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The Blackwood Experience

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Blackwood as a word is a world with many facets, whose apex is the Blackwood Theater Organ Society. It formalizes fascination with an arresting, black and gold-paneled Art Deco theater organ console. It commands—with great self awareness—a music room especially constructed to contain its particular mechanical/engineering/digital needs and specifications. Still providing a comfortable, graciously intimate, communal space where both theater organ aficionados and neophytes gather, superb artists challenge and display its splendid sound.



The Clock Tower
(Photo by Ben Robertson)



The Waterfall Console
(Photo by Ben Robertson)



The entrance to the Music Room
(Photo by Ben Robertson)





The Waterfall Console (Photo by Ben Robertson)

The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
and that has made all the difference
...Robert Frost

The philosophy of Blackwood courtesy of Robert Frost (Photo by Ben Robertson)

The reconstructed and refurbished House Patio (Photo by Susan Kemenyffy)

Blackwood is a state of mind, where for decades two men have long labored—and continue laboring—to create an ambience of sound and silence, sight and insight. Over decades the crisp, erudite, structural and systems drawings of Don Fink have come alive with the aid of supportive scores of friends giving thousands of hours in service to a vision. Ben Robertson's passion and commitment to the uniqueness of the theater organ sound has led him on a convoluted journey, whose results are individually and institutionally memorable. With the fine fortune of an encouraging family—Ben's sisters, Marna and Betty, and brother Jim—and innumerable patrons and friends, Blackwood continuously produces defining concerts within a limpid atmosphere where, with repetition, guests become more than visitors.

Geographically nestled astride a mineral-rich, rolling landscape 50 miles north of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the Blackwood experience begins with a car's angular departure from a self-effacing country lane a few miles east of Harrisville. Progressing from the known to the unknown—as in a Torii gate's spirit of transition—a visitor travels through an 'Eastern Woodland' passageway, redolent with species ferns softly spiking in the damp shadow lands beneath canopies of oak and maple.

In 1970 Don and Ben purchased 16 acres of half-wooded and abandoned farm land in Butler County, Marion Township. Consisting equally of woods and blackberry-covered meadows, the parcel was chosen as the antithesis of their city home-life, where houses stood solidly apart at 10' intervals. An old logging trail—continuing in history today as Blackwood's main entrance—traversed deep woodland, emerging into a distant meadow. Two streams, originating from within the landscape, could be tapped to serve both structural and ornamental purposes. Much later, in the mid 1990s, an additional adjoining 24 acres of land were purchased.

In 1976, in order to comply with Rural Electrification Act regulations that there be a dwelling on the property, a small 12' x 16' 'home'—replete with cots, a small dining room table and chairs and a hot plate counter—was hand-built without power or battery-operated tools. Within a year, with electricity now available, the barn 'Cottage,' a 24' x 36' structure—the theatre pipe organ's first home—was built, followed quickly in 1977 by construction of a 3,000 square foot, one-and-one-half story residence. Merging into the

landscape, the house with its large, south-facing windows shelters its capaciousness, until a narrow, lushly planted, staircase descent reveals the hospitable welcome of a sunken courtyard—recently refurbished for comfortable dining and socializing before, between and after concerts. Further on, a Pergola—twining today with multiple inches-thick Wisteria trunks—protects an adjacent crystalline-blue swimming pool from chilling westerly winds.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, theatre organs installed in American pizza parlors were increasing in popularity. It was a logical step for Ben and Don to replace their electronic Rodgers Trio organ. Visiting the Paramount Music Palace in Indianapolis, Indiana was all that was needed to send them on a quest to acquire a theatre organ of their own. In 1981, searching the 'For Sale' section in one of the latest ATOS magazines, they found that a three-manual, thirteen-rank hybrid theater organ previously installed in a Cicero's restaurant in Roseville, Minnesota, was available. Spirited east to Blackwood, a timely executive decision was made to not restore the organ, but to make it "acceptably playable." Terry Kleven and Tim Patterson came from Minnesota and brought it to functionality—ready for concerts. The original collection of pipes came from a variety of sources; from theatres in Wisconsin, from roller rinks, from KDKA Radio, and a Chicago dance hall.

