

DID YOU KNOW?

DICKINSON HIGH SCHOOL'S MUSICAL TREASURE

Key facts

- » Originally installed in the Boyd Theatre in Philadelphia in 1928.
- » Features 66 ranks (sets of pipes) – about 5,000 pipes in all – making it the fourth-largest theater pipe organ in the world.
- » A rare set of pipes makes the sound of an Egyptian horn.
- » Three manuals (keyboards) and between 400 and 450 controls make sound effects.
- » Estimated cost to replace the organ: more than \$2.4 million
- » The organ weighs more than 30 tons.

About theater organs

With the advent of silent films, theater organs were in demand. Theater organs, invented by Robert Hope-Jones, were basically the same as church organs, but they could create sound effects and play more popular forms of music from that era. Theater organ consoles were designed in a horseshoe shape to allow organists to reach all keys. **SPECIAL TO THE NEWS JOURNAL/ SAQUAN STIMPSON**

Pipe organs in the region

Three of the world's eight largest theater pipe organs are within a three-hour drive of Delaware. The Dickinson organ ranks fourth, followed by the organ at Radio City Music Hall in Manhattan and the organ at Atlantic City's Boardwalk Hall. Another famous local organ at Macy's in Center City Philadelphia, is not a theater pipe organ. Longwood Gardens offers regular concerts on its 10,010-pipe organ. **Boardwalk Hall's seven-manual pipe organ.**

To volunteer

Founded in 1973, the Dickinson Theatre Organ Society is a nonprofit group that maintains the Dickinson Kimball organ and arranges public concerts. From selling tickets to post-concert reception, it takes about 60 people to put on a concert. To learn more, visit www.dtkimball.org or call 995-2603.

Upcoming events

- » **Saturday:** Brett Valliant, 7 p.m.
 - » **April 10:** Don Kinnier, 10 a.m.
 - » **April 28:** Clark Wilson, 7 p.m.
 - » **June 9:** Nathan Avakian, 7 p.m.
- For details, visit www.dtkimball.org. To order tickets by phone, call 995-5630. Season tickets for next year's concerts are available at a discount over single-ticket prices.

» COMING NEXT WEEK: Renovations to the Delaware Children's Theatre building.

The Kimball Pipe Organ, the fourth-largest theater organ in the world, rescued 40 years ago, now plays beautiful music at Dickinson. Have you checked out these pipes?

