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You've never heard this before: Rochester Jazz Fest music on a two-story, 2,200-pipe organ

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Kit Downes (Photo: Provided)

Sometime before his Sunday concerts at the CGI Rochester International Jazz Festival, Kit Downes will find a quiet moment at Christ Church for a unusual sort of sound check.

He won't be worrying about microphones or staging, though. Instead, the British organist will spend his time getting acquainted with his musical partner for the evening — the church's 24-foot-tall, 2,200-pipe Craigshead-Saunders organ.

He won't be rehearsing his set list, either. He won't know what to play until he learns what he described as the architecture and language of the instrument.

How many principal, string, reed and flute pipes does it have, and how are they arranged? How far away is the "swell" from the "great?" Where in the room does the music sound loud and where does it sound quiet?



The Craighead-Saunders organ at the Christ Church in Rochester at its debut in 2008. (Photo: File photo)

“Finding unique features in each instrument is what I’m interested in — even if those unique features are things it doesn’t do very well,” Downes said. “You can get all the heads-up you want, but until you’re in the room hearing it and working through your own compositions or improvisations, you don’t really know much.”

Sound collector

In the 18th year of Rochester’s most prominent musical event, Downes will be the first person to play the city’s most prominent instrument. As one of the biggest names in the admittedly niche field of organ improvisation, Downes is well suited to bridge the gap.

The 33-year-old grew up in Norwich, England, a region with well preserved medieval history. As a teenager, Downes rode the train to small villages in the area to examine the locally constructed Norman and Beard organs in old stone churches, taking inventories of their stops and pipes and learning what the differences meant. “Collecting sounds,” he called it.

His adolescent immersion in classical and church music was followed by the first intensive musical study of his career, in jazz. He gained renown in Britain in a series of groups and projects, playing mostly piano.



Kit Downes (Photo: Alex Bonney)

"Jazz was the first music I really fell in love with and studied in real depth," he said. "In a way, that creeps through everything I do, whether it's playing with folk musicians or classical music. It's just such part of a DNA of the choices I make."

One of those groups, Troyka, played the Rochester jazz festival a few years ago. In the few minutes before going on stage, Downes asked the pastor whether he could have a peek at the Craigshead-Saunders organ console but never got a chance to play it.

Last year, Downes released *Obsidian*, an album of partly improvisational organ music recorded in the field on three very different organs, two in small rural churches in Suffolk and a third, much larger one in London. The feeling-out process he used for that album is the same way he prepares on a tour of organs he has never played before.

After acquainting himself with the instrument, Downes creates a rough plan for the evening, partly composed music and partly opportunities for improvisation.

"It's more fun in a way because it's different every night," he said. "I'm looking for tiny little details, always through the prism of my own approach, to create a broad framework of how I want to play. ... Then when it comes to the concert, I can feel as free as I possibly can to act in the moment."

A different beast

In the Craigshead-Saunders organ, Downes will find an instrument unique in the world. It was built over four years as a nearly exact replica of a decommissioned 300-year-old organ in Vilnius, Lithuania.

To recreate it, the organ makers eschewed modern construction practices, hand-soldering the pipes and rivets and building the console from salvaged lumber more than 100 years old. Air pumps through it via six massive leather bellows.

Stephen Kennedy is the musical director and organist for regular services at Christ Church and an instructor of sacred music at the Eastman School of Music, making him an authority on the instrument.

"It's an entirely different beast," he said. Among the elements Downes will have to reckon with: since the original Vilnius organ was constructed before instrument tuning was mostly standardized, the Craigshead-Saunders organ pitch is a half-step higher than usual.

"What I have found with that organ being so completely mechanical is that I have more control over it," Kennedy said. "You have to (manually) draw the stop when you want a particular sound to happen, and they're big hammered bronze stops, so it's a real event to do all that."

That fully mechanical character, he said, can create "kaleidoscopic color sounds in improvisation" in the right hands.

Downes will also be playing Monday at Christ Church, but on the piano with the jazz trio Enemy.

In his young career spanning jazz, classical and devotional music, Downes has become accustomed to switching musical gears quickly. And while the piano has a much longer tradition of jazz improvisation, he said it is on the organ where he feels most free.

"I feel like I'm a jazz musician deep down, as much as I'm anything, but I'd say this music is a composite of many things," he said. "I love playing piano, but it comes with a heavier tradition; there's more to forget when I start playing the piano, to feel really free. Whereas organ is really a blank canvas."

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Kit Downes performs on the organ at Christ Church at 6:45 and 8:45 p.m. Sunday, June 23. He plays with the trio Enemy at the same times and venue Monday, June 24. For more information, visit rochesterjazz.com.

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