

Valued organ plays into local church hands

By DIANNE COPELON
Special to The Daily Break

A 30-YEAR OLD PIPE ORGAN made in Germany and earmarked for shipment to Nicaragua is sitting pretty in the rear loft of Christ Church in Eastville on the Eastern Shore.

It's there to stay. . . and be played.

The story of how the instrument got to Eastville reads like a travelogue. More important, however, is the fact that it is the first example of a Baroque revival instrument in the United States and its pure and clear sound is attracting the curious along with the musically knowledgeable to join the devout for church services every Sunday morning.

Built in Ludwigsburg, West Germany, in 1957, the Eastville organ is a copy of a North German instrument dated about 1700. That was the era of the Baroque when organ music by Johann Sebastian Bach and his contemporaries filled nearly every Protestant church in Germany.

In the late '50s the German firm of Walcker, organ builders for more than 200 years, received an order to construct the organ from a small Catholic church in Nicaragua. In the firm's extensive catalog of keyboard instruments, this model was nothing more than a stock item.

For some reason, however, the South Americans defaulted on the down payment. Dr. Arthur Howes of the Andover Organ Institute intercepted the shipment and the Germans agreed to detour the large wooden instrument — all 1,000 parts of it — to Massachusetts. Perhaps all three parties were anxious, for the Germans never even took time to erase the word Nicaragua from some of the wooden casing of the instrument. It's still there.

The organ stayed in a practice room in Andover for nearly 10 years, during which time organists from all over the United States came to hear it. When the school closed in Andover in the early '70s, the instrument moved on to Greensboro, N.C., after the noted organist Katherine Hodgkins purchased it "for a song" and had it installed in her formal dining room.

In 1976 Dr. Paul Davis, head of the organ department at the Peabody Conservatory of Music in Baltimore, bought it and moved it in to his townhouse. A few years ago Davis announced his retirement and decided to move to Spain. Because the organ was too heavy and bulky for the trip, he put it up for sale.

That's where Eastville's Christ Church came in.

A music-loving pastor with a good ear and a music fund with ready money sent the church on a pipe-organ hunt that

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finally led to Baltimore. A young Norfolk-based organist named Bill Warren did the leg work.

Purchasing such an important instrument was a bold step for the small Episcopal church, but one that its pastor, the Rev. Harry W. Crandall, set his sights on after his first trip to Davis' home in Baltimore.

"If you hear the sound of this instrument once," he said, "you'll never forget it."

A healthy musical endowment donated by the late Kendall Addison Jarvis provided the funds for purchasing the organ, which is valued at more than \$100,000. Christ Church bargained for less than half that price.

Disassembling the organ

It took James Akwright, caretaker of organs at the Smithsonian Institution and Washington Cathedral in Washington, D.C., one day to disassemble the organ in Baltimore, load it on a U-Haul truck and move it to Eastville. But the task of installing and revoicing it at Christ Church took him nearly a month. Not only did all of the 1,000 parts have to be fitted together with extreme care, but one of the pipes had to be beveled to fit under the low ceiling in the church's rear gallery.

"People here resist change," said Crandall. "For years they have been used to an electric organ which sits to the left of the pulpit. The idea of setting the new instrument high up in the rear loft of the church was disturbing to many until I explained at great length that instruments of that kind needed that location for acoustic reasons. And that's where they sit in European churches, too."

Many of his parishioners questioned the purchase of a new organ when, in their opinion, the electric one was good enough for many more years.

Crandall has won most of his battles, one at a time, but sad it has taken plenty of perseverance.

The Eastville organ is neatly and compactly housed in a wooden box 10 feet high and 7 feet wide that contains its double keyboard, pedalboard, 11 stops and 732 pipes of varying lengths. It is a tracker organ — it relies on mechanical rather than electrical linkage between keys and pipes. This gives the performer direct and intimate control of phrasing, rhythm and accent. Wind pressure, provided by one man actually blowing into the instrument before the days of electricity, is now taken care of by a small electric plug that turns on the wind. There's nothing else electric on the instrument.

'Like playing a Steinway'

"It's like playing a fine Boesendorfer or Steinway piano," said Warren, who was one of the first organists in this area to play the instrument after it was installed on the Eastern Shore.

"The low wind pressure needed to produce the sound on the organ allows the music to sound more articulated and less forced. Playing becomes alive."

Warren was also instrumental in planning a recital series to introduce the organ in Eastville.

James Darling, organist of Williamsburg's historic Bruton Parish Church, was one of the first to play an entire concert in Eastville. The instrument, he explained was not new to him as he had tried it once when it was at Andover.

James Kosnik, organist of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Norfolk and head of the music department at Old Dominion University, sat at the keyboard last week for a recital that featured music for organ and trumpet, with Virginia Symphony trumpeter Steven Carlson. Concerts at 7:30 p.m. March 17 and April 26 will be played by Jane Hanner, organist of the Main Street United Methodist Church in Suffolk, with violinist Peter Dimitrov and oboist Melinda McKenzie.

Other organists are scheduled as guests for 11 a.m. Sunday services at Christ Church until the congregation chooses an organist.

Christ Church is about 25 miles north of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel on Route 13 in Eastville. Sunday services at 11 a.m. are conducted by the Rev. Harry W. Crandall, rector. Call 1-678-7837 for information.



E8 THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT AND THE LEDGER-STAR SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 1987

"If you hear the sound of this instrument once, you'll never forget it," says the Rev. Harry W. Crandall. The new Christ Church organ is behind him. S