

# Cleveland Welcomes a North German Voice

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THROUGHOUT THE HISTORY of Western music, there have been times when retrospective movements in search of a more perfect and more enlightened ideology sought to establish a balance between cultural reaction and artistic imagination. During the early 20th century, the Organ Reform Movement in North America and the *Orgelbewegung* in Germany looked to the past in shaping the future of the pipe organ. By the mid-20th century, several pioneers of organ reform arose, among whom were the American Walter Holtkamp and the German Rudolf von Beckerath.

Twentieth-century organ reform began in Europe. At the core of the movement was interest in 16th- and 17th-century tonal philosophy. Albert Schweitzer, in his 1906 *Organ Building and Organ Playing in France and Germany*, brought this issue to the forefront by suggesting the association of tonal beauty with instruments of the past.

Schweitzer's writing labeled modern technological advances in organbuilding counterproductive and ultimately destructive to the organ's tonal objective. He stated that for some, "complexity" in organ design had become a "mania":

Unless an organ console looks like the control installation of a large railroad station, it is worthless to them [modern organists]. They want half a dozen free combinations even if the controls must be mounted behind them, and the largest possible number of pistons for choruses, full organ, and combination buttons. Such complicated organs sound no better than others I have heard, and yet are claimed to be satisfactory only in proportion to the number of their controls.<sup>1</sup>

Continuing, "The only good measure of an organ is Bach's organ music," Schweitzer commended the organs of Bach's age and promoted the use of mechanical action, low wind pressures, and clear voicing that would produce a generous tone.<sup>2</sup> He condemned modern advances in organbuilding: "The past 40 years of innovation in organbuilding have not been the years of great artistic advance that many of us be-

1. Albert Schweitzer, *Organ Building and Organ Playing in France and Germany*, trans. William D. Turner (Braintree, Mass.: The Organ Literature Foundation, 1984), 7 (originally published as *Deutsche und französische Orgelbaukunst und Orgelkunst* [Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1906]).

2. *Ibid.*, 8.

lieve them to have been. They betray not merely a conflict of commercialism with art, but a victory of commercialism over art."<sup>3</sup>

Following Schweitzer's remarks, early organ reform in Europe was realized by the construction of the "Praetorius Organ," built by E.F. Walcker in 1921 at the University of Freiburg, which was based on two early Baroque writings of Michael Praetorius that highlighted the Groningen Court chapel organ built by David Beck in 1596. It was from the Beck instrument that the 1921 Freiburg instrument's specification originated:<sup>4</sup>

## UNIVERSITY OF FREIBURG "PRAETORIUS ORGAN" E.F. WALCKER, 1921

\*Ranks not part of Praetorius's design.

### OBERWERK

8 Principal  
8 Grob Gedackt  
8 Rohrflöit  
4 Octava  
4 Nachthorn  
4 Gemshorn\*  
2 Octav  
1½ Quint  
1 Schwiegelpfeiff  
Mixture IV  
16 Rancket

### RÜCKPOSITIV

8 Quintadeena  
4 Blockflöit  
4 Spitzflöit  
2 Gemshörnlein  
Zimbel II  
8 Krumbhorn

### PEDAL

16 Untersatz  
8 Dolzianbass\*  
16 Posaunenbaß  
2 Singend Cornet

### BRUSTWERK

8 Klein lieblich  
2 Gedacktfloit  
8 Baerpfeiff  
4 Geigend Regal

Although the Praetorius organ showcased a historically informed specification and a return of the Rückpositiv division, it did not perfectly reflect knowledge of historically informed

3. *Ibid.*, 11.

