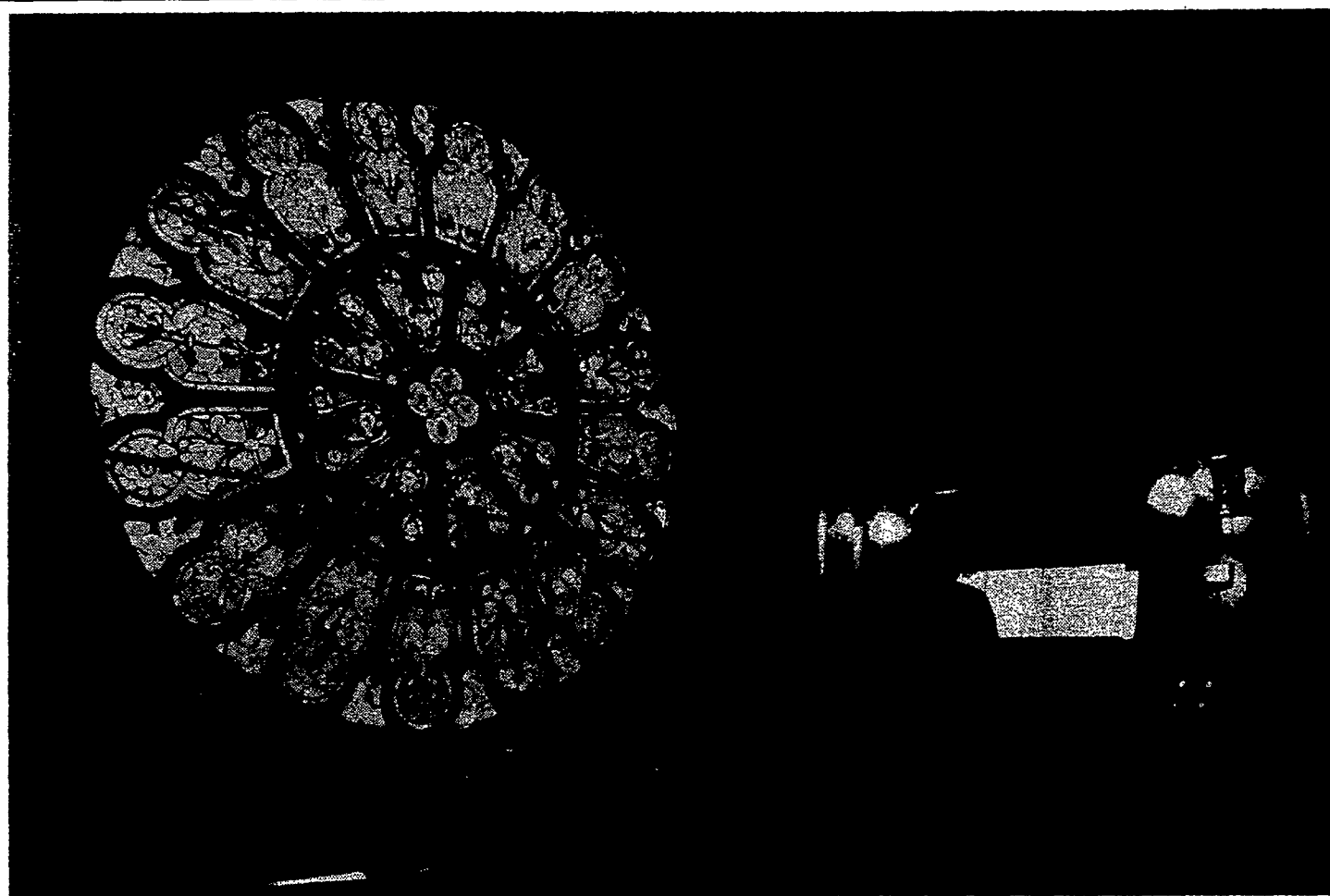


MOVIE

on the

STORY BY
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PHOTOS BY
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Aaron Wheeler, 16, practices the organ at St. Mary's Church in Geneseo.