The original Kimball console and 13 ranks of pipes were accompanied by an upright player piano, glockenspiel, marimba, chrysoglott, xylophone, drums, and toy counter. The first floor of the cottage was 24' x 36', with all pipes on one side in a 12' x 36' chamber. The console, piano, and toy counter were located opposite, separated by swell shades. It is an understatement to say that the sound was overwhelming. Comfortable listening and enjoyment demanded more space and distance, which meant exiting the building!—which is exactly what happened for the next four years, as concert goers sat on chairs on a sloping lawn beneath a small tent outside the cottage. Each July a local organist played in concert. The cottage's doors and the chamber windows were opened, so everyone could enjoy the amazing sounds that came from the rescued and resurrected instrument. Soon enough, concerns surrounding western Pennsylvania's unpredictable July weather patterns surfaced. The idea of inviting scores of people to travel not-inconsiderable



Friend Joannel Ham ascending the console elevator (Photo by Ben Robertson)



Martin Ellis and Randy Frieling in concert (Photo by Susan Kemenyffy)



Don laying cement blocks for Music Room (Photo by Ben Robertson)



Console after casts and paint application (Photo by Ben Robertson)

Kimball Console in transformation (Photo by Ben Robertson)



Ron Rhode and scholarship winner Ashley Leight (Photo by Ben Robertson)



Don with scholarship winner Nicole Cerussi and her Mother Linda (Photo by Ben Robertson)

distances, in anticipation of a concert that might be cancelled due to rain, needed to be addressed.

The decision was made to add a 30' x 50' air-conditioned, humidity-controlled music room to the main house. The day after the 1986 concert, ground was broken. It was constructed on weekends over five years, beyond the crisp, precise hours given to their Pittsburgh business. During this time they dismantled and rebuilt the original 13 ranks, while adding and re-leathering an additional seven ranks. A Peterson combination action and a Z-tronics relay were added at this time.

The splendid black and gold leaf console of the Paramount Music Palace organ served as the model for creating a similar console at Blackwood. Ben and Don discovered that a Chicago-based Wurlitzer with a 'Waterfall' console had had molds made of all its gorgeously ornate forms. Its owner graciously gave permission to make fiberglass casts. The original Kimball console was slightly altered to accommodate the Waterfall design. A local cabinetmaker created new side panels. After the console was covered with gesso and painted black—the Waterfall caps and ornate floral designs were laboriously and elegantly hand gilded—a Welte/Packard reproducing grand piano subsequently replaced the upright piano.

Literally stepping backwards in that moment of the console's rebirth and renewal, they knew their goal had been achieved. Now, there was but one other missing theatrical detail to complete the concert experience. Remembering that the Paramount organ did not sit staidly, waiting silent and immobile to perform, but rose majestically from a secretive pit, its glorious sound guided by hidden masterful hands whose artistry only became visible as the instrument gradually rose higher and higher into the view of an enchanted audience, they began to search for an elevator lift. Want Ads in the theatre organ magazines led nowhere. Ken Crome, one of the creative forces behind the Paramount Music Palace organ, was contacted. His invaluable assistance led them to the purchase of an eight-foot screw-lift elevator, complete with wooden turntable. Their additional, effective updates substituted steel for the original wooden components, including the rotator disc and its surrounding deck. A missing 5-hp motor—donated by Bob Casey, a local friend and supporter—was added.

With the organ lift in place, the greater challenge of hiding it with a movable floor

arose. As there were no available models in the U.S., Don and Ben fabricated a design. Steel I-beams formed an eight-foot square; five-inch wheels on each corner ride in a 'U' channel, ramped so that the movable floor section dives under the stationary floor, after linear actuators (motor driven screws) lower the leading edge. The movable floor is pulled by a garage door opener, totally revealing the console's lift space. In this 'pulling' operation the trailing wheels of the floor ride down the 'U' channel ramp. The eight-foot square movable floor section is composed of multiple plywood layers, providing similar density to the surrounding floor, banishing any perceived hollow sound. The entire Music Room floor is composed of approximately 7,000 pieces of tightly fitted 3/4" oak parquet. The movable floor fits within this pattern.

The organ console is located at the front of the music room, with the solo and main chambers located at the rear of the room. Tone chutes—positioned in front of the large, lower four-foot by eight-foot swell shades—direct the sound toward the ceiling, providing the audience a more comfortable auditory experience than would be possible were they in a more direct line with the sound waves.

On July 21, 1991, Jim Riggs played in concert, dedicating the 'new' Blackwood Theater Organ, for the benefit of Make-A-Wish®, whose subsequent annual concerts have raised over \$277,000 for the funding of the wishes of 74 children with life-threatening illnesses from the Western Pennsylvania Tri-State region. In 2000, Blackwood Theater Organ Society became a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization; to foster public appreciation of the theater pipe organ as an American treasure; to encourage renewed interest in silent films; and to raise monies for both Make-A-Wish® and music scholarships.

