

Pedal power: Musician inspired by pipe organ

Isaiah Williams has been playing since age 11

By Brian Bushard

bbushard@inkym.com Isaiah Williams walked into the empty Methodist Church, took a seat at the wooden pipe organ behind the altar and let the booming sound of the pipes reverberate throughout the building.

For a minute, he took a break from the liturgical music he typically plays during Sunday services at the church. He played a piece he composed last year, when he was 19 years old: a somber waltz called “Melancholy Promenade.”

“There’s so much music that’s written for the organ that has nothing to do with church, but usually you have to go physically to the church to hear it because there are no other places with organs,” Williams said.

Music has always been part of his life. His first recollection of it is hearing his mother Mollie Glazer play classical music on the cello. Williams started taking piano lessons when he was 7, and playing the pipe organ at 11.

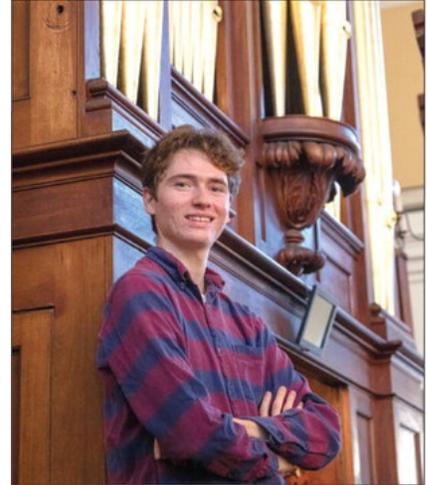
The organ was different. It was challenging and intriguing. The wooden pedals and pull-out knobs made it a completely different animal. Instead of producing one sound, the organ is designed to resemble the music of an entire orchestra. Sitting down to play it goes far beyond church music, he said.

“There’s no such thing as violins that are only for Catholics. There are no other instruments that are tethered down that way. It doesn’t matter that the composer wasn’t ORGAN, PAGE 4B

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There are so many musical opportunities in one instrument and personally I want to feel like I’ve tried most of them.”

– Isaiah Williams Musician



Isaiah Williams with the Appleton organ at the Nantucket Methodist Church.

Photo by Nicole Harnishfeger

Organ: Musician drawn to versatility

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thinking of Jesus when he wrote it,” Williams said.

“(The organ) has so many possibilities. You can do so many things with it. There are so many musical opportunities on one

it wasn’t going to be insignificant.”

There’s also a sense of history that keeps Williams playing the organ.

The organ at the Methodist Church was built in 1831. The keys and foot pedals are wooden. Unlike the majority of modern organs, sound

up. If you can’t get that right, you have to practice it for another eight hours. That doesn’t interest me. I don’t have the patience for it. But I do have the patience for doing all this nonsense with my limbs and reaching out from one side to the other while you’re playing.”

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Williams started playing the Appleton organ for Sunday services at the Methodist Church four years ago, while he was still in high school. Three years later, he enrolled in the University of Rochester's Eastman School of Music, where he studies the organ. When the coronavirus pandemic convinced him to take a gap year this fall, he went back to playing at the church on Centre Street.

He also teaches pipe organ and piano at the Nantucket Community Music Center, where Glazer is the artistic director. Early next month, he'll perform in a virtual version of the island's annual organ crawl.

"Music was always there. It seemed fun and (Glazer) made it seem joyful," he said. "I wouldn't say I was always sure I wanted to play music, but I knew

flows through the several hundred pipes inside its big wooden frame. It's one of six traditional pipe organs on the island.

There's a phrase Williams likes to repeat: that before the Industrial Revolution, the pipe organ was the single most complicated piece of machinery humans had ever invented.

"It took a lot of time to be good at it. It's an easy adjustment to play the notes because it's exactly the same as a piano. That's the easy part. The hard part is lifting your fingers and controlling how much time to press things down so it sounds the same. Nothing on the piano would make that same sound," he said.

"I like the challenge. I like the machinery challenge. Pianists will practice concepts of having your ring finger a hair louder and you can't mess that

Williams would have entered his junior year at the Eastman School this fall. While he waits for classes to resume, he said he's content with playing at the Methodist Church. His goal is simple.

"I want to keep getting better," he said. "That's my only goal for now. It's also nice to share with people. I like to perform, but I don't necessarily want to be a concert organist. I want to do something in addition to this, but I really want to be good at (playing organ). I don't want to just give myself a stamp of approval. Other people know more than me and I want to learn more."