

NEWS

How will church fix Cathedral's organ?

By **TOM BERG** | Orange County Register

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GARDEN GROVE – The patient has been growing weaker and weaker, so an old friend visits.

“It breathes,” the friend says. “It’s very much alive.”

With that, Frederick Swann lays his hands on this unusual patient – the 4th largest church organ in the world.

Air rushes through 16,000 pipes. Music fills the near-empty Crystal Cathedral.

Swann recalls the glory days of this ailing pipe organ – when it was the centerpiece of Rev. Robert Schuller’s *Hour of Power* broadcast to 100 million viewers a year. When it was played for presidents and dignitaries. When it accompanied a cast of a thousand performing Mahler’s 8th Symphony.

“That was one of the greatest things ever to happen in Orange County, musically,” says Swann, 82, of Palm Springs, who served as the Crystal Cathedral organist from 1982 to 1998.

He plays the opening chords, which draw cheers from a few visiting tourists in back.

Last summer, when the Roman Catholic Diocese of Orange bought the Crystal Cathedral for \$57.5 million, it got more than a glass cathedral. It got this world-famous organ. However, 30 years of sun, smog, bugs, birds, rain and rust have inexorably tarnished the once great beast, and left it needing \$2 million worth of repairs. Which begs the question:

What will the Diocese do with this – once, the most visible organ on the planet?

HAZEL WRIGHT ORGAN

The Hazel Wright organ features 270 ranks, or sets, of pipes – from 4 inches to 32 feet long – five keyboards and the largest draw-knob console in the world to control the sound.

“It’s a monumental instrument,” says Swann, who has performed at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, as well as concert halls around the world. “It’s always been impressive. It goes from barely audible to oh-my-gosh thunderous.”

The Hazel Wright organ – named after a benefactor who donated \$2 million to build it – now combines parts from 14 organs but essentially is the marriage of *two*:

The first is Schuller’s original Fratelli Ruffatti organ built in 1977 for the church’s Sanctuary in the Arboretum. The second is a 1962 Aeolian-Skinner organ bought from New York’s Lincoln Center. In 1982, Schuller combined the two for his new Crystal Cathedral. Another 76 ranks of pipes were added to create at one time the 5th largest pipe organ in the world.

“Who wouldn’t be thrilled by this sound?” Swann says, playing a simple C major with all the stops out – meaning that every one of the 16,000 pipes is in use. “It’s powerful. It’s satisfying.”

He recalls playing First Lady Barbara Bush’s favorite hymn at one service. Performing with Metropolitan Opera singer Beverly Sills at another. And performing with animals at the annual “Glory of Christmas” shows. Once, he played with a 350-pound tiger on top of the console.

Swann will be on hand tonight for another memorable performance – a two-hour farewell concert, of sorts, free to the public.

After that, the organ and every one of its 16,000 pipes will be disassembled and removed from the cathedral.

BENEFIT CONCERT

The years have taken their toll on this once majestic instrument.

Every time rain seeped through the cathedral’s 11,000 windows, a little rust formed in those 16,000 pipes. Every time wind rustled through the cathedral’s 90-foot doors, a little smog settled in those pipes. And every time the temperature dropped 40 degrees from noon to midnight, a little pitch was lost in those pipes.

The console needs work. The motors need work. The electrical circuitry needs work.

“A lot of the organ is not playing now,” Swann says. “Many wonderful sounds can’t be heard. Some parts are so old, it could fail after playing one chord. And there’s no way to get it back.”

No way except to disassemble it and send it back to the Ruffatti brothers in Padua, Italy – which is what the Diocese will do when it takes over the cathedral on July 1.

In fact, tonight’s benefit concert is to announce Orange County Bishop Kevin Vann’s plans to restore the world-famous organ. And ask for help.

“Two million dollars is a lot of money and we don’t have it,” says the Rev. Monsignor Arthur Holquin, Rector of Mission San Juan Capistrano, who is planning the repairs. “We seek people who like sacred music and organ music to help make this real.”

For the concert, they’ve invited world-renowned organist Hector Olivera, who at age 5 performed for Eva Perón in Buenos Aires, and has since played everywhere from Notre Dame to Carnegie Hall. He’s practiced three months for this performance, at times 12 hours a day.

His program includes one piece best known as the music from the original movie version of Phantom of the Opera (Bach’s Toccata and Fugue in D minor). One piece that runs 33-minutes (Widor’s 6th Symphony) and rarely is played in its entirety.

And for his last piece, he’ll ask the audience to join him – in seeking the mystery of the Divine.

DIVINE MYSTERY

There is so much history to this organ. To this room.

“It’s an icon,” says Swann, who’s been recognized in the streets of Munich and the cafes of Paris for playing the *Hour of Power* organ. “It’s been seen by hundreds of millions of people. It’s recognized all over the world.”

Not only that, but it’s been played by the world’s greatest organists.

“It has a reputation,” says Maestro Olivera. “It’s not just another church organ.”

Which begs another question: What is it about a pipe organ and the spiritual? Why are they so wedded?

“Words alone cannot capture the mystery of the Divine,” Msgr. Holquin says. “We have to use other ways of touching the Divine in our lives, and we do that historically through art and music.”

Over the centuries the Church used Gregorian chants, sacred art; architecture.

“Whether one is a believer or not, if you walk into Notre Dame you’re touched,” Holquin says. “Something happens because you’ve been embraced by the beautiful. That’s what beauty does. Beauty transforms.”

Back in the near empty Crystal Cathedral, Frederick Swann says the same thing in his own way – playing a single chord so that 16,000 pipes sing like angels.

“Oh,” he says, “it’s very much alive.”

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