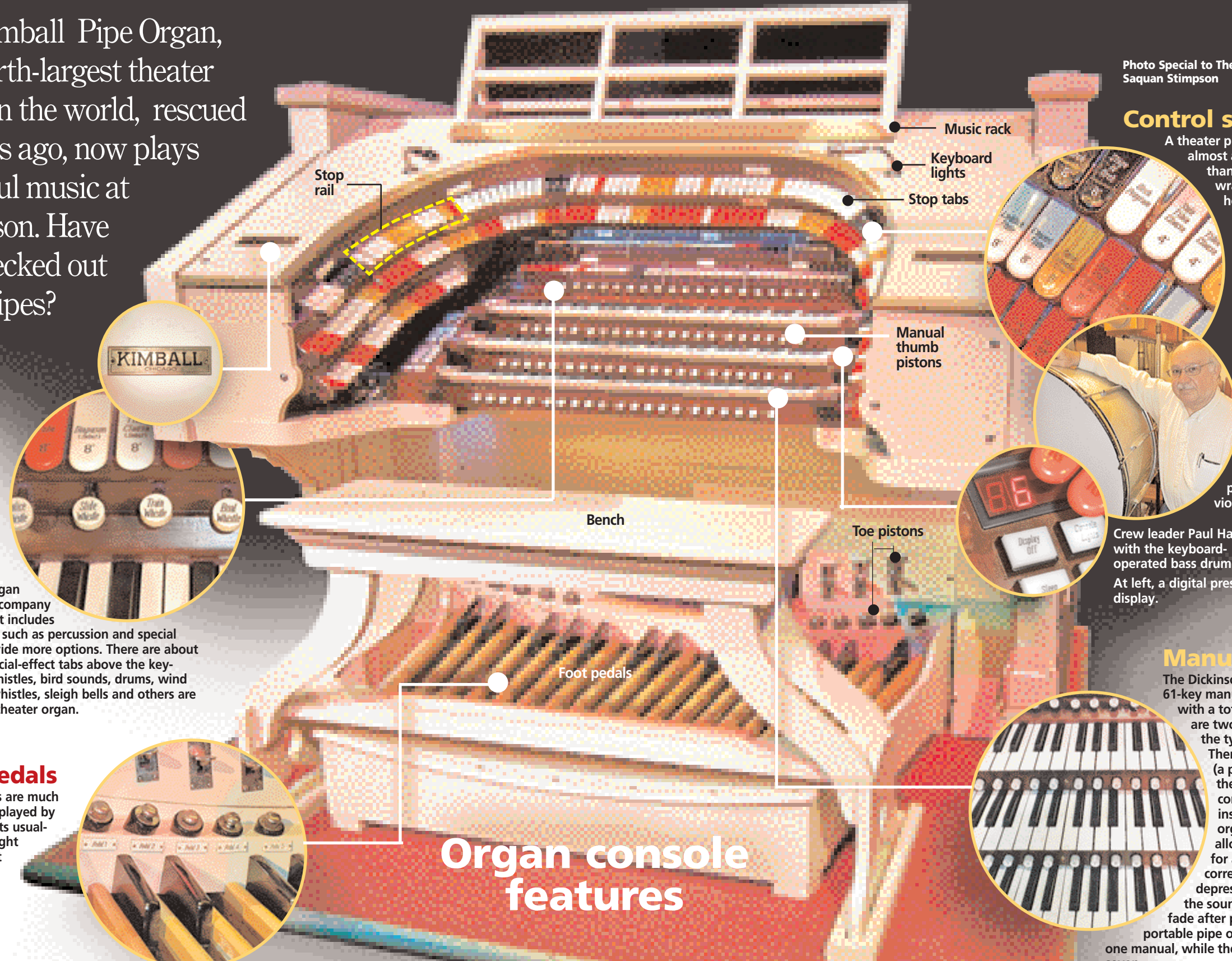


Photo Special to The News Journal/ Saquan Stimpson

Control stops

A theater pipe organ can play almost any kind of music, thanks to 400 music controls wrapped around the horseshoe-shaped console. The controls' colors represent instrumentation:

- » **RED** are brass and reeds
- » **YELLOW** are strings
- » **WHITE** are flutes and percussion
- » **BLACK** are couplers, or keys that connect different instruments together.

Instruments include: Bass drum, cymbals, flute, glockenspiel, marimba, piano, tuba, vibraharp, violin and xylophone.

Crew leader Paul Harris with the keyboard-operated bass drum. At left, a digital preset display.

Manuals

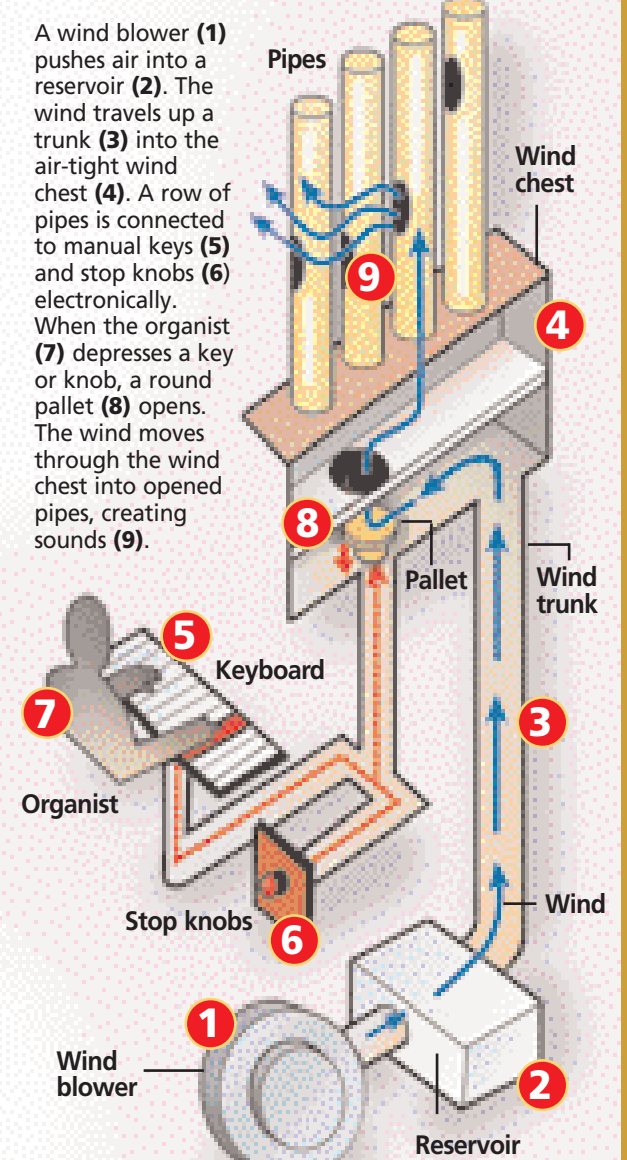
The Dickinson organ has three 61-key manuals, or keyboards, with a total of 183 keys. There are two key differences from the typical piano keyboard. There are more organ keys (a piano has 88 keys), and the organ keys are connected to wind pipes instead of strings. The organ's supply of wind allows it to sustain notes for as long as the corresponding keys are depressed, unlike the piano, the sounds of which begin to fade after playing. The smallest portable pipe organs may have only one manual, while the largest would have seven.

