Big Bertha gets new lease on life
Piedmont Community Church organ 6-month restoration completed

By Scott Fitzgerald

Minister of Music Dr. Stephen Main puts “Big Bertha” through her paces. After many years of working with the increasingly recalcitrant instrument, he is thrilled with its new capabilities.

The organ console, renewed with fine English components, is like an artist’s palette.

Within the towering organ chamber, more than 2,800 pipes are found. Every one of them was renewed as part of the project. The six-month task was completed on February 19 with a grand organ rededication service, with brass, percussion, full choir and Bertha singing lustily from her rebuilt works.

Today she sounds more alive than ever before: crispier, more responsive, louder, and fuller. Best of all, the church now has a monumental yet flexible instrument that will support the choir and congregational singing for the next 50 years.

Minister of Music Steve Main says, there is one member of the music program that has been most faithful of all: the church’s beloved pipe organ. Built in 1958, in the post-war boom of organ building, the fine Moller organ – “Big Bertha” as Main affectionately calls her – has served for decades with incredible faithfulness through thick and thin, pealing forth at weddings, lending comfort at memorials, leading singing at Christmas, and thundering in triumph at Easter.

Big Bertha has been the unsung backbone of music making at the church for decades, but time took its toll. Leather gave way, miles of 1950s-era wiring frayed, and pneumatic connections slipped and leaked. Over the years Main was able to compensate for these deficiencies. As a student of an organ teacher who insisted that all his students know how to fix basic problems, Steve repaired and patched where he could. The choir became accustomed to seeing him dash into the guts of the organ at the last minute to patch and hammer a stubborn part into place. But inevitably it was clear that the organ had to be rebuilt.

Thanks to a generous infusion of grant money, Big Bertha now has a new lease on life. Pipe organs are unusually complex, but the fine Bay Area firm of Hupalo & Repasky was entirely up to the task. They removed the almost 3000 pipes in the great, three-story-high chambers on the pulpit side of the chancel and transported them to their shop for major repair and upgrading. The console was removed and completely rebuilt and refinished, including keyboards and pedals from one of the best organ builders in Great Britain, plus the latest digital components.

All leather in the bellows, swell shades, reservoirs, chests, and indeed the blower itself were replaced with new components. All pipework was cleaned, repacked, and revcoed, and new digital capabilities heretofore unknown were added. This will provide the ability to combine the sounds of historic European cathedral organs that have been digitally sampled to play alongside the pipes.

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Ranging from a deep bass just above the threshold of human hearing, to the highest notes of a piccolo, the pipes are made of wood and metal. Each pipe must be individually tuned, the wooden ones via the stoppers in their tops or slides at their sides. Metal pipes are tuned via flaps cut in their sides. Adjusting the length of a pipe’s flap changes the effective length of the air column, altering the pitch of the pipe.

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