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# ARTISTS' WORKSHOP

By Jessica Reed



## Pipe Dreams

A Conifer  
organ maker  
keeps an  
age-old  
craft alive

NESTLED WITHIN A DENSE AREA OF FOREST JUST OUTSIDE OF CONIFER IS THE HOME AND WORKSHOP OF ORGAN BUILDER Charles Ruggles. Windows inside the moderately sized studio command attention he paid to the spectacular view of the Rocky Mountains, and the immense sensation of silence that is prevalent in this part of the state is broken only by sounds of the organ builder's trade—pounding hammers, metal sheets being sliced into workable sizes, and completed pipes being voiced.

An organ builder by avocation since 1975, Charles, or Charlie as he introduces himself, speaks modestly about his skills and the fine craftsmanship that has earned him a national reputation. "I just love making things," he says. "Making dust...taking big boards and turning them into smaller ones."

His simplification becomes almost laughable when one stands before one of his magnificent organs. Due to its immense size, one of his larger creations sits in a few separate pieces in the corner of the studio, striking quite a contrast to the power saws and soldering irons next to it.

Charlie brought the massive puzzle of polished wood back from the Ohio church for which he had built it, now using it for practice and demonstration purposes.

Charlie grew up in Cleveland, Ohio in a music-loving family where "you were started on the piano at age five whether you wanted to or not." A childhood spent at the



Top: One of Charles' stunning organs.  
Above: Charles at work in his Conifer studio.

# WORKSHOP

keys included organ lessons beginning in the eighth grade; he practiced on the small instrument his parents kept in their home.

It was not until after he graduated with a degree in music from Oberlin College that he became more fascinated with the mechanics of the pipe organ than with simply playing the instrument. An apprenticeship with an organ builder in Germantown, Ohio soon followed as well as a few extended visits to Europe to study the classic instruments.

Six years ago, Charlie packed up his tools of the trade and moved west to where he had dreamed of living his entire life—Colorado. An avid fan of the outdoors and the mountains, he felt that Colorado could serve as a home base for his business as well as the place to explore his other passion—geology. Nature's influence can be seen in much of the detail work on the instruments. Carved autumn leaves and wooden deer complement one organ, while another exhibits designs borrowed from a more unusual occurrence found in nature:

crop circles. Charlie remains intrigued by the geometric patterns of these environmental mysteries regardless of their origin, and refers to a wall chart in his studio when creating some of his designs.

Along with the natural influences so prevalent in the surrounding landscape, photographic reproductions of both organs and organ music composers paper the walls of his workshop and serve as inspiration when he designs an instrument to suit an individual client's needs and desires. A solid understanding of the sometimes very slight, yet always differing, sounds produced by each and every pipe—from a pencil-sized version crafted from tin alloy to what is essentially "an 18-foot wooden whistle"—allows Charlie to say in all honesty that no two of his instruments are ever exactly alike. In fact, he adds, "Nothing is 'off the shelf,' so to speak. If I order some part, other than nuts and bolts, it's custom-made for me and the specific instrument."

This attention to detail and devotion to every aspect of the craft of organ building is one of the elements that make

his instruments stand out among the rest. Even reproduced on the two-dimensional surface of a glossy brochure, Charlie's well-honed skills are apparent. Aside from some of the modern electric tools used today, the art of organ building has not changed for centuries. Charlie remains true to the craft, retaining the classic lines and shapes of the traditional pipe organ, while revealing his modern, artistic sensibilities in the decoratively embossed metal pipes and carved accents made from a diverse range of woods selected to suit the instruments' eventual surroundings.

"You become so immersed in it, with every single part," he says, "that it's easy to become almost obsessed with detail." He believes that an organ should blend seamlessly with its surroundings, and takes every aspect of the environment into consideration, including the architectural detail of the building in which it will be housed and any dominant type of wood or stain in the decor.

When building an organ from the ground up, Charlie assumes an almost

parental role. Although he occasionally employs a subcontractor to help, he is the builder from the very early planning stages through the final set-up. The finished organ is assembled in his workshop and put through a series of tests, then disassembled and packaged for shipment. Charlie travels with the instrument and, with the help of a small crew, sets up and tunes each organ. This can be a daunting task, as some of them contain nearly 2,000 pipes that each need tuning. He has been known to spend weeks at a time setting up and perfecting an instrument in its final location.

In the end, "Parting with it is a mixed blessing when you've spent six months, a year, or even more working on it," Charlie notes. "You love it because it has become so much a part of you, but you're also tired of working on it—you're glad to see it go out the door."

When he is not working on a brand-new organ, Charlie fills his time with restoration and repair work. Organs fall victim to the ravages of time, human

beings, and environmental factors; the high dust levels in Colorado's dry climate cause pipes to slip out of tune. Leather cracks as well, and careless players often mistreat the sensitive instruments. Although most of his commissions involve pieces from the latter half of the 20th century, Charlie has engaged in some restoration projects on 19th-century organs as well as on one dating from the 1600s.

Nearing his 30th year as an organ craftsman, Charlie looks forward to the projects in his future. He is eager to build some original instruments for Colorado clients and to continue exploring the medium that he loves. That includes playing the occasional recital for the public as well as entertaining lucky guests with a bit of Bach.

"I'm not sure if building the organ is any easier than playing it," he says, "but it is certainly more lucrative. Organists almost always have a day job!"

For more information, contact Charles Ruggles at (303) 838-0065 or at [rugglesorgans@aol.com](mailto:rugglesorgans@aol.com). ■

