

Yankee Stadium organist from Montville starts second gig at Morristown church

By Jeff Diamant/The Star-Ledger

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For six years, Ed Alstrom has performed regularly for 50,000-plus as organist in one of the nation's highest-profile venues — Yankee Stadium, during weekend baseball games.

Now, he's got a second gig where the crowds usually top out at about 200: the Episcopal Church of the Redeemer in Morristown.



Matt Rainey/The Star-Ledger

Ed Alstrom, the weekend organist at Yankee Stadium since 2004, has taken a job at the Episcopal Church of the Redeemer in Morristown.

New Jersey native and accomplished jazz musician, Alstrom, of Pine Brook, began his job at Redeemer on Nov. 1, a week after his organ music accompanied the Yankees' clinching victory over the Los Angeles Angels in the American League Championship Series, and four days after he played for Game 1 of the World Series, when the Phillies beat the Yankees.

It's a rare mix of the ethereal and the hardball worlds but Alstrom said there aren't that many jobs for organists: You have to be flexible and you have to hustle, he says.

"I was looking, the church was looking, and we liked each other and we agreed on it," said Alstrom, 52, adding that he found the job posting on Craigslist in September. "I'm a freelancer who stockpiles work when and where I can get it, regardless of where it is. I'm fortunate in that I can do a lot of different things."

His Yankee Stadium experience dates to 2004, but his church experience is far deeper.

He trained as a church organist at Westminster Choir College in Princeton and has more than 30 years of experience at churches across northern New Jersey — Upper Ridgewood Community Church, Holy Spirit Lutheran in Verona and, most recently, Presbyterian Church in West Caldwell.

Alstrom said organ music has been magical to him most of his life. He recalls hearing the Yankee Stadium organ as a child in the late 1960s, when Eddie Layton, a legendary figure to frequent Yankee Stadium visitors, was just starting the job he would hold at the keyboard for most of the next 37 years, until he retired in 2003.

Alstrom auditioned for Layton in March 2004.

"There was snow on the field, we were in parkas," he said. "I sat at the Yankee Stadium organ with Eddie Layton at the doorway requesting songs. He asked for 'New York, New York' and the national anthem and the Canadian national anthem and 'Happy Birthday' and 'Take Me Out to the Ball Game.'"

His favorite memory, he said, was playing the final game at the old Yankee Stadium, on Sept. 21, 2008. "I actually ... played 'Goodnight, Sweetheart,'" he said.

Alstrom says organ music at the Stadium may seem spontaneous but it is really tightly directed and scripted.

"It's a regular production up there," he said. "I generally only play when the Yanks are batting, and it depends if there's a rally going."

The two jobs — and Alstrom's versatility — offer tantalizing possibilities.

He can go from "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" on a Saturday evening in the Bronx to playing church standards straight, such as "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" and "There Shall a Star From Jacob" the next morning.

Alstrom has a new jazz organ CD being released next month, "Gettin' Organ-ized." It is his third, after "The Record People Are Coming" and "Acid Cabaret."

Asked if he's ever been tempted to break into jazz, Sinatra or baseball music during church services, he said, "I don't tend to genre-hop up there. I do some spiffy cords that dress things up harmonically, and they (members of Church of the Redeemer) may construe it as jazz, but it's not intended that way."

Terry Perkins, who was on the church search committee that selected Alstrom, said she was attracted to Alstrom's versatility.

"He does beautiful jazz and contemporary. He's got a very, very eclectic background," Perkins said. "He's a composer in his own right. He has a wealth of experience being an organist in churches, so he knows the drill, but he's also very accomplished with people."

Alstrom's hiring has sparked excitement on the listserv of the Newark Episcopal Diocese, where even the bishop, Mark Beckwith — a Boston Red Sox fan — has contributed, writing, "It is with great (and perhaps reluctant) charity that I (an ardent Red Sox fan) welcome the Yankees' organist, Ed Alstrom, into our diocese."