

March 2024 – The Erard Harp at the North Bay Motherhouse

By Sr. Mae Kierans, Sault Ste. Marie Congregation Archivist

There is a fascinating musical mystery in our Motherhouse: the presence of a rare semi-grand Sebastien Erard Harp!



Its presence was evident right from the opening of St. Joseph Motherhouse as illustrated in the 1939 promotional brochure for St. Joseph's College and Motherhouse. How did it get from London England to North Bay?

The harp was crafted in the London Great Marlborough Street factory of Sebastien Erard (1752-1831) and his nephew Pierre Erard (1794 – 1855). Sebastien, a French contemporary of Mother St. John Fontbonne, had moved his Paris factory to London in 1793 to escape the French Revolution threat to his life. Meanwhile, Mother St. John was imprisoned in St-Didier-en-Valey. Erard's remarkable skill had attracted the notice of musicians and musical instrument makers of eminence. However, his increasing fame and several commissions for the likes of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette placed him at risk. He returned to Paris in 1812. Pierre remained in London and directed the establishment until 1822. (Wikipedia)

The brass patent plate (#5527) on the harp gives the London address and is associated with the date December 10, 1835, (the year before Mother St. John sent six Sisters to North America) making it 188 years old in 2023.



Erard invented the first double movement seven pedal action harp, allowing a harpist to perform in any key or chromatic setting. This mechanism, visible on our harp is still used by modern harp makers.



Erard Harps are rare in Canada; it is estimated only four exist. How did this Erard harp find its way to St. Joseph's Motherhouse when the Sisters moved from St. Joseph's (later St. Mary's) Academy in January 1939? Was it a gift from some father to his daughter? Alternatively, was it from a benefactor to the Music Department of the convent?

No longer able to produce heavenly music, this gracefully beautiful instrument is keeping silent about its secret history.

We are grateful to Karl Dittmann, a local harp tuner and technician who meticulously restored the Erard harp now displayed in our Motherhouse Heritage room. Bill Milne from our Maintenance Department carefully built the elegant display case from oak recovered from the former

Sacred Heart Chapel wings.