

1920s church organ is moved across town, brought back to life

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Hundreds of people filed into a West Town church to hear a once-silent 19-ton organ roar back to life. There were Methodists from Chicago's South Side, Roman Catholics from across the city and suburbs and musicians from around the world.

As the 87-year-old instrument's thunderous notes rattled the pews at St. John Cantius Catholic Church, Anna Jordan Hicks remembered the first time she heard the organ, more than a half-century earlier in a house of worship several miles south.

It was at St. James United Methodist Church. The organ, with its four keyboards and 3,790 wood and metal pipes ranging in height from a few inches to 16 feet, had been a gift from the famous meatpacking Swift family. For years before the church's closing in 2010, the instrument had drawn renowned organ aficionados for concerts and accompanied weddings, baptisms, funerals and Sunday worship.

"I have just relived so many of those early days there at St. James," Hicks said at St. John Cantius after hearing the organ last weekend for the first time in decades. "I could just see the service. I could just see the gentleman playing that organ. That's the impact that it had on all of us."

The night of nostalgia, and the organ's journey that made it possible, occurred only by chance.

In 2010, after decades of falling attendance, St. James was in steep decline. The Rev. Addison Shields Jr., area superintendent for the United Methodists' Northern Illinois Conference, decided to close the church, refer the remaining congregants to nearby houses of worship and put the building up for sale.

The sanctuary had been condemned, and the organ had been ravaged by rainwater leaking in from an unstable roof. A section of the instrument no longer worked, said Shields, who was pastor there in the 1980s. "In essence, it was dying."

The day after Christmas that same year, congregants ignored the dangers and gathered around the organ one last time to say goodbye. Stephen Schnurr, former president of the national Organ Historical Society, stopped by to pay his respects that Sunday. He took a seat and played for more than an hour while the congregants sang Christmas carols and hymns.

"That unity right there, they knew they would never experience that again," Schnurr said. "It was the organ that was the vehicle for that."

Across town, at St. John Cantius, organ curator Jeff Weiler had made a sad discovery of his own. A different organ, also installed in the 1920s, had been altered so many times that it was "beyond redemption."

The Rev. Frank Phillips, who came to St. John Cantius in 1988, said "it was not a unified instrument. ... It was just a conglomeration of bits and pieces."

Weiler promised Phillips he would find him a top-notch organ to accompany his choir. When he heard there was an organ built by Casavant Freres available at St. James, he went to examine it. He concluded that even though the instrument had extensive water damage, it could be saved. Hearing the wind pushed through the distressed pipes assured him that he could restore the same sound that parishioners' great-great-grandparents once had heard.

"When you don't hear something for a long time you forget how beautiful the sounds are," Phillips said. "There's a unified presentation. When you hear something designed tonally from beginning to end, it is a huge difference."

The Catholic parish raised nearly \$2 million to buy, dismantle, restore and install the organ. It took two tractor-trailers to haul pieces of the instrument between the two churches and two years for the restoration to be complete. The fully installed instrument spans 180 degrees and occupies multiple balconies.

The move was a perfect fit for St. John Cantius, which was one of only a few parishes in the Chicago area whose choir sings in Latin and needed a world-class organ.

It also enriched the legacy of St. James, and reawakened memories of its congregants.

Wendell Weaver, 82, who joined St. James in 1957, recalls the organ channeling the sound of camels lumbering through the sanctuary during the playing of the African-American spiritual “The Ballad of the Brown King.” Then there were the organ’s vibrations mimicking an earthquake during the recitation of the “Seven Last Words of Christ,” an Easter tradition.

The instrument played such a vital role on Sunday mornings that a pastor was known to skip his sermon and let the organ “speak” instead, former parishioners said.

Shields remembers opening services with organ music and how the regal sound automatically lifted the congregation to a higher plane.

“You have an expectation that something is going to take place, the Holy Spirit is going to break through,” recalled Shields, who now is a pastor in La Grange.

Organ aficionados from around the world came to tickle its keys, including French musician and composer Marcel Dupre.

The undertaking that saved St. James’ organ is rare, if not unique. In 1907, for instance, when the Unitarian Church of the Messiah left its home at 26th Street and Michigan Avenue, it sent its organ to another church on a steamer ship across Lake Michigan, Schnurr said. But as more historic churches find it impossible to pay their light bills, let alone maintain million-dollar pipes, the colossal instruments are becoming orphans —

either left behind when churches close or neglected in favor of more modern music.

“More often than not they just sit and go silent,” Schnurr said.

But with the resurgence of interest in traditional liturgical music, more organs are finding new homes as well, he said. Listeners have discovered that the pipe organ’s purer voice meshes well with human vocals.

“There seems to be a tremendous amount of interest in recapturing what was once deemed reverent and mystical, and we’re seeing a bit of a return to that,” Weiler said.

Cardinal Francis George, who played organ as a seminarian, blessed the instrument at St. John Cantius before it played its first note publicly Sunday.

“The synthesis it seems to create among those who sing with it shows that the unity of difference is not only possible, it is pleasant,” he said before sprinkling holy water in the direction of the choir loft.

As the first notes began to echo through the Catholic parish, Barbara Wright-Pryor Williams, whose late husband, George Williams, served as St. James’ organist in the 1960s, described it as a “resurrection experience.”

“It was a spiritual moment,” she said. “The organ died and has arisen.”

Wendell Weaver and his wife, Frances, sat back in the pews and let the vibrations wash over them just as they had decades earlier.

“It’s going to be used and loved,” said Frances Weaver, 75. “We were not able to do that, but someone else was.”