Pulling Out All the Stops

Greg Zelek, the principal organist of the Madison Symphony Orchestra, uses his creative flair to grow the local audience for organ music.

By **Anna Kottakis** / Photos by Christine Dopp

At each of Greg Zelek's organ concerts, he addresses the audience directly in between pieces. He jokes, tells stories and shares insights into the process of playing the organ.

"I feel like I'm in my living room, talking amongst friends and family," says the 34-year-old organist. In reality, he's performing in Overture Hall, speaking to a crowd of up to 2,255.

Zelek grew up as a serious pianist. He was in middle school when his piano teacher, who was also an organist, suggested that he could make extra money by learning organ and performing on weekends.

"I took to it right away," he says. During high school, he pivoted to focus on the organ and attended the New World School of the Arts in Miami, Florida. He then attended The Julliard School in New York City, where he completed his undergraduate and master's degrees studying the organ.

Now, as the Elaine and Nicholas Mischler Curator of the Overture Concert Organ since 2017, Zelek designs the musical programs for the Madison Symphony Orchestra's four-part organ series each year.

"Every year, I ask myself, 'What are the four concerts I want to do to continue to grow and build our audience?'" he says. Unexpected or inventive collaborations (like last season's bilingual program of Latin-American music) create new access points—and, he hopes, attract new audience members.

"I think people don't necessarily [start out loving] organ music, but I think that they love having a great time, they love great music and they love meeting new artists as part of our series," he says. "Over time, they learn to love the organ."

From the Artist: Greg Zelek

One of a Kind

No two pipe organs are alike. … It's very unique to have an organ in a concert hall setting and not a sacred space. I also feel like our instrument is eclectic enough that you could play a complete organ-centric classical program, or you can play a salsa concert with a Cuban band.

Give and Take

The energy that a performer receives from the audience is so strong and has such an impact on the joy with which I play, and how I'm able to experience the music and share it.

Building an Audience

Classical music and the arts are a tough business. We want to play for as many people as possible. So I'm always thinking about how to achieve the highest artistic excellence with the most unique programming that brings in new people.

Creative Freedom

I love whatever piece I'm learning next. Because I can program the way I want to — because the audience [in Madison] now trusts me — I never have the pressure to play something that I don't want to play. Anytime I program something, it's because I think I'm going to really enjoy playing it and the audience will really enjoy hearing it.

“[The organ] is versatile. It’s grand. It’s virtuosic.”

THE ORGAN:
Overture’s concert organ was commissioned by the Madison Symphony Orchestra in 2001, and it took nearly three years to design and build. The instrument weighs 174 tons and has 4,040 pipes and 63 stops (the buttons which allow Zelek to manipulate the timbre, volume and sound as he plays).

THE WAY IT WORKS:
The console, where Zelek sits, has three keyboards called “manuals” that each control a different section of pipes. He plays a pedalboard with his feet to create bass notes. All the while, he’s also operating a dizzying array of other knobs and buttons. “People think the hardest part of playing the organ will be learning how to coordinate your hands and feet, but it’s really learning how the organ works,” says Zelek.

"I want my organ concerts to be something people leave and say, 'I feel like I got to know the artist, and I experienced great music in an incredible space.'"

THE PERFORMANCE: Part of the appeal of an organ concert is in the sheer fascination of watching someone produce music from such a complex, enigmatic instrument. "I think people like seeing something being done that makes you think, 'I don't know how they're doing that,'" says Zelek.

THE PREPARATION: Zelek's rehearsal time in Overture Hall is limited. He learns notes and plans at home on a much smaller, two-manual organ — but not all his ideas translate when he gets to the hall, sometimes just a day or two before a concert. He'll adapt as much as he can and continue tweaking as he performs. "My brain is always on overdrive when I'm gearing up for the concert and when I'm playing the concert," he says.

Greg Zelek | @gregzelekorganist | madisonsymphony.org

Anna Kottakis is digital editor at Madison Magazine. **@annakottakis**