

Portland Conservatory of Music moving to former church building in West End

The music school has been based at Woodfords Congregational Church for the past 12 years and was able to purchase the Neal Street building thanks to an anonymous donor.

By BOB KEYES, STAFF WRITER



The Portland Conservatory of Music is moving to a former church at 28 Neal St. in Portland. *Courtesy of Portland Conservatory of Music*

The Portland Conservatory of Music has purchased a former church building at 28 Neal St. in Portland's West End and will begin offering lessons and holding concerts there in the fall.

An anonymous donor gave the conservatory about \$1 million for the purchase, which closed May 12. The conservatory has been based at Woodfords Congregational Church for the past 12 years. The recently vacant Neal Street building is the former home of the Second Parish Presbyterian Church, which conducted its final service in the West End on Easter Sunday. It has moved to Scarborough.

Casey Oakes, a member of the conservatory's board of directors, said the church's decision to sell and the emergence of a donor felt like a providential confluence of events. "We have been looking for about three years and came to the conclusion that, unless we had some type of angel, the economics of it didn't work out," he said. "We said a prayer, and the angel came."

The purchase gives the Portland Conservatory of Music its first permanent home in its 26 years of existence. Before operating out of the Woodfords church, the conservatory was based on Free Street. [The Woodfords Congregational Church recently announced that it is exploring selling](#) its three-story parish house for conversion into senior housing.

Jean Murachanian, the conservatory's executive director, said the purchase gives the conservatory control of its space and the ability to expand programming and grow. Because the building was purchased outright and has no mortgage, the conservatory will save money by not paying rent, she said.

“The donor was well-known to us, knew our situation, had seen our progress over the least several years and thought it was a good investment,” she said. “It shows faith in our ability to be a viable institution.”

In a typical year, the nonprofit conservatory has an operating budget of about \$500,000. Murachanian said the conservatory will embark on a \$2 million capital campaign to raise money for renovations and an endowment. Pre-pandemic, it had an enrollment of about 350 students.

With more than 8,000 square feet, the Neal Street location – between Carroll and Bowdoin streets – gives the conservatory about twice as much space as it had at Woodfords.

“We were bursting at the seams, so this allows us room to grow,” Murachanian said. The building is suited for performances, private lesson studios, rehearsal space for bands and choirs, and a recording studio. The board and staff will go on a retreat this summer to begin writing a strategic plan to guide the conservatory through its next phase, she said.

Founded in 1995, the conservatory provides music education for people of all ages and abilities, with scholarships. It specializes in classical music, with instruction in piano, voice, strings, winds, percussion and brass instruments. It has added jazz, world music and fiddle music to its curriculum in recent years. With its new space, the conservatory will add a youth orchestra, and Oakes expects that the conservatory will partner with neighborhood schools, youth groups and other organizations, including nearby Maine Medical Center, to offer programming and concerts.



The sanctuary at 28 Neal St., where the Portland Conservatory of Music will host concerts beginning in the fall. *Courtesy of Portland Conservatory of Music*

Because the conservatory will be on the peninsula and within walking distance to downtown, Murachanian said the music school would explore opportunities to reach people who have not had the chance to experience music making. “We want to do a better job serving the underserved,” she said.

The conservatory will renovate the building in phases, with this summer’s first phase including a fresh-air system, fire alarm system, acoustic improvements, interior paint, a roof, outside handrails, and an ADA-compliant ramp to the

performance space. The conservatory will do a second round of renovations next year, including an elevator to the lower level, according to a news release.

Oakes said the former church offers parking for staff and faculty. “I think for any public concert, we’re hoping to partner with some of the other church parking lots in the area,” he said. “Ultimately, we don’t see there being too frequent a need for that but have some creative solutions we’re planning to explore for when that need does arise. But for daily operations, we should be more than covered.”

The church was built in 1960, with a 2,500-square foot vaulted sanctuary ceiling with exposed floor-to-ceiling beams and stained-glass windows.

The conservatory switched its lessons and concerts to a virtual mode within a week of shutting down its in-person operation, because of the pandemic, last March.

“The pandemic gave us a moment to step back, breathe, do a little strategy planning and then this building happened,” Oakes said. “The pandemic hurt, but we will come out on the other end probably stronger, if not definitely stronger, than ever.”

Murachanian anticipates that the conservatory will return to normal operations by fall, including in-person concerts. It plans to hold its First Thursday Noonday Concerts at the Neal Street location and the Third Thursday Noonday Concerts at the Portland Public Library.