

Come all ye faithful

Pianist Steven C fills the Cathedral with the sounds and spirit of Christmas

- By Anne Murphy

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Steven C. Anderson at his Bosendorfer grand piano. Photo by Brad Stauffer

The night before Steven C. Anderson's annual Christmas Together concerts at the Saint Paul Cathedral, there is a special delivery. His beloved Bösendorfer grand piano "goes on its back with three movers," Anderson said. "I have them take it into the Cathedral so it has a day to get used to the temperature."

A resident of the Summit Hill neighborhood, Anderson has played his 9-foot, 1,200-pound grand piano in concert beneath the Cathedral's dome every Christmas since 2015 (except for two years during the pandemic). This year for the first time he will be playing two concerts—at 7 p.m. Thursday and Friday, December 7 and 8.

"It's such a big production," he said, "I'm excited that I can do it on two nights and not just have to put it all away until next year."

Part of a three-day Christmas Festival

Anderson is also thrilled that his Christmas Together concerts this year will be part of the Cathedral Heritage Foundation's Christmas Festival, which runs from 5-9:30 p.m. on December 7, 8 and 9. The festival will feature a European-style Christmas market with holiday food, beverages and gifts in the Cathedral's outdoor courtyard.

"People can come and enjoy some hot chocolate and do a little shopping before and after the concert," he said. "And what's especially rewarding is that the Heritage Foundation supports the Cathedral."

"A really important part of Christmas Together is that people of all faiths can come and enjoy the music and the spirit," Anderson said. "Christmas music is beautiful no matter your religion or background. And I hope the concert helps bring people together. That may be more important than ever."

Admission to the Christmas Festival is free. Tickets for Anderson's concerts are \$10 with proceeds going to the restoration and preservation of the Cathedral.

Joining Anderson in the concerts will be vocalist Jillian Gubash, young singer Jack Cassidy, acoustic guitarist Pat Donohue and the Cathedral Choir School's Saint Cecelia and Saint Gregory Choristers.

Gubash has performed with Anderson for over 20 years. “Jack has a voice like candy,” Anderson said. “I don’t know of a better way to describe it. And this is the first year we’ve featured acoustic guitar. We’ve had strings before. We’ve had trumpet. But the guitar will be a nice addition in the Cathedral where the sound just surrounds you.”

A mix of the sacred and secular

“Then, of course, we’ll have Chris Ganza on the organ,” Anderson said. Ganza is the Cathedral’s organist and director of choirs. “I like to provide a variety of Old World music, and the organ is part of that,” Anderson said. “Sometimes the organ is featured, and sometimes we use it more casually to support other music. Sometimes we sneak in music from ‘A Charlie Brown Christmas.’ Musically speaking, there’s something for everyone.”

Concert-goers will hear some of Anderson’s favorite Christmas music. “One of them is the Austrian carol ‘Still, Still, Still,’” he said. “‘Greensleeves’ is another. ‘O Holy Night’ and ‘Silent Night.’ We have a version of ‘O Holy Night’ that has multiple key changes. It starts very small and it grows. I also have a version of ‘Joy to the World’ that actually starts off in a kind of sad way in a minor key, but then finally gets into a major key.

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Bösendorfer's sound touched his soul

It was after recording a holiday album at the Cathedral in 2014 that Anderson decided to perform a Christmas concert there. “I decided to try one free concert where people could experience my Bösendorfer in the Cathedral,” he said.

It was the sound of the Bösendorfer that really sold Anderson on playing the piano. “My first piano was a Schimmel, another German piano,” he said. “But I kept on thinking I need a bigger piano, I need the full-size grand. So I immediately thought about Steinway. But my musical friends said, ‘Well, what about Bösendorfer?’

“So once when I was in New York, I went to a shop called Beethoven’s Pianos. They specialize in European imports. I went in and I started playing pianos and then they played my Bösendorfer. And I freaked out. With even the first chord, with the sound

and the touch, it hit my soul. It's like a mind-reading piano, like it's connected to my soul."

Appreciating the space, the music and one another

Anderson hopes his audiences will feel connected in much the same way at Christmas Together. "The Cathedral is in my neighborhood," he said. "It's on my jogging route. I sit there, I pray there. And so to fill it with all these people is so meaningful. There's a collective energy at the concerts, a shared appreciation for the space, the music and one another.

"One year, I think it was maybe the third or fourth year of Christmas Together, a gentleman who definitely looked like he had some health problems came up to me after the concert with tears in his eyes. He said, 'Thank you, you made my Christmas.' Right there, I said, 'That's the bar. If I can reach one person, even one, why would I ever stop doing this?'"

Tickets to Christmas Together will be available at the door and in advance at tinyurl.com/bdh45hmj.