

1872 organ to get new life

Restored instrument
debuts in West DePaul
church Easter Sunday

By Jon Anderson
Tribune staff reporter

Slowly—ever so slowly—the beautiful old organ is coming back to life.

Two rehabbers—call them neurosurgeons of the organ world—are at work on its innards, mending or reproducing broken parts, cleaning old splattered paint off its pipes, removing decades of coal dust, then scraping and shellacking its walnut, pine and poplar woodwork.

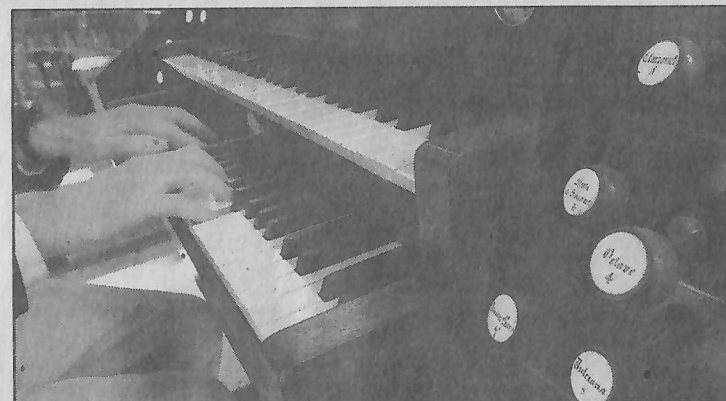
On Easter Sunday, a musical instrument that has been called the oldest working organ in Chicago will be back in business, lovingly installed in a new home, on the main floor of St. Josaphat Church, 2311 N. Southport Ave., in the West DePaul neighborhood.

"It was an incredible act of grace," the parish pastor, Rev. Dominic Grassi, said Wednesday.

He was describing an arc of history that began in 1872. Members of a local branch of a Masonic lodge placed a hurry-up order with the Johnson Organ Co. of Westfield, Mass. They needed an organ to replace theirs, lost in the Great Chicago Fire of the year before.

The organ lasted longer than the lodge, which folded in the early 1900s.

The organ was carted up and



Scott Arkenberg, St. Josaphat Church music director, plays the organ, which will have its post-restoration public debut on Easter Sunday at the church, 2311 N. Southport Ave.

moved to a Methodist church on the Northwest Side. Five years ago, the church sold the organ to Evanston-based organ builder and restorer Walter Bradford. The instrument needed work, and Bradford was happy to do it.

"Every organist knows about this organ," he said Tuesday, introducing a visitor to its intricacies.

Following the strict mandates of the national Organ Historical Society, which call for rebuilding, not modernizing, Bradford even crafted a replica of the original nameplate, which he placed above the keyboard. As the work progressed, he was happy to show it to visitors.

"When we started to celebrate our 100th anniversary in 2000, we were looking for a chancel organ," said Grassi, picking up the story.

St. Josaphat's old organ, in the balcony, was in need of expensive repairs. Even at best, "it

had a muddy sound," noted Scott Arkenberg, the church's music director.

Bradford's organ, on the other hand, was available, reasonably priced and had "a beautiful, clear, crisp sound," Grassi said.

Last year, the pair rounded up two dozen potential donors, drove them north to the Bradford Organ Co. for an on-site visit, then to a church in Lincoln Park to hear an instrument built by the same company, though not as old.

"It was an easy sell," Grassi said.

Aside from its age, what makes the organ special, Arkenberg said, is its mechanical action, reminding aficionados of an old manual typewriter. The fingers of the organist, flicking lightly or hitting keys hard, can produce a wider range of sound than comes from its modern-day electronic cousins.



Eric Haugen of Chicago, a journeyman with the Bradford Organ Co., works on restoration of an organ built in 1872 that is being installed in St. Josaphat Church.

Tribune photos by Bonnie Trafelet

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