

Sounds of Summer Concerts Uptown Hit

By

Jane Barry

The Greater Saint John Community Foundation

Norma Blanchet has been involved with music for almost as long as she can remember. Music has been part of the life of the Saint John native for many years, performing, directing choirs and acting as an organist for several local churches. Her former church, St. James Anglican, in the South End is now just a memory. Lately, she has re-directed her energies and been instrumental in organizing the weekly Sounds of Summer Noon Concert Series at the Church of St. Andrew and St. David, 164 Germain Street, now in its fifth year.

Last week, the unique tones of the Chinese dulcimer provided a contrast to the familiar peals of the 1879 church bell, as they echoed through the hallowed sanctuary of the historic church. Wenmei Li performed traditional Chinese music and some western pieces for an appreciative audience of locals and cruise ship passengers. Visitors are awed by the Freres Casavants pipe organ and beauty of the hand-crafted pulpit and woodwork by the famed nineteenth century carver, John Rogerson. He is considered one of the finest craftsmen in the history of shipbuilding and spent the latter days of his career creating treasured pieces for Saint John area churches, public buildings and private homes.

The vision of the congregation of The Church of St Andrew and St David is inclusive and aspires to reflect present day realities. Their minister, Rev. Bill Thomas, states “We are striving to make the church an accessible space for all people regardless of any of the false barriers that we might perceive”. They are striving to understand the complexities of our community and meet the people where they are, so to speak. As the minister for an inner-city church, in a neighbourhood of great diversity, Rev. Thomas says they are “deeply concerned about folks who feel they don’t belong”. He is encouraged to see the varied backgrounds of the audience attending their summer concert series and wants everyone to know they are welcome. The church, which is wheelchair accessible, undertakes a number of outreach activities to change that including a free meal program.

The church and congregation are also committed to the Abbey St Andrew housing project, envisioned for their parking lot area behind the church. This would move them toward the realization of their vision with the building of 96 mixed income, mixed age, mixed family, housing units in the South End, with 55 of them “rent-gear-to-income”. As their welcoming brochure states “The Church of Saint Andrew and Saint David is a congregation in transition and growth, exploring new ways of being God's people - learning from our history and tradition, but also being open to ideas and activities that are new to us.”

On a more tangible level, one of the wishes of the congregation is to be able to purchase the grand piano at the end of the series this year. The acquisition of a piano would open up the possibility of concerts throughout the year. A quality instrument would make it possible to welcome performers of the stature of a Phillip Thomson into their historic sanctuary, which has remarkably fine acoustics.

Funding for the Noon Series from the Greater Saint John Community Foundation was welcomed last year and this year, from the City’s Community Arts Funding Program. The eleven week series started June 24 and runs weekly until August 26. On July 29, they will welcome back Philip Thomson on piano; on August 5, Wen Gao on piano; August 12 Meghan Thompson, Soprano; August 19, Christopher Lane, Baritone; and finally August 26, John Higgins and Norma Blanchet with Piano and organ duets.

A Sohmer grand piano has been generously loaned by Dan, (the Pianoman) Mullen, of Grand Manan. His business, Pianoworks, reconditioned and rebuilt the classic instrument, which is available for purchase after the series. As Oliver Wendell Holmes once said, "Take a music bath once or twice as week for a few seasons. You will find it is to the soul what a water bath is to the body". It will be relaxing too, for the pews at St. Andrew and St. David are reputed to be the most ample and comfortable in the city. Information: 634-3092



Photo: Wenmei Li performs traditional Chinese music and some western pieces for an appreciative audience of local and cruise ship visitors at one of the weekly Sounds of Summer Noon Concert Series at the Church of St. Andrew and St. David, 164 Germain Street.

Community Profile is a weekly column highlighting community causes and work done by non-profit organizations in the Greater Saint John area. It is contributed by Jane Barry, executive director of The Greater Saint John Community Foundation. Contact the foundation at 506-672-8880. To view other Community Profiles go to www.saint-john-foundation.nb.ca