On Make-A-Wish® concert days—with back-to-back concerts and interim refreshments—attendance averages 190. A newsletter is sent to all concert attendees. Our current mailing list is over 400. We are continuously encouraging new people to attend. Success was relatively immediate as customers of the Blackwood Gallery segued over to attendance at the concerts. Over the years the composition of the audience has shifted, so that it is now composed of approximately 50% of the original gallery customers and 50% residents from surrounding communities. Since their inception the Dinner Concerts have been sellouts, due to the high level of artistic talent and the warm, comforting



Elevator and retractable floor (Photo by Ben Robertson)



Martin Ellis ascending in concert performance (Photo by Susan Kemenyffy)



Don with Margaret and Dennis Unks between concerts (Photo by John Bauerline)



Guests at a Dinner Concert (Photo by Ben Robertson)

The west end of the music room with console and grand piano (Photo by Ben Robertson)



Ben and sister Marna before a concert (Photo by Ben Robertson)



The Kemenyffy capes above tone chutes (Photo by Susan Kemenyffy)



Checking out 'Puff the Magic Dragon' (Photo by T. Stars)

environment of the venue. Beyond the newsletter, the concerts are not advertised. Word-of-mouth continues to reap benefits.

Summer programs have included organ concerts with a short silent film, classical piano duets, and a season finale catered dinner concert featuring both organ and piano/organ duets. These additional concerts have raised funds to award \$176,000 for music scholarships, investing in the futures of 52 high-school seniors from both within and beyond the greater western Pennsylvania region, whose chosen orchestral instruments have included harp, percussion, strings, brass, woodwinds, piano and organ. In 2013 \$25,000 will be available for awards in five scholarships of \$3,000 to \$5,000, plus an additional \$5,000 for grants.

Having established an Art Gallery and Custom Picture Framing business in the North Hill suburb of Pittsburgh in 1972, Don and Ben traveled 100 miles a day for 35 years, with cumulative odometer readings of well over a million miles. They were doing all the work at Blackwood at the same time.

With each season's passing, Don and Ben's personal craftsmanship created visible and invisible systems and structures, civilizing the formerly untamed spaces of Blackwood. In the early 1990s a pool house was added to conceal a filter mechanism and to provide a changing room after swimming. A bathroom in this facility helped to provide greater amenities for concert-day guests. In those years, Walt Strony and Chris Elliott came to play Make-A-Wish® concerts.

In the mid 1990s, when Ron Rhode and the late Tom Hazleton played, it began to be apparent that a larger water supply was necessary to service the needs of ever-increasing concert attendance. After the summer drought of 1997 eviscerated the primary water stream, a 25,000-gallon underground reservoir was excavated and installed with concrete blocks and a non-porous liner. Once completed, the stream was redirected through it, with the overflow creating a naturalistic pool. A below-ground water treatment system and over ½ mile of piping for water distribution throughout the property was also installed.

Lew Williams and Scott Foppiano concertized in those closing 20th-century years, as a 'spring house' with a second-floor seating area materialized, followed shortly by a linking, gracefully arcing bridge, whose matching 2" x 2" curved oak railing—after many years of soaking under pressure—was finally installed in

the summer of 2012. Turning into the new millennium, a fiberglass greenhouse was constructed to provide early momentum for seed-grown plants for the gardens. Soon, it was superseded by a roomier, heated orangerie used to over-winter large, fragile summer ornamentals, displayed beside the house, music room, and swimming pool patios.

In response to a friend's innocuous query concerning a soon-to-wed daughter's search for a wedding gazebo, her desire was unexpectedly fulfilled with Blackwood's hallmark grace and energy as a shining new structure received one last coat of paint the day before the nuptials. Close by, a 60' diameter formal garden—bursting with color and texture in full sun—with bisecting north, south, east, and west cement walkways, was gem-set into an emerald lawn extending in every direction.

Living in the midst of mineral-rich hills, whose neighbors have signed over their rights to open-pit limestone-mining companies, Ben and Don studied Commonwealth of Pennsylvania law relating to property rights. Knowing that mining companies must maintain a 300' distance from all dwellings, in the early 2000s they began to build a 1,500 square foot-house on the southeastern part of the property and a clock tower on its easternmost tip.

The year 2001 buzzed with new construction. A restored 1907 Seth Thomas tower clock, whose face is six feet in diameter, had been acquired at auction a few years earlier. It joined another auction discovery, a 1960s vintage 75-note Schulmerich carillon. Each waited patiently for its turn in the spotlight. Hibernation ended when a monumental four-story, 16'-square clock tower, dedicated as 'Rainbow's End' in memory of Ben's mother, with 9' ceilings, an observation deck and a hip roof, began construction. The foundation was dug in mid-2001, with concrete block laid before winter. In the following spring the first 20' were erected. Within five years additional floors were added and the interior was completed.

