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SCENE SPOTLIGHT

Christopher Cross, the singer-songwriter — and fine guitarist — who scored multiple radio hits in the early 1980s, returns to the Chumash Casino, on Thursday, bolstered by an infectious, hit single-laced songbook and his enduring talent. His latest album is 2014’s “Secret Ladder;” but his live shows feature the ’80s songs his legacy is built upon, including the triple-Grammy-winning “Sailing,” the Oscar-winning “Arthur’s Theme (Best That You Can Do),” “Ride Like the Wind” and “Think of Laura.” The Texas-born Cross, who has lived in Santa Barbara for years, is known for the energy and musical flexibility of his live shows, covering the hits and more obscure material, while also stretching out a bit as a nimble lead guitarist.

— Josef Woodard

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MUSIC

New Spin, Ancient Instrument

ORGANIST CAMERON CARPENTER BRINGS HIS TALENT — AND HIS CUSTOM TOURING ORGAN — TO THE GRANADA ON TUESDAY

By Josef Woodard, News-Press Correspondent

Cameron Carpenter
When: 7 p.m., Tuesday
Where: The Granada Theatre, 1216 State St.
Cost: $38-$54, 520 UCSC students
Information: 899-3000, granadashb.org

One of the startling aspects of Tuesday's big organ concert at the Granada Theatre is contained in the very phrase "organ concert," a rarity in the cultural world, especially in a venue as large and high-profile as the Granada. But acclaimed and broadly popular Cameron Carpenter is no ordinary organ phenom, and not your father's organist hero, or not exactly.

Julliard-trained and well-versed in organ literature, and with a stint as church organist in his resume, Mr. Carpenter does incorporate great traditions — such as the music of Bach. He is eager to expand the reputation and reach of the organ, however, and is doing so with the modernizing touches of a special customized and travel-friendly digital instrument and arrangements of pop songs in the mix of his repertoire, a blending instinct heard on his album "If You Could Read My Mind."

In a recent interview, Mr. Carpenter gave an outspoke, maverick and everyperson-sensitive account of his adventure as an organist, thus far.

News-Press: Is there a special intensity and satisfaction you get from playing live concerts, and commanding a room with the great wide palette of this instrument?

Cameron Carpenter: Certainly. Important for me as a secular artist, it gives me an instrument truly capable of film scoring, jazz and new music, as well as the complete organ repertoire and my own improvisations and compositions. The organ has been an instrument of stereotype, eccentricity and obscurity. What we now have is a brilliant and revolutionary vehicle which leaves that image in the dust.

NP: There have only occasionally been organists whose popularity allows them into a larger public arena and listenership. I guess Virgil Fox was one, F. Power Biggs another. Is there a part of what you do that has a kind of crusader element to it, in terms of wanting to extend interest in the greatness of this ancient instrument — with your modernized touches — to new listeners, to make organ hip?

CC: I couldn't care less about making organ "hip," as if that were even possible. One has a better chance of painting the sky green. But that's not the same as introducing it to new listeners, and helping people to see it as the humanism — and, in a musical way, the analogy for the universe itself — that it is.

But we should always be suspicious of attempts to make the organ itself significant, or to promote it for its own sake. Like all musical instruments, it is merely a medium, however large and complicated.

NP: To touch on your own background with organ, when did the sound and the instrument take hold of you? When did you know this would be your musical world and life?

CC: It's not my whole musical world or life. It's what I do now, and I'm obsessed with it deeply, but I don't always love it, and I don't intend to do it forever. I discovered the organ in an encyclopedia when I was four and started playing around that time.

NP: Was it always your interest through your studies and finding your own musical voice, to find ways to blend "serious" music with new arrangements of pop songs and other musical terrain — the high and low, so to speak?

CC: No. There is no high and low in music; those are only artifacts of the biases of the 20th century. Some of it is commercially driven, since as we are now in the last days of classical music as a performing art, the more diverse one's repertoire the wider its potential reception. However, I only play music that I care about, and that

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I'm able to pay attention to deeply whatever my mood.

I consider myself to have a fairly short attention span, I get bored easily — especially in music — and choosing music that defies this helps me to play music more
understandably and engagingly for audiences unfamiliar with my
work and with classical music in

NP: Is it fair to assume
that Bach is one of those cornerstones of your musical being? Does his
organ music supply you with
renewable fascination?

