

Organist Todd Wilson to be featured in BW improvisation workshops & concert

by Daniel Hathaway



Over his keys the musing organist,
Beginning doubtfully and far away,
First lets his fingers wander as they list,
And builds a bridge from Dreamland for his lay:
Then, as the touch of his loved instrument
Gives hopes and fervor, nearer draws his theme,
First guessed by faint auroral flushes sent
Along the wavering vista of his dream.

Thus begins James Russell Lowell's *The Vision of Sir Launfal* (1867), a poetic description of an organist improvising at the keyboard — an act of instantaneous musical

creation that had all but disappeared except from organ lofts, usually French, by the dawning of the 20th century.

Improvisation is now on the rise again, not only through the fingers of organists. “It’s now infecting other musicians as well,” Todd Wilson said in a recent telephone conversation. “Chamber music groups, orchestras, everybody’s doing it.”

Wilson, who is music director at Cleveland’s Trinity Cathedral, professor of organ at the Cleveland Institute of Music, curator of Severance Hall’s E.M. Skinner organ, and a well-known concert organist, is an enthusiastic improviser whose talents are expressed not only during church services. He also provides on-the-spot music for screenings of silent film classics produced during the era before “talkies” became technologically feasible. Then, scores were played live on a special kind of instrument — the theater organ, with its wide array of bells, whistles, and other sound effects.

The organist will demonstrate his movie-scoring skills as well as introducing the art of keyboard improvisation to interested musicians this weekend at Baldwin Wallace University. Wilson will unpack the mysteries of making up music on the spot in

workshops on Friday and Saturday, January 11 and 12. And on Saturday at 7:00 pm, he'll provide live accompaniment to Charlie Chaplin's *The Kid* and Laurel & Hardy's *Big Business* in Gamble Auditorium (details and ticket information [here](#)).



How did Wilson get into the improvisation business in the first place? “For organists, those skills are a necessity,” he said, “and I started by seeing people improvise in a church service context. My studies at the Cincinnati College-Conservatory coincided with Gerre Hancock’s last years there, and he showed me how much wider the possibilities were than I had realized before.”

Hancock went on to serve from 1971-2004 as organist of St. Thomas Church on Fifth Avenue in New York City, where his improvisations on hymn tunes and in larger forms became legendary. One stop in Wilson’s career trajectory was Cleveland’s Church of the Covenant, and during his tenure there, he launched his movie-accompanying career.

In a 2014 [interview](#) with this publication, Wilson said, “I thought it would be nice to have a summer music series because there wasn’t much going on then in University Circle. I thought about what would get people to come out on a summer evening — something popular, fun and different. It worked, and I enjoyed it. I realized right away that it represented a completely different kind of organ playing, one that was challenging and fun, drew crowds and entertained people.”

On Saturday, Wilson won’t have the benefit of all the gizmos of a true cinema organ to play with, but he’s grown accustomed to having fewer toys at his disposal. “With movies, you can paint with the broadest of brushes, using general colors,” he said. And if an organ isn’t in top condition, that won’t faze him much. “When you’re improvising, you can avoid using what doesn’t work. No one’s the wiser, and the organ sounds fine.”

Wilson is especially looking forward to furnishing music for *The Kid*. “It’s a bit on the short side, but it’s a really sweet movie, great fun to watch and play. It has so much character, and it’s a bit different from some of the other Chaplin films.”

How will Todd Wilson introduce the art of improvisation to his workshop attendees? He’s going to be doing a bit of improvising there as well. “It depends on who shows up,” he said, “and I don’t have a clue who’s coming.” He plans to center exercises around hymn and service playing and to introduce freer formats as well. “We’ll do round robin sessions on the bench to bring people out of themselves and prove to them that they can’t get into too much trouble. I’ve got plenty of different handouts and angles to go from.”

Wilson is delighted that so many contemporary musicians are dipping their toes into improvisation, and hopes that his workshops will inspire people to experiment further. “It’s a great experience for instrumentalists to have — to make music that’s not on the printed page.”

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