In the early 2000s Jason Wiles came to a concert. In conversation he impressed Don with his electronic expertise. Jason's advice to add a projection wall screen—which would allow the audience to see the artist's hand- and pedal-techniques—was incorporated. Years since have seen the adoption of additional electronic recommendations which have allowed for an increasingly unique concert experience. Magic must be maintained, and so Jason has taken on added responsibility, ensuring that

the quality of the Blackwood experience continues. In 2008 Jason and his fiancé, Haley, were married in the music room, with Dave Wickerham playing the organ.

During the complexity of those years Ron Rhode returned to the console, followed by Simon Gledhill, Jelani Eddington, Rob Richards at the organ and the late Ralph Wolf at the piano. The showing of silent films brought Chris Elliott to play for Buster Keaton's *Steamboat Bill Jr.* and *Cops*, as well as Douglas Fairbanks Jr.'s *The Mark of Zorro*. Jim Riggs returned to play for another Fairbanks film, *The Black Pirate*.

The latter years of the decade saw Jim Riggs and Dave Wickerham maintaining the theatre organ's historical link with silent films. In 2007, Jelani Eddington and Chris Gorsuch presented the Greig Piano Concerto, while 2010 saw them playing Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto # 2. Jonas Nordwall and Walt Strony rounded off the final years of the first decade of the millennium, with Donna Parker, Mark Herman, Martin Ellis and Randy Frieling beginning the second decade.

In speaking of his 'presenter's philosophy' Ben says, "Since the first concert in 1991 we have always striven to provide our audiences with the most talented and respected artists in the theatre organ world. We will continue to do so. When we become aware of new, emerging artists of the caliber of veteran artists, they too will be introduced at Blackwood. Generally the music that we enjoy is a combination of popular songs of the theatre organ's heyday and contemporary music. The versatility of the instrument—capable of traversing time—easily allows our artists to play transcriptions of classical and contemporary music, each equally appreciated and expected by our audience. At our scholarship recitals, after the young musicians have performed in the music room, the console rises from its mysterious waiting place, and performs through the Midi system. By sharing its magnificent sound and history, it is our hope that tomorrow's musicians and their families will come to understand and acknowledge, not only the complex beauty of the instrument, but those who voluntarily gave thousands of hours to help raise the scholarship funds that would be helping them achieve their dreams."

The Blackwood experience extends beyond four walls. On concert days, time is allocated to walking: among informal rock gardens—in a constant state of flux—surrounding the house, garage and music room; to distant, beckoning structures whose



The first house built at Blackwood
(Photo by Ben Robertson)



The Ligularia Garden
(Photo by Ben Robertson)



The Spring House pool and fountain
(Photo by Ben Robertson)



Cookie (Photo by T. Stars)



Mark Herman rehearsing before a silent film
(Photo by Ben Robertson)



Solo Vibraharp
(Photo by Ben Robertson)

unexpected strength and serenity are more comfortably seen walking along poured concrete sidewalks, where buried electric lines light iron lampposts. New sculptures have recently entered the grounds. A two-foot Æolian harp catches the wind atop a four-foot pedestal, circled by a large garden of prickly pear cactus. In 2012 a whimsical, colorful, metal dragon sculpture with solar-powered glowing eyes and claw-held globe, was placed prominently.

Having closed the Blackwood Art Gallery in Ross Township in 2008, Ben and Don are now able to focus their waking hours entirely on expanding the Blackwood experience. In their eyes the buildings and the grounds linking them are not complete: there are still unfinished projects, finishing details that need to be woven into the essence of seemingly complete designs.

Continuing a long established routine, Ben is up at 5:30am starting their morning coffee. After news and breakfast at 7:00am he is to be found in the music room practicing, or playing Chopin for his own pleasure. Don is outside in the landscape, or beyond, in one of the distant out-buildings, immersed in his latest project. A recent success saw the resurrection of a Wurlitzer Military Band Organ, Style 125. Bought at another ubiquitous auction, it was inoperable, with the original walnut-colored oak wood hidden beneath paint. Stripped of dross, disassembled and rebuilt, with pneumatics recovered and leather parts replaced, the roll once more is rewound and playing.

