



Julia Hendry, Department Head
Archives and Special Collections, Laurier Library
519-884-0710 ext. 3625 or jhendry@wlu.ca

Kevin Crowley, Director
Communications & Public Affairs, Wilfrid Laurier University
519-884-0710 ext. 3070 or kcrowley@wlu.ca

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Records of renowned Canadian organ builder Gabriel Kney donated to Laurier Archives

WATERLOO – The business records of organ builder **Gabriel Kney** have a new home at the [Wilfrid Laurier University Archives](#) in Waterloo. The records document Kney's custom-built organs, which remain staples in churches, homes and concert halls throughout North America, including Toronto's Roy Thompson Hall.

"I feel so honoured to know that my life's work will be kept on record. I'm so pleased and so appreciative, because otherwise it would all be gone," said Kney.

The Kney compilation joins the Laurier Archives' robust collection of records specifically related to organ music and sacred music, and its existing collection from the [Waterloo Lutheran Seminary](#) and Laurier's [Faculty of Music](#).

"The collection contains the original drawings and schematics of nearly all of Kney's organs, as well as business files, correspondence, photographs, technical and architectural drawings and concert recordings — all in excellent condition," said **Julia Hendry**, head of archive and special collections.

Each one of Kney's instruments is custom built to suit the specific environment.

"The acoustic environment changes from place to place and this affects the scaling of the pipes. Harmonics, so to speak," said Kney. "This makes a difference in the design of the pipes and in the sound of the pipe scaling. It's different with each instrument."

These details are preserved in the collection, which is of particular interest to musicians.

Shortly after immigrating to Canada at the age of 15, and with his wealth of organ-building experience from his native Germany, Kney founded his own company with the intention of revitalizing the building of mechanical-action pipe organs — something that was unique in North America at the time — based on historic tonal concepts and construction techniques.

"After starting my own business, it took me a number of years to convince people to build mechanical organs again," said Kney. "However, many organists prefer to play a mechanical-action instrument, which responds directly to the touch of the fingers."

One of Kney's earliest supporters was **Ulrich Siegfried Leupold**, a theologian, musicologist and former dean of the Waterloo Lutheran Seminary at Waterloo College (now Wilfrid Laurier University). In 1955, Leupold installed Kney's first mechanical-action organ built in Canada, the Opus 1, at Waterloo College. It was later moved to Aeolian Hall in London. Records about the Opus 1 are included in the collection.

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Over his 50-year career, Kney custom built 129 organs and became well known as a top-tier artist.

"I don't consider myself artist, but rather a craftsman," said Kney.

Kney's wife, **Mary Lou Nowicki**, an organist herself, believes otherwise.

"He is far too modest about organ building being a work of art. The look of his instruments is beautiful," said Nowicki. "He couldn't build organs well and create the sounds he does if he wasn't a good musician — a musical artist."

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