Youth finds beauty in music

For the most part, Aaron Wheeler has been a self-taught musician who's rarely displayed his talents outside of his home.

This cloak of obscurity is being shed rather quickly. In recent months Aaron, who will turn 17 on Oct. 22, has moved steadily into the public eye.

Last spring Aaron joined the adult choir at St. Mary's Parish in Geneseo, where he's a youth-group member. And this summer, he began as a substitute organist at St. Lucy's Church in Retsof.

Aaron has also taken his music to the national level. He spent June 8-24 as a member of the National Catholic Youth Choir, singing and performing organ solos at several sites in Minnesota. The choir also made a brief trip to Atlanta where it performed at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' semi-annual meeting.

These are big steps for a young man whose only previous public performances were a handful of nursing-home recitals. Although he lives a fairly secluded life, Aaron said, "I do enjoy sharing my music with people."

Aaron is home-schooled by his moth-



er, Patricia. He grew up playing the family piano, and now teaches his younger siblings. He has never taken a formal piano lesson, and only got an organ instructor within the past year. Most of his training, he said, has been through instructional tapes.

The Wheelers reside in the peaceful hamlet of Piffard, Livingston County, where Aaron's father, James, is employed in the bakery at the Abbey of the Genesee. Aaron, who often attends the monastery's liturgies and prayer services, said he has been markedly influenced by the priests' and brothers' singing that fills the monastery chapel.

"The music is very prayerful, part of the lives of the monks. If you see somebody living with music like that, it's something you internalize," said Aaron, whose family's house is less than a mile down River Road from the abbey.

Aaron added that he became interested in the National Catholic Youth Choir because its founder and chaplain, Father Anthony Ruff, is a Benedictine monk. Trappist monks, such as those at Abbey of the Genesee, live a Benedictine spirituality.

The national choir consisted of 51 youths. Aaron remarked that he enjoyed meeting people from different parts of the country but, except for the weather, "Most places are about the same. They have a McDonald's and shopping malls."

The choir spent most of its time at St. John's Abbey and University in central Minnesota where classes in music history and theory, as well as religion and liturgy, were offered. Choir members also attended numerous Masses, prayer services and special devotions such as rosary recitations or Benedictions.

Aaron served as a bass singer for the choir and also got to perform three organ solos. Dr. Axel Theimer, a former member of the world-famous Vienna Boys' Choir, served as conductor.

The choir sang in English, German and Latin, performing music that ranged from Gregorian chants to works by noted composers and contemporary pieces. (The choir's performances are available on CD. Those wishing to purchase a copy should call Father Ruff at 320/363-3233 or e-mail him at awruff@csbsju.edu.)

Aaron said his experience was so enjoyable that he'd like to re-join the choir next year and possibly attend college at St. John's. "NCYC gives you a real feeling for the importance of the legacy of sacred music in liturgy today," he remarked. "The directors achieved an excellent balance between classical and modern."

In addition to the formal instruction he received, Aaron was impressed by his instructors' positive attitudes. He remarked that it's important for him, also, to exude enthusiasm as both a performer and instructor.

"I find what's lacking in so many music students is heart. If you lack heart, it's like dry crackers — there's nothing to them" Aaron commented. "I try to let out a lot of expression, make things very positive. I practice because I enjoy playing, and that's half the battle. If you don't have a positive attitude, all the theory in the world isn't going to help."

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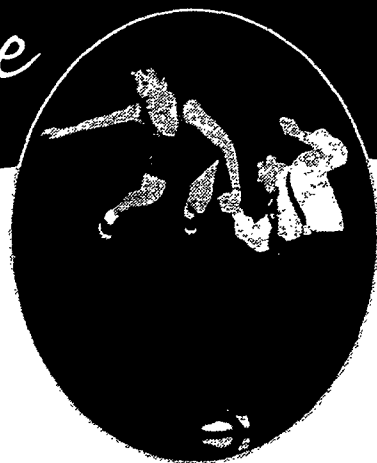
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