4. "1945 Freiburg Praetoriusorgel," Walcker-Orgelbau, accessed September 14, 2017, [http://www.walcker.com/opus/1000\\_1999/1945-freiburg-praetoriusorgel.html](http://www.walcker.com/opus/1000_1999/1945-freiburg-praetoriusorgel.html).

methods in organbuilding. As a result, Walcker was not capable of demonstrating totally the perceptions of organ reform and disregarded some of the original 16th- and 17th-century concepts by using electropneumatic action, un-encased pipework, and “other modern features,” aspects in opposition to Praetorius’s original treatise.<sup>5</sup>

In North America, Walter Holtkamp was staying abreast of the *Orgelbewegung*. At the time of the Praetorius organ’s construction, Holtkamp was in his late 20s, and was working with his father Henry in the family’s organbuilding business. Able to read German, he began to acquire a comprehensive library of German and other European books on organbuilding.<sup>6</sup> Holtkamp and his father had also made friends with a young German engineer and organ enthusiast in Berlin, Rudolph Barkow. The three engaged in a letter exchange of organbuilding trends between Europe and North America, including discussion of the Praetorius organ and its components.<sup>7</sup>

Walter Holtkamp’s training ended in 1931 when his father died. Inspired by the Classic revival in Europe, he steered the Holtkamp company’s philosophy toward prototypes of organ reform featuring bright mixtures and mutations, unenclosed Positive divisions, and Baroque-inspired reeds.

In 1933, Holtkamp built the first North American Rückpositiv at the Cleveland Museum of Art, an installation that placed him in the vanguard of North American organ reform.<sup>8</sup> The nine-stop Rückpositiv, joined to a 1922 Skinner organ, was representative of the fading symphonic era, complete with plentiful orchestral voices, borrowing, extensions, and unison registers.

- 8 Bourdon
- 4 Prestant
- 4 Flute
- 2½ Nazard
- 2 Doublette
- 1½ Tierce (37 pipes)
- 1½ Larigot (24 pipes)
- 1 Piccolo
- Mixture III

Like the Praetorius organ, Holtkamp’s Rückpositiv had an electropneumatic wind chest, not a mechanical one. In defending his approach, Holtkamp stated:

I have never looked upon my work as archaeological. The Cleveland Museum of Art Rückpositiv departed in

many respects from the average of its prototypes. Primarily we were not creating a Rückpositiv, that is making a revival, but creating a tonal apparatus to thin out an existing and all-too-heavy ensemble. We applied a corrective treatment, so to speak. The value of a Positiv, located as a Rückpositiv, has really been made clear to me since then.<sup>9</sup>

Unlike his European counterparts, Holtkamp remained unconvinced of mechanical action. However, he did experiment with it during the 1930s when he built several small portative organs using slider chests. A company description of this instrument reads: “The builders of the Holtkamp Portative feel that a direct physical control of the tone-generating agency is essential in any small intimate musical instrument, regardless of whether that instrument be a violin or an organ, and that adherence to this principle is especially desirable if an instrument is to be played in ensemble with other instruments or voices.”<sup>10</sup> Because of the slow Depression-era economy, Holtkamp did not pursue this avenue of organbuilding any further.

By 1950, Holtkamp had settled on what can be described as his mature style, characteristic of certain architectural and dispositional elements of the early phases of the European organ reform, especially electric action and exposed pipework. Although he traveled several times to Europe to observe historic European examples of organbuilding, his instruments were not much affected by these experiences; Dirk Flentrop commenting, “Holtkamp didn’t like to be influenced at all.”<sup>11</sup>

By the 1950s, more and more American students were traveling to European countries, including Germany, with the aid of programs like the Fulbright scholarship. This increased the influence of the European organ reform movement in North America, about which Holtkamp remained skeptical. While he affirmed his belief that early 20th-century organs in America were “a sin against good taste,” he also deflected the increasing European influence by saying:

We Americans must get back to first principles, forget our fancy solo stops and develop an American organ to suit our own conditions. Europe can be used as a storehouse for information. Europe can help in our organ education just as she helps in the education of our doctors, architects, painters, etc., but she cannot be our model.<sup>12</sup>

5. Harry Haskell, *The Early Music Revival: A History* (New York: Dover Publications, 1996), 57.

6. John Allen Ferguson, *Walter Holtkamp: American Organ Builder* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1979), 22.

7. *Ibid.*, 20.

8. Allen Kinzey, “Cleveland, Ohio: Cleveland Museum of Art,” *Organ Historical Society*, accessed October 24, 2017, <https://organhistoricalsociety.net/aeoliaskinner/Specs/Op00333a.html>.