CC: I would not have described
Bach's music as a "cornerstone of
my musical being." Even by my
rather ridiculous standards, that
would be pretentious. Bach is
more like the sun; sometimes it's
pleasing, sometimes it burns you,
and sometimes it's hidden behind
clouds. I don't listen to Bach
recreationally.

NP: You have a wonderful,
adaptable and progressive
attitude about the instrument
itself, and being able to have
your own sound and setup wherever
you go, vs. performances that are
by nature, site-specific. Can you
talk about your motivation for
creating a new organ, and how
the International Touring Organ
differs from pipe and theater
models?

CC: In concept, it is simple
to understand: a very large
organ, using sounds sampled
from the best of both cathedral
organs and Warthite theater
organs, using digital technology
to liberate those sounds from
the immobile infrastructures
of wood and metal from which
they originated. In a bit more
technical terms, it uses digital
sampling to harvest the sounds
from organ pipes, and then uses
massively parallel processing and
a proprietary and customized
mobile sound system to structure
and reproduce those samples.

In artistic terms, this means
that I can keep what's best in
the pipe organ — its sounds, its
spatial dynamics, its emotional
impact — and dispense with
what I would argue holds it
back: its immobility (as the pipe
organ is certainly 'not going
anywhere'; whether literally or
commercially), its great and
ever-increasing expense, and
particularly its institutionalism.
The International Touring Organ
is uniquely, though it has some
distant precursors.

NP: Your album, "If You
Could Read, My Mind" shot up
the classical charts. Was that
a gratifying thing to see, on
various levels, beyond just the
success factor?

CC: Absolutely not, because
there is no classical chart that's
possible to regard seriously as
an arbiter of success. Most of
the albums that "chart" are
often done so on a comparison
basis, often on mere handfuls of
copies sold. Classical charts are
interesting mainly as evidence
of the insignificance of the CD
and the classical recording industry
in general.

NP: There are a lot of very
fine organists — and younger
organists — on the scene now,
and great instruments, such as
the organ at Walt Disney Concert
Hall. For all of its presumably
esoteric nature, is organ culture
alive and well, and poised for
expanding public profile?

CC: Within my own lifetime,
the last three decades' boom of
affordable, little-used concert
hall pipe organs will be seen
as a rash excess to rival any
decadence of the 1920s. It has
done nothing to raise the public
profile of organists in general,
improve their pay or their ability
to compete in the music industry,
or caused any noticeable
improvement in the relationship
of organists to the public.

As the role of the organ in
church continues to decline, there
will be a continuing separation
between traditional organists
and those more entrepreneurial
individuals who are prepared
to take risks to promote their
talent. Is "organ culture" has any
future, it's in those individuals, not in
organs.

WIFE
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typical triumph of the human
spirit kind of story. She has a
lot of flaws that were part of her
ingenuity to survive.

The play asks audiences to accept
all those flaws, and to admire her
"daring and do some of these
decisions.

"And our society doesn't allow
us to do that these days," says
Mr. Tufts. "As soon as our heroes
have flaws we dismiss them... But
in this play, every time she
does something questionable
we're reminded that she's
remarkable. And every time
she does something remarkable
we're reminded that she's done
something questionable."

The other main character is
the writer Doug Wright, who
interviewed Von Mahlsdorf near
the end of her life. The changes
that indicate different characters
are small and not obvious.

The last thing Mr. Tufts wanted
was a kind of quick-change
actor type who has so many
dark secrets in their
character. This is a
play about

"If..." he says. "It's taken five
weeks of working two to three hours a day,
then reviewing before bed, and
then waking up and seeing what, if
anything, remained."

Fortunately, he has a director
that fully understands
how an actor processes such a play.

"The toughest thing isn't
the memorization but the
orchestration from within," Mr.
Tufts says. "And Jenny's been
good at making sure I have
these signposts so I do
orchestrate from within, and she helps adjust the
dynamic along the way."

Without spoiling too much
of the magic of the ending, Mr.
Tufts talks about how Von
Mahlsdorf became a great
collector of antique, pre-world war II,
and went on to open a museum to show it off.

"She's able to accept these
objects as is, she doesn't
polish them," he says. "And like these
objects around her, she's a
beautiful relic from the past too.
And we're asked to treat her
the same way. It may not work the way
it used to, but it still has value."