

Focus on Faith

New music director at St. George's likes both old, new

BY BILL BUELL
Gazette Reporter

Twist his arm a little bit, and Andrew Krystopolski will admit that it might be fun to show up at St. George's Episcopal Church in Schenectady one Sunday morning and start playing a little jazz, ragtime or maybe even a polka.

Well, that's not about to happen anytime soon, and he's fine with that.

"St. George's is a place that prides itself on tradition and holding on to its strong roots from the past, which I'm all for," said Krystopolski, who took over as music director at the Stockade church four months ago. "But there is some wonderful new church music being written, and I'd like to bring us into the 21st century. But I'm still in my first year here. I have to do some more observing, and see what drives this congregation musically."

Music and his relationship with God has been a big part of Krystopolski's life since as far back as he can remember.

"I was raised in a Polish-American family, and church and music were always a very big part of it," said Krystopolski, who grew up in Wilmington, Del. "Music is my primary way to worship. It takes me to a whole new level of spirituality."



BILL BUELL/GAZETTE REPORTER

Andrew Krystopolski, music director of St. George's Episcopal Church in the Stockade neighborhood of Schenectady, sits at the organ in the choir loft of the church.

PIANO TAKES PRIORITY

He began taking violin lessons when he was 5, but, as his parents soon found out, he couldn't keep himself away from the piano.

"I'd come home from school and play the songs I heard during the day on my toy piano, and I just sort of gravitated toward that instrument," he said. "We went to the biggest Catholic church in Wilmington, and they had this awesome organ. I'd spend most of Mass facing the back gallery and staring at the organ. I was glued to it."

He went to Catholic schools all of his life, getting a degree in church music from Marywood University in Scranton, Pa. During his college years, however, he left the Catholic church and became an Episcopalian.

"I did an internship at an Episcopalian church and the liturgy was very similar to what I was used to," he said. "I liked that, and I just fell in love with the priority that music takes in the Episcopal church. The music just seemed more important, and there was much more substance to it than what I had experienced in the Catholic church. There was also more emphasis on the choir as opposed to just one cantor. It was the community that I liked."

He also liked that while many members of the Episcopal faith see things from a conservative viewpoint, there was some room for a liberal perspective, at least more

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than he felt was available to him as a Catholic.

"It was a very smooth transition for me because of the similarity of the two religions, and the Episcopalians have their roots in Catholicism and that was important to me," he said.

LIBERAL VIEWPOINT

"But I'm also very liberal, and I loved the aspect that women could be ordained and that clergy could be married in the Episcopalian faith. I found all that very appealing."

Krystopolski, 29, was at a church in New Jersey before heading to Schenectady in June to take the position as music director at St. George's. The church had been going without a director for quite some time.

"But we had some wonderful parishioners who took up the reins during the interim and kept the choir going and made sure we had an organ player," he said. "That says a lot about the leadership in this congregation."

While his job is only a part-time position right now, he hopes that will change and if his early success is any indication, he may have more than enough work to keep him busy.

"We started a new children's choir, and we opened it up to children outside of the St. George's parish community, and we got a great response," he said. "It's a great way for children to get some kind of free musical education as well as some foundation in a church. In the past, the role of children in the choir would typically be taken up by boys, but we have 16 kids who signed up and most of them are girls. Our numbers are continuing to grow, so I'm very excited about it."

His life at St. George's is the kind of thing he's dreamed about since he was a young boy.

"I knew I wanted to be a church

musician, and if I'm going to be doing something for the rest of my life, I want to be comfortable doing it, and I also want to be challenged," he said. "St. George's is just so wonderful. It's such a beautiful place and so steeped in tradition. When I first saw it, it was like walking back in time. I'm living in Troy right now, but I am planning on moving to the Stockade soon and really being a part of this wonderful neighborhood."

While he appreciates the antiquity that oozes from St. George's and its surroundings, he's also a big fan of the acoustics in the main sanctuary. It is the oldest church building in Schenectady, built just before the American Revolution.

"There is very little on the walls here and that helps make it a perfect place for music," he said. "Father Paul [Blanche] doesn't use a microphone, and we don't have a sound system for the people who read on Sundays. We just don't need one because the acoustics are so wonderful."

PLAYING ACCORDION

Along with playing the organ at St. George's on Sunday and other special occasions, Krystopolski is looking forward to getting an opportunity to play another of his favorite instruments, the accordion.

"My father had a love of jazz music, so I've always loved that, and when you're growing up and taking piano lessons classical music is always a big part of that," he said. "And while I love playing church music, in my other life outside of the church I love playing polka music. I have an accordion and a concertina, and because of my fascination with keyboards I was drawn to those instruments along with the piano and the organ. That's how I supported myself through college. I played in a lot of polka bands, and then I also played jazz in bars on Friday and Saturday night. But on Sunday morning, it was always back to church."

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