conn., for restoration. The removal will continue in March. The organ is due back in time for Vespers at the end of the year.