

A melodic gift of life

Organist Nigel Potts of Bay Shore's St. Peter's by-the-Sea combines music with altruism

By LINDA LEUZZI

BAY SHORE — The music is glorious, tapping the senses like a majestic, commanding presence with notes that trumpet and soar. Bold and delicate melodic nuances pop like little surprises. And that was just one composition, "The Star Spangled Banner."

Performed by Nigel Potts, a world-class organist and director of music for St. Peter's by-the-Sea Episcopal Church in Bay Shore, the national anthem will be repeated again at St. Peter's, along with an acoustic treasure of popular classics by Bach, Mozart, Purcell, Saint Saens and Sousa on Sunday, April 23, at 4 p.m.

It's a concert Potts will be playing on an instrument he loves for a child he's never met. All proceeds will be donated to the Rotary Club's Gift of Life program, which flies in third-world children who require heart surgery.

"I haven't met any children (who had surgery)," Potts said. "I only heard about the program through the Bay Shore Rotary and their involvement." He glanced at the Gres Miles instrument in front of him, an American classical organ. "I'm going to do a concert here. St. Peter's will receive a small fee for its use and, apart from getting the word out, all the public has to do is show up. All I need is 200 people paying \$20 and we have \$4,000 to bring a child over."

Those who attend are in for a treat. Modest and charming, Potts is an acclaimed rising star in the music world. He's played over a hundred concerts in countries that include Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Singapore and Iceland. Besides appearances in major cities here and in Canada, his inspired performances have awed listeners in revered London cathedrals, including Westminster Abbey and St. Paul's. He's also recorded a CD or two.

As for the instrument he's chosen for his life's work, it's a lot more complex than people think. For one thing, its origins began around 250 B.C. Back then, it was called the Hydraulis because its air pressure was controlled by a reservoir of water. The current form, a series of pipes connected to a wind supply controlled from a keyboard, evolved around 1580.

"The keyboard is identical (to the piano)," he explained. "But the organ is essentially a wind instrument. The blower generates air that's stored in reservoirs, which maintain the wind pressure. When a key is depressed, it opens a valve that allows air to escape up into the selected pipe." An umbilical cord of wires, which attaches the organ console to the organ chamber, sends signals to each pipe. There are 3,500 pipes in St. Peter's organ, the largest in Suffolk County, Potts said.

Organs can have as many as five keyboards; St. Peter's has three plus the pedal-board, a



Renowned organist and St. Peter's by-the-Sea Director of Music Nigel Potts at his instrument in the Bay Shore church. IB/Leuzzi

keyboard played by the feet. The console also has stops, or knobs on the sides of the keyboards. Each stop represents a rank or series of pipes, which have their own individual sound. The higher the note, the shorter the pipe. Pipes can range from two inches to 16 feet in length and the physical effort in playing the instrument is quite demanding.

"It has the greatest dynamic range," he said, "from the softest whisper to the loudest thunder. There's a great selection in tone color. Playing it is like an artist working with his palette. Each stop is a different sound color."

Most people tend to associate organs with churches and funerals, Potts pointed out regarding a fixed perception. "So I think in general there's a lack of understanding with the organ," he said. "They are very expensive to maintain. However, there seems to be a revival of the pipe organ in America with many U.S. cities and town halls signing contracts for new, large pipe organs."

As music director, he bridges the spirit of the soul with the transcendence of organ music. Last year he scheduled such musical talent for the Music at St. Peter's series as Dorothy Papadakos, whose use of the pipe organ incorporates jazz-based eclectic and innovative sounds, and Paul Jacobs, Chairman of the Organ Department at the Juilliard School, among St. Peter's concerts. Richard Webster, a composer, church musician, choral conductor and renowned organist, also appeared as guest conductor.

The church itself is a polished gem of simple beauty and acoustical perfection. Potts pointed out that the 16-foot sterling silver cross on the altar was a gift from the Otis family, who made their fortune in elevators. There is also a magnificent blue tapestry that was made for the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II.

A native of Wellington, New Zealand, Potts studied church music at the Royal Academy of Music in London, one of the most prestigious music schools in the world, as did his grandmother Phyllis Rowe, who won a schol-

arship to study piano there in the 1920s.

It meant a six-week voyage at the time for Rowe, who lived long enough to see her grandson's accomplishments before she passed on at age 90. That included receiving a spontaneous phone call Potts made one night while practicing at St. Paul's Cathedral in London. Rowe continued to play the piano until just before her death in 1997.

"When I was very young I went to church with my mom and dad at Wellington Cathedral," Potts said, remembering his first connection at around six. "I was inspired by the grandeur." Piano lessons began at 8, (his mother is a retired piano teacher) and Potts began taking organ lessons at age 11.

A scholarship lured him from London, where he studied for seven and a half years, to the U. S., and Yale University's School of Music and Institute of Sacred Music, as a student of Professor Thomas Murray.

He roomed with Paul Jacobs, another organ dynamo, who also attended Yale. As Jacobs said of Potts, "his resplendent playing and alluring personality resonate with those who thought they never cared for organ music."

Potts has received acclaim in numerous reviews, but probably the most telling comment came from Debbie Jenks, an organist for the First Presbyterian Church in Northport. Jenks met Potts for the first time at an American Guild of Organists dinner three and a half years ago.

They sat next to each other and struck up a friendship. Potts, she said, is supportive and kind and plays frequently at her church. "There's a way that Nigel brings out a part of the music you don't expect to hear," she said admiringly. "He's very creative and he has a gift for making the organ sound like a symphony orchestra."

To purchase tickets for the Sunday, April 23, Gift of Life organ concert at St. Peter's by-the-Sea, call 665-0051, ext. 12, or e-mail Potts at Nigel@nigelpotts.com. ■