9. Charles Callahan, *The American Classic Organ: A History in Letters* (Richmond: Organ Historical Society, 1990), 161.

10. Orpha Ochse, *The History of the Organ in the United States* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), 411.

11. John Fesperman, *Flentrop in America* (Raleigh, N.C.: The Sunbury Press, 1982), 48.

12. Ferguson, 86.

Despite Holtkamp's stance, American organists increasingly desired instruments more in keeping with the European trend, especially ones built with mechanical key action, which no American organbuilder was using at the time. In 1947, Robert Noehren, University of Michigan professor of organ, traveled to Europe. Noehren was among a group of Americans still not convinced that Americans could build instruments worthy of the reform movement. Of his travels, Noehren wrote that upon discovery of the historic instruments in Germany, his "world had turned around" and that he was beginning to believe that "good instruments and mechanical action were synonymous."<sup>13</sup> While in Germany, he played recitals on many instruments, both old and new, and met Rudolf von Beckerath, of whom he wrote: "I met a fascinating gentleman-builder-musician of Hamburg, Rudolf von Beckerath, who had grown up in the land of Schnitger and who had restored the Schnitger organs of Steinkirchen and Neuenfelde. Through him and my experiences I soon became aware of the importance of mechanical action and its responsiveness."<sup>14</sup>

Upon returning to America, Noehren spread the word of his European adventures and discoveries. He grew increasingly fond of the work of Beckerath, who he claimed had captured the "spirit of Schnitger," but whose instruments also reflected international traits, being able to play music outside the German Baroque spectrum.<sup>15</sup>

Rudolf von Beckerath was born in Munich in 1907. His family moved to Hamburg during the same year so his father, a visual artist, could take a teaching position at the city's School of Applied Arts. In 1925, Beckerath attended a recital by Günther Ramin, organist of Saint Thomas Church in Leipzig, on the 1693 Schnitger organ at Saint Jacobi Church in Hamburg. That recital was a moment of great awakening for Beckerath. His sister later claimed that he was so affected by the music and the organ that he "hardly spoke for a week."<sup>16</sup> After the concert, Beckerath met the organ enthusiast and reformer Hans Henny Jahnn, who would further mentor him in organbuilding and who steered Beckerath's early studies from engineering to woodworking.

The Saint Jacobi Schnitger greatly influenced the young Beckerath. In 1926, one year after Ramin's recital, Beckerath built a small house organ. As his first pipe organ, this was an instrument that Beckerath loved and enjoyed, often referring to it as his "mistress."<sup>17</sup> It was a small mechanical-action

organ using slider windchests and incorporating seven ranks characteristic of the Classic tonal influence of the Saint Jacobi organ.<sup>18</sup>

MANUAL I	MANUAL II	PEDAL
8 Gedackt	8 Krummhorn	16 Dulzian
4 Principal	4 Rohrflöte	
2 $\frac{3}{4}$ Quinte	2 Kleinflöte	

After the success of his house organ, Beckerath sought to become an apprentice organbuilder. On the advice of Louis Vierne (with whom contact was made through a family friend studying with Vierne in Paris), Beckerath moved to Paris in 1928 to study organbuilding under Victor Gonzalez.<sup>19</sup> The Spanish-born Gonzalez had received his training under Aristide Cavaillé-Coll, and was one of the few European builders knowledgeable about mechanical action and slider windchests.

The early days of working with Gonzalez were fruitful for Beckerath in acquiring the knowledge of pipe voicing that later became his trademark skill. In a letter, Beckerath spoke of his initial thoughts on Gonzalez's work, "The other day I heard a Gonzalez organ for the first time. Remarkably better than Cavaillé-Coll, but cursed with the same defect like all other organs: too narrow scales for the basic stops."<sup>20</sup>

In time, Beckerath admitted to learning from Gonzalez and confessed a persuasion to "give up some of the prejudices from [his] childhood influence."<sup>21</sup> This conversion marked a pivotal moment in his work because it imprinted an ambition to build organs that were not representative of just one national tonal identity. Compared with Holtkamp, who designated Bach's music as the test of an organ's success, Beckerath often referred to music outside the German oeuvre, and mentioned works by French Classic and Italian and Spanish Baroque composers to demonstrate the tonal variety incorporated into his instruments.

