Church of St Leo the Great

Kimbel/Wicks Organ: History and Description

A pipe organ is a wind instrument that has held a place of honor in churches since its invention. The true sound of the winding of an organ's pipes has served the size and dimensions of church buildings in a special and fitting manner.

In the 1930's, Sherman Clay Music Company in San Francisco, in addition to selling pianos, sheet music, etcetera, also sold stock model pipe organs, contracting with the Kimbel Organ Company of Chicago, Illinois, to build the casework, pipework, windchests and winding system of their organs and with the Wicks Organ Company of Highland, Illinois, to build the consoles from which to play the organs. (Kimbel and most organ builders' consoles at the time employed pneumatic operated switches using the organ's wind system as the air source for these. This required a wind line to be run to the console, which was not always convenient. Wicks was one of a few builders, at the time, who made an all-electric action console.)

The Sherman Clay/Kimbel "Cathedral Pipe Organ" model, which was a personal gift of Father Owen Lacey to the new building for the Church of St. Leo the Great in 1929, had eight extended sets of pipes, playable on both manual keyboards and pedal keyboard at various pitches, approximately 550 pipes. The console had approximately 30 stop tablets for the organist to select from these pipe ranks and the set of chimes. The sets of pipes or ranks of pipes were: a First Principal or Diapason rank, (basic organ sound), a Second (softer) Principal or Diapason rank, a Stopped Flute rank, an Open Flute Rank, a Loud String like rank, a Soft String like rank, a Trumpet rank and a Vox Humana Rank (imitative of soft operatic human voice.) All of these pipes were in the case and spoke through Swell Shades, or louvers, which are opened or closed via a shoe on the organ console by the organist. The Swell Shades used here were 12" wide and rotated open via pneumatic drivers not quite 3". With the casework below the facade or front pipes blocking over

half of this opening, sound absorbing material lining the inside of the case and the pipework being located low inside, speaking into the lower case wall, all combined to limit the sound of the pipes heard in the church. This was a stylistic approach in vogue at the time; music in churches, was to be delicate and ethereal. In most Roman Catholic churches then, the function of the organ was to accompany the choir singing the chants, psalm tones and Mass settings for the congregation at Mass and to provide service music before and after Mass.

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Post Vatican II congregations are expected to sing most of the music in the Mass and the organ's primary function now is to lead congregational singing. So it was appropriate to move the console and pipework to the front of the church in the remodel. The revised stop layout with the addition of two sets of pipes in this new location, with a refurbished console and releathered actions in windchests was expected to provide a functional organ. The surprise was how well the concrete walls behind the alcoves and the reverberant front space would work to develop, enhance and project the sound. Ten ranks of pipes now fill the whole church. Also amazing was how loud the pipework had been originally voiced and regulated inside the casework with its limited tonal egress; much of the pipework actually needing to be softened so as not to be too loud in its new location. The current layout, in conjunction with available space in the front, has been done in a more classical approach, with only pipework playable from the top or Swell keyboard being under expression. Due to this, a soft set of pipes was added, playable by the bottom or Great keyboard, so it would be possible to accompany music played on the Swell keyboard. Also, a higher pitched Quint rank was added to provide brightness to full ensemble registrations and for additional tonal variety. Presently the stops are: First Principal playable on Great (bottom) and Pedal, Second Principal available at one and two octaves higher on the Great, Open Flute available on the Great and Pedal, new soft Gemshorn and high pitched Quint available on the Great and the revoiced Trumpet available on the Great and Pedal.

The four remaining ranks are fit in the alcove to the lower front left fitted with the original louvers ripped in half, now 6" wide and opening a full ninety degrees at the front of the opening, behind the grill cloth. These ranks playable from the Swell (top), keyboard are: the Louder String rank available at two

different octave pitches and in the Pedal, the Soft String rank, tuned slightly sharp to "celeste" or undulate when used with the Louder String rank, the Stopped Flute rank playing at numerous octaves and quint pitches and an Oboe rank (which replaced the Vox Humana), for solo and chorus registration, a standard stop on Swell divisions.

Bass notes from the Great and Pedal and the soft 16' stopped flute (the longest pipe being only 8' long since the sound waves "fold over" on themselves when a pipe is stopped) are located behind the reredos, and behind the grill cloth on the lower right.