Pausing routinely before noon, quietly, graciously hosting all those working with them, they daily drive with Cookie, their 13-year-old cocker spaniel, into Harrisville to eat lunch. She stays in the van, kept warm in the winter, cool in the summer. The brief journey serves a dual purpose, temporarily clearing their heads at a distance from the calculations and stresses of the most recent project, and reciprocating support long received from a vibrant, local enterprise whose owners—often unable to leave a demanding restaurant—and servers appreciate their steady business.

In 2010 the music room was renewed. Glowing softly, it became a visually warm environment for the newly arrived Petrof grand piano, a Vibraphone, a new rank of pipes (Oboe Horn), and a smaller set of swell shades mounted high in the chamber walls.

Two 10' x 5' painted capes made of parachute silk—which once danced with abandon to Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* within the vast stage of the restored Art Deco

Warner Theater in Erie, Pennsylvania—flew once more, as actuators open them like butterfly wings at the organ's first notes. These capes conceal the newly installed swell shades.

What are the recollections when departing Blackwood? Is it the sonorous quality, the breadth and depth of the organ's voices that one recalls? Is it the deft ricocheting between gentleness and strength, playfulness and laughter that surged throughout the music room? Is it the performers' dedication to controlled memory and movement, enchantment and flamboyance? Is it the parallel dexterity of a grass-roots cadre of nameless, silent, skilled artisans who insure that armatures, gaskets, mufflers, blowers, and regulators remain fully, compliantly functional?

One hears again the unexpected waves rippling from the Carillon, whose 50 songs were converted from a roll player to a computer by a MIDI player. With the concert season concluded for another year; with the organ on temporary hiatus, basking in much-deserved down time; with the annual autumn ritual of planting allium, lily, and other summer-blooming bulbs in the quadrants of the circular sun garden complete; with the sound of the tower clock striking the hour and its half in solemn reminder of fleeting time; with the wholly magical, mysterious notes of the Carillon ringing comfortably across cherished acres, then fearlessly out for a mile—smiling on scarred acres always in flux—it is a time for reflection. As Don says, "It may appear to an audience that this is an idyllic place to live. What is not realized is that we built every structure ourselves, poured every yard of concrete for every sidewalk and driveway ourselves, while building structures to defend our property from mining encroachment."

As latent winter begins crossing the newly somber hills of western Pennsylvania—settling into silver months of chill, silent waiting—summer's thoughts and observations morph into concrete plans, schedules and budgets. With meadows devoid of exploring visitors, and footprints left only by Ben and Don, 13-year-old, four-legged Cookie, resident small wildlife, and a herd of cosseted deer 20-strong, the end-of-day clock tower ritual—including the worst days of winter when Cookie can easily walk a shoveled 800' path—continues, finding the three of them—one inhaling her evening meal and two decompressing with wine and chips—revisiting the previous hours, strategically planning those to come.

The Robert Frost poem, 'The Road Not Taken,' viewed chest high, in three-dimensional bronze at the divergence of two of Blackwood's own paths, sums up the *raison d'être* of Blackwood:

'Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.'

About The Author

After receiving her BFA from Syracuse University, studying at The Art Students League in Woodstock, New York, and working with poets at the Writers' Workshop in Iowa City, Iowa during her MA and MFA studies, Susan has continued a life-long immersion in visual, spoken, and written art forms. Her studio work ranges in scope and scale from the multiple sketchbooks created during journeys to Prague, Vienna, Rome, London, Budapest and Kyoto—later published—through the frenetically-fruitful, decades long, sculptural, Raku ceramics collaboration with her husband Steven, which earned her a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship. Her prize-winning works have entered national and international public and private collections in Brazil, New Zealand, Great Britain, Canada, Europe, and the United States—including the Smithsonian Institution, the Philadelphia, Carnegie, and Cincinnati Museums of Art. Her large-scale designs have danced in Ballet Theatre, have been trod upon by schoolchildren on the floor of their elementary school, and have been walked in the peace and pleasure of multiple acres of garden projects—including those of her own Raku Place, whose tours support the work of the Erie Art Museum and the national Garden Conservancy. She has lectured extensively on 'Art and Gardens,' including the University of the Arts in Prague, Colonial Williamsburg, and New York's Chautauqua Institution. She is a co-editor of the British electronic journal "Tracy" (dedicated to the presentation and discussion of drawing practice). A recent essay was published in the University of Chicago Press compilation of 'Drawing: the Purpose.' As a volunteer member of the Garden Club of America—Zone V Rep—she works to document gardens for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Gardens. Raku Place is the home of her studio and gardens in McKean, Pennsylvania. Her website is www.kemenyffy.com and her email is susan@kemenyffy.com