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St. John Cantius refurbishes, dedicates organ

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Thomas Schuster, director of music and organist at Epiphany Catholic Church in South Miami, FL, was a guest performer at the dedication of the Saint John Cantius organ.

(Photo by Troy T Heinzeroth)

By Haley Carlton

Saint John Cantius Church at 825 N. Carpenter St. recently refurbished and dedicated an historic organ that it had rescued from a shuttered, condemned church building. Designed by noted Chicago organist, conductor, and music educator Tina Mae Haines, the Casavant Pipe Organ-Opus 1130 was built in 1926.

The restored organ's recent dedication included a blessing by Cardinal Francis George and an organ recital of sacred and classical music. The church paid for the restoration via a two-year fund raising effort.

The Casavant replaced the church's original 1906 organ that was beyond repair, said the Rev. Scott Haynes, associate pastor and music director at St. John Cantius. Also a choral composer, he previously has worked as an organ and choral scholar with Washington National Cathedral in Washington, DC.

“Tastes change,” said Fr. Haynes of the original organ, which its makers had built in the romantic style. Around the 1950s and 1960s, the baroque style became popular, and the organ underwent alterations. “It’s like trying to turn a Cadillac into a BMW,” Fr. Hayes said, noting the church had altered the instrument 13 times, to the point where nothing else could be done with it. Ironically, the Casavant organ was crafted in the romantic style, “as tastes change back,” he said.

After determining the old organ could not be repaired, parish leaders decided to look for a different instrument. They came close to acquiring one from a Montreal church that was closing, but the deal fell through because the Canadian government declared the organ a national treasure and barred its removal from the country. St. John Cantius then heard about a Chicago church that was closing and had an organ that was in danger.

Formerly at St. James

Originally built for St. James United Methodist Church at 4611 S. Ellis Ave. in the South Side’s Kenwood neighborhood, the organ’s future became uncertain when St. James closed in 2010. The church’s deteriorating building meant the organ also had fallen into neglect and was at risk for damage.

“The organ hadn’t been cleaned in 86 years,” said Fr. Haynes, who noted that, far from being problematic, that fact was a blessing because “nothing on it had been touched.” Also, because it had all of its original parts, with the exception of one missing pipe that the Casavant company remade, it was a good candidate for restoration.



Stephen Alltop of Northwestern University’s Alice Millar Chapel plays the organ, while Br. Matthew Schuster of Saint John Cantius Church turns the pages.

(Photo by Troy T Heinzeroth)

The organ’s age also presented no problem. “I’ve played organs in Europe that are 400 years old,” said Fr. Haynes. Once it decided to acquire the organ, St. John Cantius had to act quickly, as water had been coming into the St. James Church building through a hole in the roof. “As we were starting to take the organ away, the roof started caving in,” said Fr. Haynes, who noted workers had to prop up the roof to protect the organ before they could continue.

The organ's designer, Tina Mae Haines, co-founded the Sherwood Conservatory of Music (now part of Columbia College) and was St. James's organist in 1926, when she designed the organ especially for that church. She oversaw the instrument's creation by the prominent Canadian company Casavant Frères, founded in 1879 in Saint-Hyacinthe, near Montreal, and now the world's largest pipe organ builder. When Casavant completed its work, St. James boasted an organ that ranked among the city's largest and greatest, including the renowned 1928 E.M. Skinner Opus 634, created for Rockefeller Memorial Chapel on the University of Chicago campus.

"Tina Mae Haines not only was an organist, but she knew how to build organs," said Fr. Haynes. As part of the restoration, Fr. Haynes and colleagues traveled to the Casavant company where "they still have the letters written" between Haines and the factory "involving the building of the organ."

In constructing it, Haines used her knowledge of Caville-Coll organs, which Fr. Haynes called "the premier European organ builder." The church has honored her by naming the organ "Tina Mae."

Restoration cost \$2 million

Restoring the organ cost \$2 million, which included rebuilding the church balcony and reinforcing it with steel to hold the 23-ton instrument. The organ features four keyboards and more than 3,000 pipes, some as large as 16 feet. The previous organ had weighed only three tons. According to Fr. Haynes, a new organ would have cost about \$10 million.

The church has paid for the restoration and installation through fundraising, and it still must raise about \$50,000 for the project.

"That last bit of money is the hardest to get," said Craig Johnson, a parishioner and member of the church's Patrons of Sacred Music, a group that raises money to support St. John Cantius's music program. "People have already heard about it and donated what they can." Besides appeals for donations, the church has held concerts, with proceeds going toward the organ project.

Johnson, who lives in Wheeling, IL, found out about St. John Cantius about ten years ago when he took a stained glass tour organized by the Art Institute. Johnson said, "It's serendipity" that the church found the organ, which he called "important to sacred music and Chicago history. It's good that this was kept out of the landfill."

The organ restoration formed a separate effort within a larger, overall restoration of the church's 1898 building, which workers completed primarily in 2012. Richard Ryan, a major donor to the organ restoration, said, "In college, I was lucky enough to spend a semester in Vienna, and that experience refined further my taste in classical music and operas, but also for liturgical music as played on the fine pipe organs in Vienna churches.

“That may partially explain my strong interest in this restoration project and the worry that this fine instrument might otherwise be lost or destroyed,” Ryan continued. “Now, it can be enjoyed.”

For more information or to donate, call (312) 243-7373 or visit www.cantius.com.

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