In January 1931, amid growing frustrations working for Gonzalez, Beckerath moved to Copenhagen to work for the Danish organbuilder, Frobenius. With him, Beckerath hoped to gain more experience in working with historic instruments, but unfortunately, after just eleven months, an economic depression hit Denmark, and Beckerath was given notice of termination of his employment. Frobenius had hoped that Beckerath would rejoin the company once the depression was over, but Beckerath was accepted back in Paris by Gonzalez, where his request for greater responsibility was met with

13. Robert Noehren, *An Organist's Reader: Essays* (Warren, Mich.: Harmonie Park Press, 1999), 204.

14. *Ibid.*, xii.

15. *Ibid.*

16. Doris Predöhl, interview by Arthur Carkeek, undated.

17. Rudolf von Beckerath, letter to his sister, May 25, 1930. All quoted correspondence is in the "Cleveland" file in the Beckerath shop in Hamburg.

18. Rudolf von Beckerath, letter to his mother, August 18, 1931.

19. Arthur Carkeek, "Rudolf von Beckerath: Part I," *The American Organist* 25, no. 9 (September 1995): 59.

20. Rudolf von Beckerath, letter to his family, February 21, 1929.

21. Rudolf von Beckerath, letter to his family, March 5, 1929.

promotion to being an independent voicer on several prominent projects.<sup>22</sup>

Beckerath stayed with Gonzalez until 1936, when increasing political tensions caused him to return to Germany. Because Beckerath did not apprentice in his home country, he was unable to apply for a master builder's license and was therefore forbidden to open his own company. He circumvented this by teaming up with other organbuilders, such as the Sauer firm of Frankfurt.

With Sauer, Beckerath built a three-manual, mechanical-action instrument in 1936 for Christ Church, Altona-Othmarschen, outside Hamburg.<sup>23</sup>

### CHRIST CHURCH ALTONA-OTHMARSCHEN

HAUPTWERK	RÜCKPOSITIV
16 Gedacktpommer	8 Quintadena
8 Prinzipal	4 Rohrflöte
8 Gedackt	2 Italien Oktave
4 Oktave	Sesquialtera II
2 Oktave	Scharff V
Mixtur V	8 Krummhorn
OBERWERK	PEDAL
8 Rohrflöte	16 Subbaß
4 Gemshorn	8 Prinzipal
2 $\frac{3}{2}$ Nachthornnasat	8 Oktave
2 Blockflöte	2 Nachthorn
Terzian II	Mixtur V–VII
16 Dulzian	16 Posaune
8 Bärpfeife	

Compared with Walcker's Praetorius organ, built 15 years earlier, the Altona-Othmarschen Beckerath showcased a similar *Orgelbewegung*-inspired specification including a Rückpositiv division, but advanced beyond the Praetorius model by incorporating mechanical action and slider windchests. However, striking omissions from the design are a reed rank in the Hauptwerk to complete its ensemble and a proper encasement for the pipes. These advances and omissions illustrate the continued path of progress in European organ reform.

Beckerath wrote only one public document describing his view of organbuilding. In this article, he promoted a departure from "old and comfortable traditions" and argued for exploration and innovation in organbuilding while staying grounded in the time-honored strengths of mechanical action, slider chests, and variable pipe-scaling measurements.<sup>24</sup> Beckerath was keen on implementing electric

stop and combination action, as he did in the Altona-Othmarschen organ. He considered modern electric technology valuable in alleviating heavy stop actions and enabling quick registration changes, but he did not approve of electrical key action:

