

SENNHEISER MKH 8040's CAPTURE THE BRASS FOR MACY'S CHRISTMAS CD

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The Wanamaker Organ, located in what is now the downtown Philadelphia Macy's store, is the world's largest operational pipe organ, boasting 28,541 pipes in 462 ranks. It is both visually and acoustically stunning and, beyond that, a precious piece of living history. The organ was originally built for the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair and later moved to Philadelphia as the crown jewel of the new Wanamaker's Department Store. Even as Wanamaker's changed owners and names over the ensuing decades, care was taken to maintain the tremendous instrument. Pre-siding at the behemoth 6 manual console is Grand Court Organist, Peter Richard Conte. Currently, Macy's offers free concerts twice a day, six days a week.

In recognition of its cultural and historical importance, Macy's decided to celebrate the Wanamaker Organ by recording a Christmas CD "Christmas in the Grand Tradition" with accompaniment from the world renowned Philadelphia Brass. Jim Stemke of DSP Recordings of Schaumburg, IL (www.dsprecordings.com) was hired to capture the resources of this sleeping giant along with the clarity and musicianship of the Philadelphia Brass - www.philadelphiabrass.com. When he's

not recording the instrument, Stemke is one of the dedicated professional technicians who helps to restore and maintain the Wanamaker Organ!



The recording session took two weeks and steely dedication on the part of everyone involved: they had to reverse their sleep schedules as Stemke could only hit the "record" button on his Genex recording system between 11 PM and 5

AM, when the cash registers, elevators, and telephones were all peacefully asleep. The organ speaks into the store's Grand Courtyard, which is seven stories high, 120 feet deep, and 70 feet wide. Capturing the immense sound of the organ itself was a nuanced, but relatively straightforward task. Capturing the sound of the Philadelphia Brass's trombone, tuba, French horn, and two trumpets, which effectively competed with the organ, proved more challenging.

"It's a truly massive building," remarked Stemke. "The brass players were producing unusually high SPLs, even for brass players, because they were in the presence of the Wanamaker organ. To isolate the brass, I needed to be close, but not so close that I lost the natural bloom and dynamics coming from the instruments."

Stemke turned to a pair of Sennheiser's new MKH 8040 cardioid condensers to simultaneously handle the high SPLs, along with the very accurate sonic realism and super smooth response these microphones are capable of capturing. Their natural on-axis response, and effective off-axis rejection also played an important factor in using these microphones. The engineer made a custom rig for the 3-foot spaced A/B pair to hang over the balcony where the Philadelphia Brass were situated and then fed the high-end microphones into Prism microphone preamps.

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“The 8040s did a fantastic job with the high SPLs,” Stemke reported. “Their overall sonic beauty provided the clarity and liveliness that would have been remarkable in any recording situation, let alone up against the gigantic Wanamaker organ. The separation from the organ is significant and yet when I mix the 8040s with the organ pickup, the blend was not only very natural and smooth, but highly articulate.”



Large bi-amplified monitors provided accurate monitoring for the musicians, but the critical monitoring was done using two pair of Sennheiser HD-650 headphones powered by Grace headphone amplifier. Everyone loves using these headphones because they have a fantastic bass response, and can reveal very small details often missed over speakers. Since this session, and because these headphones are so good, we have now purchased 3 more pair, plus another Grace headphone amplifier.

Although Christmas still seems a far way off, the ball is already rolling to have the CD - “Christmas in the Grand Tradition” available at Macy’s by Christmas.

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