About the pipes



The Dickinson organ has about 5,000 pipes, making it the fourth-largest theater pipe organ in the world. The pipes range from the size of a pencil to more than 32 feet tall. The pitch of the sound is determined by the pipe length. The longer the pipe, the lower the note. There are two main categories of pipes: flue pipes and reed pipes. Flue pipes have no moving parts and generate their sound by vibrating air in a column. Reed pipes, like a clarinet, have an actual mechanical reed at the base and a resonator above.

How it works



Special effects

Because the organ was built to accompany silent movies, it includes many gadgets, such as percussion and special effects, to provide more options. There are about two dozen special-effect tabs above the keyboard. Train whistles, bird sounds, drums, wind chimes, slide whistles, sleigh bells and others are unique to the theater organ.

Foot pedals

The 32 pedals are much like manuals played by foot. Organists usually use their right foot to adjust the volume.

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By **JOHN MICKLOS JR.**
Special to The News Journal

his is one of the best organs in the world,” exclaimed renowned theater organist Lance Luce during his Jan. 28 concert at Dickinson High School. “You really have a treasure here.” Luce should know. He has performed hundreds of shows in the United States, Canada, England and Australia. His concert at Dickinson included show tunes, classics and hymns. As he prepared to play “How Great Thou Art,” he said, “It’s a joy to play this song on this organ. You won’t hear a version like this on any other organ in the world.”

The story of how one of the world’s great organs came to reside at Dickinson spans more than 40 years. It began when Robert E. Dilworth, then a teacher at Dickinson, learned that the RKO-Stanley Warner Corp. planned to donate all theater pipe organs remaining in their theaters to charity. Dilworth inquired and was ultimately offered the Kimball organ from the Boyd Theatre in Philadelphia. Dilworth, now 80 and the president of the Dickinson

Theatre Organ Society, first saw the organ on Election Day in 1968. For months, he and students from his audiovisual class – sometimes aided by parents and other adults – spent nearly every weekend repairing the organ and ultimately moving it piece by piece, pipe by pipe to Delaware. The first public concert at Dickinson, featuring Philadelphia’s Larry Ferrari, played to standing room only on Feb. 22, 1970.

Since then, Dilworth and others have worked continuously to add pipes and enhance the organ’s sound. The console has been updated, and a new electronic relay system was installed. “For years, whenever artists completed their con-

certs, I asked if there was anything they had wanted in the organ that wasn’t there,” Dilworth said.

The organ now comprises 66 ranks (or sets of pipes) – about 5,000 pipes in all – ranging in size from the size of a pencil to 32 feet long and as broad as tree trunk. The fourth largest theater pipe organ in the world, the Dickinson organ has three large chamber rooms containing most of the pipes; other sets are on stage.

At this point, he said, “We are in maintenance mode to take care of any problems that crop up. With this much mechanism, there are always problems that are going to occur.” To handle those problems, a maintenance team of six to eight people comes in every Friday morning. Concerts sponsored by the society may draw upwards of 1,000 people from as far south as Richmond, Va., and as far north as New York. One family from Luxembourg even schedules their annual vacation to this area around society concert dates. Attendees skew toward retirees, and concerts serve as social events where friends gather to chat at

intermission and after the performance.