The old tracker action, which has to turn corners and go in all sorts of odd directions to make its connections, permits the player to vary the initial tone by means of the speed of putting the note down. The control of the initial tone, articulation and phrasing are, with the tracker action, the means which allow the organist to give his playing the quality of vitality. For the organist, playing is controlled in general by the sense of touch and in particular by the high degree of muscular sensitivity. . . . If tracker action is replaced by the insensibility of pneumatic or electric action, no time need be wasted on discussion as to what this signifies musically speaking. . . . The player should be able to control the sound production. If he cannot do this, then the instrument is as lifeless as an electronium.<sup>25</sup>

After his success in 1936, Beckerath restored the 1642 Tobias Brunner organ in Saint Martin's Church in Tellingstedt. He learned much from his work on this instrument and credited its influences on him in a letter to his father:

I learned much again and came upon many tricks that the old builders used. One is never finished learning, and I have had again to revise my opinions significantly. My next organs will benefit from these experiences. That is the most beautiful thing about this art—that one must always renew, must change, in order to stay active and alive, and because of that I see a huge distance ahead of me until I come nearer my goal."<sup>26</sup>

During World War II, Beckerath was drafted into service, captured, and held in an American prisoner-of-war camp until 1946. Upon his release, he was hired by the Protestant Church in Hannover to survey the surviving historic organs in its province. Included in the work were critical pipe measurements of the instruments, many of which were by Schnitger.

This experience led fortuitously to a contract, signed in 1947, to restore the 1687 Schnitger organ in Steinkirchen. This instrument influenced the identity of Beckerath's early instruments and the success of its completed restoration offered Beckerath approval for his masters license in organbuilding, allowing him to open his own shop.

By the time Robert Noehren met him, Beckerath had already built a number of instruments throughout Germany. These varied in size and scope, representing the intimacy

22. Arthur Carkeek, "Rudolf von Beckerath: Part II," *The American Organist* 25, no. 12 (December 1995): 54

23. Ibid.

24. Rudolf von Beckerath, "The Art of Organbuilding: A European View," *Music: The AGO and RCCO Magazine* 11, no. 4 (April 1977): 50.

25. Ibid., 52.

26. Rudolf von Beckerath, a letter to his father, December 30, 1937.



Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church, Cleveland PHOTO William T. van Pelt

of the Steinkirchen Schnitger as well as the grandeur of the French school of organbuilding. When one of Noehren's students, Ralph Schultz, was looking for a new organ for his Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church in Cleveland, Noehren offered three options that inexplicably contain no mention of Holtkamp, whose shop was less than two miles from Trinity's doorstep:

1) That the church engage Rudolf von Beckerath of Hamburg, Germany, whom I consider the outstanding European organ builder today and a man of high artistic integrity, to design and build an organ for your church. Such an instrument should consist of some 35 to 40 stops with

three manuals and pedals and would be built with mechanical action.

- 2) I should propose to design and build the organ myself and, if the church so desires, submit plans for such a project.
- 3) If the church desires to consider one of the large organ builders in this country with a long-standing reputation, I could recommend that an organ be built by the Aeolian-Skinner Organ Company of Boston, Massachusetts, a builder whom I believe represents very high standards of workmanship.<sup>27</sup>

At the end of his proposal, Noehren added: "If the responsibility of making the decision were placed on my shoulders, I should consider an organ built by the German builder Rudolf von Beckerath the most beautiful instrument I could find anywhere in the world today. Such organ [*sic*] would undoubtedly soon become famous throughout the United States for its unusual quality of tone, and possibly set a new standard of quality in this country."<sup>28</sup>

Noehren also excluded Holtkamp from another of his consulting jobs, that for Saint Paul R.C. Cathedral in Pittsburgh. Coincidentally, Paul Koch, the cathedral's organist at the time, wrote to Holtkamp asking for a proposal, but Holtkamp wrote back that he would submit one only if the cathedral paid him a \$5,000 retainer fee, (\$37,518 dollars in today's currency).<sup>29</sup> The fee would be applied to the cost of a new organ, but if the church decided not to sign a contract with Holtkamp, he would keep the fee.<sup>30</sup>

The Cleveland Beckerath was a landmark in North American organ reform. A four-manual, mechanical-action, encased organ, representing the tonal influence of Arp Schnitger had now made its first appearance in North America. The installation was a remarkable success; Schultz reported 2,400 visitors to the organ during the three years after its dedication.<sup>31</sup> Numerous other Beckerath organs sprouted from this installation, and several North American builders began building mechanical-action organs.

