



Thursday, January 31, 2002

## Varner Recital Hall to undergo improvements

By **Jeff Samoray**, OU Web Writer

Oakland University's **Department of Music, Theatre and Dance** recently received three generous gifts that will improve facilities in Varner Recital Hall. OU President Gary Russi made the announcement of the gifts and cited recent **MTD achievements** before Dean David Downing of the **College of Arts and Sciences** and the MTD faculty on Friday, Jan. 18, in the Oakland Center.

A grant of \$75,000 from the Matilda R. Wilson Fund will be used to renovate the lighting and acoustical systems of Varner Recital Hall.

"We understand the prominent role Varner Recital Hall plays in the intellectual and cultural life of the university and community, as well as in the work of Music, Theatre and Dance," said George Miller, president of the Wilson Fund. "We're delighted to be able to grant these funds to Oakland University to enhance the quality of its performing arts programs.

"Matilda Wilson was instrumental in the founding of the Meadow Brook Music Festival and its programs and in making that facility the summer home for the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. Mrs. Wilson had a tremendous interest in the arts, and this grant is a means of furthering her vision of Oakland University as an institution that has the performing arts at its core."

An additional \$70,000 was given by an anonymous donor to purchase a new concert-level Steinway grand piano for the hall. Additionally, \$10,000 in support has been earmarked for the restoration of the existing concert piano, which will be used by advanced students of piano. Professor of Music Flavio Varani held two fundraising concerts that generated \$6,000 for this endeavor and Downing allocated an additional \$4,000 from the College of Arts and Sciences Distinguished Programs Fund. The CAS Advisory Board established the latter fund, to which alumni and board members have generously contributed, following major gifts from the family of the late Pierre Heftler, former president of the Wilson Fund, in his memory.

"We have a very active music program at OU with strengths in vocal and instrumental music, and Flavio Varani is an exceptionally talented pianist," Downing said. "He and his students will greatly appreciate the opportunity to perform on a concert-level instrument."

Since 1995, the number of students majoring in MTD has grown from 171 to 476. This increase of 278 percent makes MTD one of OU's fastest growing departments, matched by a corresponding increase in the quality and talent of its students. As the department has expanded, so have the number and range of its productions and performances.

Initially designed as a recital hall for small musical ensembles, over the years Varner Recital Hall has seen the addition of large musical ensembles, fully staged theatrical productions and dance concerts. While some of its equipment and furnishings have been refurbished over time, some of its acoustical and lighting systems are badly in need of upgrading.

Additions in the area of lighting will provide a great deal more variety of visual effects than is currently possible with the hall's limited system. Audio system improvements will benefit student technicians, facility users and audience members by making sound reinforcement and recording more efficient and up-to-date. Refurbishing some of the equipment that impacts the hall's acoustical qualities will enhance the aural experience during performances of musical and theatrical events.

"From the last half of each fall semester and during the entire winter semester Varner Recital Hall is alive with activity," Downing said. "These gifts indicate strong community support for what we do in the performing arts, and the department and College of Arts and Sciences are both thrilled and appreciative to receive them."

Varner Recital Hall is used as a primary source of training for students majoring in the performing arts for presenting public performances. This academic year, 37 MTD public performances will be presented there from September to June, ranging from an opera to performances by the Oakland Chorale, the University Chorus, the Eisenhower Dance Ensemble, the African Drum Ensemble, the Pontiac-Oakland Symphony and a special performance by the Second City Touring Company. In addition, over 15 university events and 40 community-sponsored events will be held in the hall, including auditions for the New York City Ballet's summer program in Detroit.

Downing said he anticipates further support in the future.

"The renovations to the hall are the first step toward what we need to reach our potential in the performing arts," he said. "We ultimately need a modern, multipurpose performance facility. We're now behind the curve in terms of providing students what they should receive and what we can offer to the community. We're doing so many wonderful things now, but are constrained by the lack of space and the quality of our facilities. It's almost beyond imagination what we could do with a new facility."

The **College of Arts and Sciences** recently completed a project feasibility study for a proposed Performing Arts Complex and presented its proposal before the OU **Board of Trustees** at its December meeting. The proposed \$50 million complex would support student education in the arts, support creative and research endeavors, provide a creative hub for the intellectual and academic life of the university, and promote community outreach.

"We need an exceptionally high-quality facility," Downing said. "The acoustics and audience comfort, in particular, are very important variables. We're not thinking of something to compete with the Palace or the Fox Theatre. But with the exceptional range of our talented faculty and strong student body, they deserve facilities where we can showcase their talents and provide the best possible learning experience. We cannot continue to grow as we have without a new facility."

The Board of Trustees will consider the proposal, along with a concurrent proposal for an Automotive Transportation Facility, within the context of the university's strategic direction. Funding options include a state capital outlay appropriation and private support.

In the meantime, the improvements to the recital hall and the existing concert piano will have a major impact in the near term, Downing said.

"The wonderful gifts from the Wilson Fund and our anonymous donor indicate strong and committed support for the OU performing arts by the community," Downing said. "These friends have made our current students and faculty extremely happy. Our students can't wait to pay back the donors' vision and faith with some knockout performances in the upgraded hall."

The Matilda R. Wilson Fund was established in 1944 and has supported various university projects since Matilda and Alfred Wilson founded OU in 1957. In addition to the \$75,000 grant to MTD, the Wilson Fund recently gave \$25,000 to Meadow Brook Theatre to support the direct operating costs of MBT, including its outreach and education programs and main stage productions.

#### **SUMMARY**

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