

## NEWS

# Christ Cathedral witnesses the rebirth of iconic Hazel Wright pipe organ



Workers install some of the more than 16,000 pipes for the Hazel Wright organ at Christ Cathedral in Garden Grove, CA, on Thursday, Feb 28, 2019. (Photo by Jeff Gritchen, Orange County Register/SCNG)

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PUBLISHED: March 3, 2019 at 8:00 am | UPDATED: March 3, 2019 at 8:10 am

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“Hazel” has waited a long time for this.

About five years ago, after the Roman Catholic Diocese of Orange [purchased the Crystal Cathedral](#), the church's 16,000-pipe organ named after its benefactor, Hazel Wright, was taken apart piece by piece from its long-time home, the glass sanctuary envisioned and erected by famed televangelist the Rev. Robert H. Schuller.

After a trip to Italy and four years in a temperature-controlled storage unit, Hazel is now back where she belongs.

Since late January, Piero Ruffatti, the man who built the Hazel Wright organ for the Schullers in 1981, has returned to the same sanctuary, supervising the installation of the legendary instrument which he says will have a place in his heart and in his family's legacy forever.

### **Spiritual strength and inspiration**

It's going to take about a year to resuscitate Hazel at a cost to the diocese of \$2.9 million, all of it raised by the OC Catholic Foundation. The overall [cost of the cathedral renovation](#) now stands at \$77 million, including the considerable expense of bringing one of the world's most famous organs back to life.

Bishop Kevin Vann admits the costs are staggering. He says it's natural for the public to question why a church should spend tens of millions on a glittering building and a humongous organ when that money could go to help solve issues such as hunger and homelessness.

Vann says there are several organizations within the Catholic Church, such as Catholic Charities of Orange County, which serves as the diocese's social service agency dedicated to helping the needy. According to Catholic Charities of Orange County's 2017 tax filings, it had an annual budget of about \$3 million.

The bishop says he hopes the sanctuary and its music will help inspire the faithful in Orange County and beyond to do good deeds.

"I hope the people, when they come here and hear the sound of this magnificent instrument, will be spiritually inspired to go forth and spring into action to help others and make this world a better place," he said.

Reviving the building and the organ is also about continuing the legacy of Schuller and the Crystal Cathedral, Vann said.

"That has always been important to us," he said.

### **History and legacy**

Music was an integral part of the Crystal Cathedral's ministry including its weekly "Hour of Power" television broadcasts, which in their heyday had more than 100 million viewers worldwide. These millions watched organist Frederick Swann and other skilled musicians perform on the Hazel Wright organ over the years.

Ruffatti, now 75, remembers meeting Arvella Schuller in the New York City office of Crystal Cathedral architect Philip Johnson, around 1980. The pastor's wife, a skilled organist and musician herself, was the force behind the church's music ministry.

"Arvella wanted a special organ, something that was magnificent," Ruffatti said. "She wanted big sounds, grandeur."

The Schullers got what they wanted, and more.

Under the supervision of master organist Virgil Fox, the Ruffattis grafted a 100-rank Aeolian-Skinner organ purchased from the Philharmonic Hall in New York City with a 97-rank Ruffatti organ built in 1977 for the sanctuary now known as the arboretum on campus, which at the time housed Schuller's Garden Grove Community Church.

The Hazel Wright organ was born. Its benefactor, a long-time viewer of Schuller's "Hour of Power," donated \$2 million for the organ's construction and upkeep.

The organ the Ruffattis built featured 270 ranks, or sets, of pipes from four inches to 32 feet long, five keyboards, and the largest draw-knob console in the world to control the sound. It could play a range from the highest pitch to the lowest, and could produce all sounds — from the softest to the most majestic.

### **Memories and nostalgia**

Swann, who played the Hazel Wright organ almost every Sunday for 17 years at the Crystal Cathedral, from 1982 to 1998, said he can't wait to hear those majestic sounds once more. Swann, 87, now lives in Palm Desert.

In May 2013, [he played a "farewell concert"](#) for Hazel's fans. In January 2020, he says, he'll return to Garden Grove to hear the sounds of his favorite organ again.

Over the years, Swann has received thousands of comments about what the organ meant to those who came to the cathedral.

"As organists, we appreciate the beauty we can create through music," he said. "It's almost like a beautiful piece of architecture. For many, the music brings them closer to God. It's meaningful and beautiful at so many levels."

Swann has had unforgettable moments with Hazel. Like the time he played First Lady Barbara Bush's favorite hymn during a service. Or when he performed with Metropolitan Opera singer Beverly Sills. He's even performed with animals during the Crystal Cathedral's annual "Glory of Christmas" shows, and once played with a 350-pound tiger on top of the console.

So, this is an organ with a rich history and an aura of celebrity. Hazel even has her own [Facebook page with more than 1,700 followers](#).

### **Return to former glory**

In addition to the cost, it has taken a lot of work to restore and nurse this instrument back to its former glory, said John Romeri, the diocese's organist and director of music.

Heat, humidity, rain, smog and lack of proper maintenance during the [Crystal Cathedral's bankrupt final years](#) took their toll on this majestic instrument, he said.

“The pipes became infested with termites and insects,” Romeri said. “The once beautiful trumpets — about 400 of them — had become corroded. Some of the pipes had melted and collapsed in the heat.”

Once the organ is fully installed and ready a year from now, the public will hear its real sound, better than before, because the sanctuary will now be temperature-controlled.

When Swann played the organ, he said, he and the instrument were under the mercy of the elements. If it was hot or sunny, he wouldn't be able to use parts of the organ just as when it was rainy, windy or when the temperature dropped below 40 degrees, because it would be out of tune.

Now, thanks to a temperature-controlled environment, Swann said, all parts of the organ can be used, all the time.

The diocese has set a July 17 date for the dedication of the new sanctuary.

But, Hazel's time won't come until January.

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## Deepa Bharath

Deepa Bharath covers religion for The Orange County Register and the Southern California Newspaper Group. Her work is focused on how religion, race and ethnicity shape our understanding of what it is to be American and how religion in particular helps influence public policies, laws and a region's culture. Deepa also writes about race, cultures and social justice issues. She has covered a number of other beats ranging from city government to breaking news for the Register since May 2006. She has received fellowships from the International Women's Media Foundation and the International Center for Journalists to report stories about reconciliation, counter-extremism and peace-building efforts around the world. When she is not working, she loves listening to Indian classical music and traveling with her husband and son.

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