

Church piano is piece of national history

As Kevin Theilacker's fingers touched the piano keys, he unlocked years of history trapped inside the piano for much too long.

Gentle sounds of "Amazing Grace," "Holy Art Thou" and "Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow" hung in the air of the New Apostolic Church in Ontario. The sanctuary finally got its piano.

"I sat down and the first thing I thought of was 'what a blessing,'" said Theilacker, the church rector.

He ended his playing with "My Country 'Tis Of Thee," an homage to the 1909 Mason & Hamlin Boston Piano and its prestigious past

From 1923 to 1929 the majestic grand piano lived in a house many powerful men have called home: the White House. It belonged to Grace Goodhue Coolidge, wife of Calvin, the 30th president of the United States.

"This is such a special occasion," Theilacker said when the piano arrived at the church in late November. "It's not every day you get a piano, let alone a national treasure."

Theilacker took over as head of the church about a year ago from his father, Paul, who was rector from 1967 to 2004.

About two years ago Theilacker and the women's choir went to another church in the faith in Tucson. The choir was accompanied a grand piano, and the music was so ethereal, he decided it was the sound he wanted for the Ontario church. "We had used digital music, but would rather have the organic," Theilacker said. "It lives and breathes."

Jens Whitter, Ph.D. is pastor of Tucson's New Apostolic Church. Theilacker expressed his admiration for the fine piano, and asked Whitter to keep his eye out for something suitable for his church.

"I looked around for a long time, but nothing that I found fit his needs," said Whitter, who was born, and trained, in Germany. "Then I found this piano in a music store, and what a history."

The Coolidges willed the piano to a niece, Katherine Coolidge. She kept it for a long time, years after she was unable to play, then sold it to a local music store.

"I saw that instrument, it was a mess, not playable, but I knew two things for sure," Whitter said with a smile. "I knew I was going to buy it and I knew I could fix it."

Whitter never intended to keep the instrument. He considered three possible options for the treasure.

"I could sell it to a private person and make a lot of money," he said. "I could donate it to a museum for the public to admire, but if I do that they will put ropes around it and a big sign that says 'don't touch' and no one will listen to it ever again and then there was Kevin and a wonderful church and a chance for Americans to come from all over and see and listen to this extraordinary piece of national history. No one would have to pay and it would be open to the public."

Whitter approached Theilacker, who already had plans to play the piano Wednesdays and Sundays.

"Two times a week people can come to see this magnificent instrument," Whitter said. "It's one of a kind, unique and irreplaceable. Something you could never buy again."

Brand new, the Mason & Hamlin would cost \$56,000. Though Whitter donated his restoration services, he couldn't afford to donate the piano.

The dream might have ended right there, but for a generous benefactor.

"Earl J. Johnson lived across the street from the church," Theilacker said. "He was not of our faith, but became a friend of the congregation. He passed away last year; in his final year he attended fairly regularly. When he died he bequeathed to the church a certain sum of money. We wanted to do something special with the money. We thought this would be the perfect thing."

Theilacker's father, Paul, was one of the few onlookers when Whitter and his family set the piano up. He watched with pride as the gift to the community was unveiled.

"This is an expression of love," Paul Theilacker said. "Its fruit has come from generosity. You start with a little and you have no idea how it will multiply. You will be able to see it in years to come. We will experience it each time we hear the piano play."

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