

NMM Director Presents Updates To Vermillion Rotary

By Sarah Wetzel For the Plain Talk; Oct. 13, 2023

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Dwight Vaught, director of the National Music Museum in Vermillion, shared this photo and other images of the museum's new galleries during a recent presentation to the Vermillion Rotary Club. NMM Gallery

Dwight Vaught, director of the National Music Museum (NMM), spoke at a Vermillion Rotary Club meeting a few weeks ago to give an update on happenings at the NMM.

“A number of months ago we were talking about what was going to happen in the new museum,” Vaught said. “This time we can say ‘Mission accomplished’ or at least ‘partial mission accomplished’ that we can talk about what is happening at the new museum.”

Attendees were encouraged to check out the NMM Live concert schedule to hear music played by historic instruments from their 14,000-instrument collection.

The museum’s Master of Music program has also re-started after a five-year hiatus.

“You might not be aware that we have the only Master of Music program in conjunction with the University of South Dakota music department with a specialization in the history of musical instruments because we have the museum here,” he said. “It’s designed as a small program, a couple of students every year.”

The program is run by Dr. Darryl Martin who is also the museum’s conservator keeping the instruments in display-ready condition and playable condition if the instruments are playable.

“Really among the museum conservators in the world he is right up there among the top,” Vaught said. “In fact, everybody told us, ‘If you can get Darryl to come to the National Music Museum, you’ve pulled off a coup.’ Fortunately, he was

ready to leave Belgium and come to South Dakota.”

Vaught went over the NMM timeline from 2021 when the Lillibridge Wing opened.

“Then in 2022 the NMM Board of Trustees approved us to invest about \$4.25 million to do the first-floor galleries,” he said. “That’s our phase one and that was what we just reopened at the end of August. The board is now considering whether or not we have the money together to go on to phase two to complete the second floor.”

According to Vaught, the second-floor galleries will include the Sound Gallery focusing on the acoustics of sound, their Italian Strings Gallery, a keyboard gallery, and musical instruments as arts or crafts/innovations focusing on the process of evolution and failure in developing instruments.

The good news, he said, is all the bills for redoing the first floor have been paid so they are sitting very well as of now.

Vaught shared information about some special aspects of the NMM as well as some of the current exhibits.

“When we were talking to Darryl in Belgium, one of our board members asked him how he would rank the collection of the National Music Museum among musical instrument collections in the world,” Vaught said. “He said easily among the top three. This is the reputation and the prestige that we have.”

He said the e-museum website can provide the public a peek into the collection so the public can get a glimpse of the vast array of instruments.

Currently the Jason and Betsy Groves Special Exhibition Gallery is hosting the “As Good As Gold” 50th anniversary exhibit featuring instruments which have brought international attention to the NMM.

“The Special Exhibition Gallery means that we can rotate those exhibitions out whenever we feel the need to do that,” Vaught said. “As opposed to permanent exhibitions. Those are going to stay there pretty much permanently.”

The “As Good As Gold” exhibition will be available until the end of 2023.

The new first floor of the NMM has seven new galleries, according to Vaught, highlighting “The

Roles Instruments Play in our Lives,” as reads a display.

He highlighted several icons that are on labels throughout the museum. These icons are Highlights, Musicians and Family.

“As the designers put together the museum, they said we want to make a museum for the Streaker, the Stroller and the Scholar,” Vaught said. “It was the idea of how people interact with museums.”

Vaught explained someone with little time to view the exhibits, or the “Streaker” might want to pay attention to the Highlights icons to guide them through the museum.

Strollers or people with a few hours interested in musicians and masters of music can look for the Musicians icon.

The family icon, of course, serves those bringing families.

“Of course, you’re welcome to go at your own pace but these are things that we think are really important for you to see depending on how you come in and interact with the museum,” Vaught said.

He showed pictures of the new exhibits showing brand new casework, flooring and reader rails clearly labeling and describing each instrument.

In the Music In the Home Gallery, Vaught highlighted the Christian Dieffenbach organ, one of two organs the NMM has on display, which will be played at noon on Friday the 13th to museum-goers.

“The audience for that recital will take our chairs into the gallery itself and sit there and listen to the instrument play,” Vaught said. “Where that’s possible we certainly want to do that.”

Visitors can hear instruments in other ways as well.

“We have both audio and video listening stations at different points throughout the galleries,” he said. “You can walk up, there are three musical examples there. You can push it and hear a 30-second sound sample of whatever is described.”

Another opportunity for visitor engagement lies at the Personal Expression Wall.

“We give you the opportunity when you come into the museum if you want to take a moment there are slots where there are three cards,” Vaught said.

“You can pick a card with a topic: feeling, playing or favorites.”

He said this has been a popular exhibit with patrons answering the prompts for visitors after them to read.

“Music is life and life is music,” read one card signed Bella Sanchez from Brazil. “Actually, I don’t know what I would do without the piano. Through this wonderful instrument I show my feelings to the World.”

The entire wall has been filled up once with a second round well under way.

“It’s really fun to go through the cards and read what people write,” Vaught said. “In a few words, it is so powerful and it’s so poignant about how they interact with music.”

As far as what is next beyond the next phase of renovation, Vaught said that acquisition of new instruments to the collection are largely on hold, even “de-accessioning” excess items in the collection, unless something extremely unique or rare presents itself.

“We used to have over 15,000 instruments,” he said. “Over these past few years of having been shut down and trying to live within our footprint we’ve had to take a really serious and hard look at the collection.”

An example of that is a recent acquisition of a 1939 Storytone Piano, donated by Gary Nelson from Williston, North Dakota.

According to Vaught, the extremely heavy instrument was an important in the evolution of home musical instruments.

“This is what’s considered to be the first electric piano ever made in that the keys and the strings and the actions are just like a regular piano but there’s no sound board, so you don’t have the length of a regular piano,” Vaught said. “There’s electric pickups inside the piano that project the sound through what looks like those two legs which are actually speakers.”

The piano also contains an AM radio and a shortwave radio in the bench as well as a phonograph that can be hooked into the unit allowing someone to play out of the speakers at the same time they are playing with it.

The instrument is currently at the NMM center for preservation and research.

Dr. Martin joined Vaught in his presentation, showing a unique Grafton Saxophone, a promised gift from a donor.

Built with brittle plastic or acrylic, this type of saxophone proved difficult to repair which ultimately halted its production, though it served as an affordable option for many musicians at the time.

“It fills this role of instrument invention and trying to invent something new and see if it might take off as the next big thing in commercial musical instrument production,” Vaught said. “Today most of the surviving Grafton Saxophones are more for display than performance...They are very interesting instruments and quite delicate.”

All first-floor galleries in the NMM are open as well as the special exhibit gallery. Hours are Tuesday through Friday 10 a.m.-4 p.m. For more information visit (nmmusd.org).