A reception following the show allows attendees to mingle and meet the artist. The tradition started in 1973 when last-minute organ repairs left organizers wondering if the sound quality would be subpar for the upcoming concert. Society leaders decided to host an on-stage reception after the show in case the concert did not go well. The concert went fine, and the reception has remained a tradition.

Charlie and Jan Hufnagel of Newport hold season tickets and said they are drawn by the variety of artists. “It’s certainly a diversion for old people,” Charlie said.

Dilworth talked about the need to draw in the next generation of listeners. “We have to find a way to get them in here to hear the organ,” he said. “Once they hear it, they often get hooked on the sound and come back.”

Perhaps some of those listeners may even experience the passion that has caused Dilworth’s life to revolve around this organ for more than 40 years. “I had no idea back then how this was going to develop,” he said. “I’m glad we had the opportunity to make this all happen.”



Crew member Glenn Hough checks the organ before concerts. **SPECIAL TO THE NEWS JOURNAL/ SAQUAN STIMPSON**



Behind the scenes
It takes constant upkeep to maintain an instrument as complex as the Dickinson organ. There are a dozen or so volunteers on the maintenance team, and six to eight of them meet every Friday morning to do any needed work. A work room is available with access to wires and other parts to make repairs.

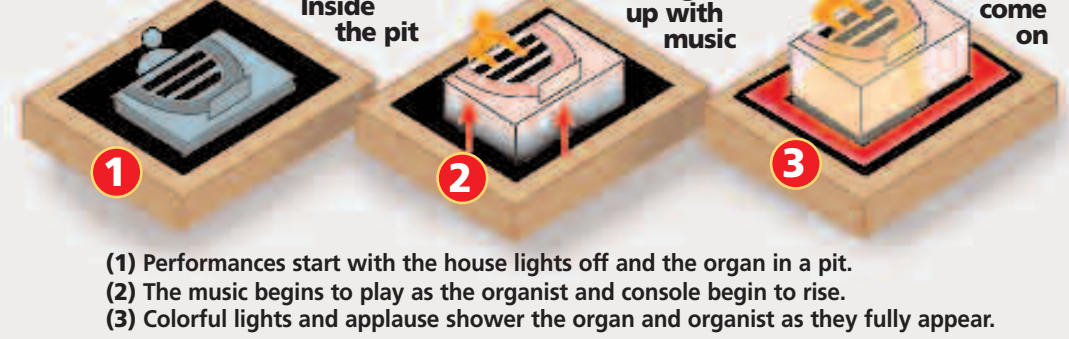
Left: 91-year-old Bill Clark adds a leather seal to a sound box.



Egyptian horns
Only three organs in the world have Egyptian horn pipe sets. Some describe the sound as “saxophones on steroids.”

Left: The Egyptian pipe set. **SPECIAL TO THE NEWS JOURNAL/ SAQUAN STIMPSON**

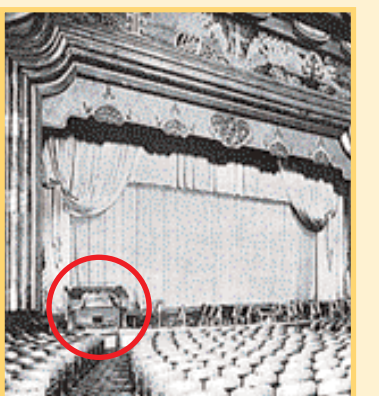
A grand entrance



- (1) Performances start with the house lights off and the organ in a pit.
- (2) The music begins to play as the organist and console begin to rise.
- (3) Colorful lights and applause shower the organ and organist as they fully appear.

Rescuing the organ

The Boyd Theatre, on Chestnut Street in Philadelphia, was the original home of the Dickinson pipe organ. Built during the golden era of the movie palace, the Boyd opened in 1928, and the organ was built to accompany silent films. As sound came to movies, the organ was used less and finally shut down. In 1968, Robert E. Dilworth, a member of the faculty of John Dickinson High School, negotiated with the new owners of the Boyd to acquire the organ. In 1969, it was donated and moved by a crew of students and adults into the Dickinson auditorium. It was first played at the school in 1970. Over the years, the number of pipes was increased from 1,400 to 5,000.



An old photo of the Boyd shows the organ at left.



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