

From Synagogue to Sanctuary: Historic pipe organ begins new chapter in Cleveland Heights



Church of the Saviour in Cleveland Heights is working to revive a historic Austin pipe organ gifted to them following Anshe Chesed Fairmount Temple's merger with another temple last year.



By: Damon Maloney

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A hand-built pipe organ that serenaded congregants inside Anshe Chesed Fairmount Temple in Beachwood for more than half a century is now stored in a room at a Methodist church in Cleveland Heights.

"About 2,000 pipes lay in all of these crates here," said Don Verkuijlen, director of music and organist at the Church of the Saviour, as he pointed to and picked up pieces belonging to Opus 2257, an Austin organ that was once housed in the temple.

"To give not only an organ a second life is a wonderful thing," Verkuijlen said. "But an organ that served a different tradition now coming into a new home and breathing new life is fantastic."

The organ's unexpected journey, just a few miles down the road, began following Anshe Chesed Fairmount Temple's merger last summer with The Temple-Tifereth Israel to form Congregation Mishkan Or.

"We had a museum in our building. We had ancient Torah scrolls. We had other religious artifacts," said Eric Silver, a lifelong member of Anshe Chesed Fairmount Temple. "But the piece that didn't seem to get much attention really was the organ."

Silver said his final time in the sanctuary was emotional.

"I was consecrated in that space when I was 5 or 6 years old. My children were married there. My father's funeral took place in that space," Silver said. "As I reminisced about those important events, I was drawn to the organ. I thought about the role the organ played in creating background music and helping people reach spirituality. I realized that organ should find a new home."



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Pieces of the dismantled pipe organ that once stood inside Anshe Chesed Fairmount Temple now rests inside crates at Church of the Saviour.

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Silver said he Googled and contacted his high school shop teacher, who is also a master organ builder.

"He immediately responded and said he didn't know anyone personally, but there's an organ clearinghouse, which is a national organization for finding homes for organs," Silver said. "For me, that seemed like the end of the story."

Unbeknownst to Silver, his efforts ultimately reached Austin Organs Inc. While the manufacturer is based in Hartford, Connecticut, it had a relationship with Verkuijen and reached out to see if there was interest in the instrument. There was.

"It turns out it is actually an Austin organ, the same company that built ours here in 1928, but this one was constructed in 1954," Verkuijen said.

Silver didn't learn about the organ's fate until photographs from his friend, Scott Lewis, appeared on Facebook, showing it being dismantled for shipment to the church.

"It's a wonderful story, and I know everyone in my congregation and the consolidated congregation feels great knowing that organ was saved from the wrecking ball and will continue to provide comfort and spirituality well into the future," Silver said.

The gifted organ will become the church's second and will be placed in the rear balcony of the sanctuary.

"Having an instrument in the back that can support a choir and singing, as well as other instrumentalists, allows for a really flexible musical space," Verkuijen said.

It's a complicated, expensive, and emotional project that Verkuijen said will cost about \$625,000. A fundraising plan is in the works.

"It's a lot of money, and we're hoping to find community support to ensure that this project happens," Verkuijen said.

The project will involve building a custom airbox and chambers that allow the instrument to play, reviving the sounds once heard when the organ was in the temple.

"It will be immediately recognizable to anyone who comes to hear it," Verkuijen said.

This project is a perfect fit for Verkuijen, who grew up adoring organs.



News 5 Cleveland: Don Verkuijen, director of music and organist at Church of the Saviour, said his love for the instrument began as a young child. "It really becomes like an orchestra at your fingertips," he said.

"My mom tells the story that when I was growing up in Appleton, Wisconsin, the only time I was quiet in church was when the organ was playing," he said.

A love that has evolved into a profound respect as he has matured and deepened his faith.

"I truly hope this fosters a great community relationship between the Jewish community and us here at Church of the Saviour," Verkuijlen said. "My big dream is to have some sort of regular combined worship. I don't even know what that would look like, but where we can all worship together in some way."