Because of this success, the Cleveland Beckerath redirected the North American organ reform paradigm toward the European model. Lawrence Phelps wrote:

If there had been just one old instrument of this type somewhere in America and if it had survived until the be-

27. Uwe Pape, *The Tracker Organ Revival in America: Die Orgelbewegung in Amerika* (Berlin: Pape Verlag, [1978]), 20–21.

28. *Ibid.*, 21.

29. Walter Holtkamp, letter to Rt. Rev. Msgr. Andrew Pauley, October 30, 1957.

30. The Cleveland Beckerath in 1956 was \$23,569. That would equal \$203,958 in today's currency—quite a steal for a large, new mechanical-action organ. The German postwar exchange rate was favorable to Americans and proved to be a further incentive for customers to choose Beckerath.

31. Ralph Schultz, letter to Rudolf von Beckerath, September 20, 1960.

ginning of the reform movement so that more musicians could have known it, the trend of the reform might have taken quite a different pattern right from the beginning. As it was, the selection as to what was right for America was made in the early stages of our reform by a very small group of experts who arbitrarily rejected the concept so well—but so belatedly—represented by the Beckerath instrument. Without older instruments to serve as a guide, there was little else to do but go along with the experts, at least for a while.<sup>32</sup>

During the installation of the organ in Cleveland, a unique friendship developed between Holtkamp and Beckerath. Holtkamp often allowed Beckerath access to his shop for tools and resources and even held a picnic for the Beckerath employees working on the installation.

Despite the camaraderie, the two were still at odds, with Holtkamp warning Beckerath that one would now have to wait and see whether his mechanical-action organs would prove to be playable and survive in North America.<sup>33</sup> This statement led Beckerath to believe that Holtkamp doubted his work, which troubled him greatly. Nonetheless, their friendship continued to grow. When news reached Beckerath that Holtkamp had passed away, he took time off from voicing his organ in Pittsburgh to attend Holtkamp's funeral and offered the following tribute to Holtkamp: "[Holtkamp's death] is a great loss to American organbuilding; he was such a driving force behind the many things currently going on in organbuilding."<sup>34</sup>

Holtkamp and Beckerath were two giants whose perceptions of organbuilding were equally aligned, but whose conceptions of the craft were drastically opposed. While their respective instruments share a common goal of reconnecting the organ to the burgeoning popularity of 16th- and 17th-century music, they manifest stark contrasts in how a pipe organ should look, sound, and operate. The dramatic underlying differences between Holtkamp's style of organbuilding and Beckerath's raise several questions:

- ▶ What influence did their individual upbringings have on their careers? Beckerath grew up with an intimate relationship to 16th and 17th-century organs, while Holtkamp's knowledge was limited to books

and recordings, and he later confessed that he was never much interested in allowing them to influence his work.

- ▶ How did their roles within their respective companies influence the outcome of their instruments? Beckerath was the head voicer of his instruments, while Holtkamp was not, instead taking more the role of artistic oversight.
- ▶ To what degree did their artistic evolution advance or impede their output of organs? Once Holtkamp reached a certain amount of success in his work, he no longer was interested in further developing his methods. Most of his instruments during the 1950s embody similar visual and tonal identities. Beckerath, on the other hand, constantly sought to evolve. The Cleveland organ is an anomaly in his work because it has mechanical stop action, which Beckerath spoke out against. Also appearing in his later instruments are tonal elements representing Classic influence from other European countries such as Spain, France, and Italy. However, one consequence of Beckerath's constant evolution is that in hindsight, some of the intimacy in his early pipe voicing is lost in his later instruments.

The two builders were metaphorically worlds apart but shared a common concern for the organ and its future. Neither was interested in building copies of older instruments; rather, they wanted to modernize the 16th- and 17th-century organ for use in the 20th century. Holtkamp, a pioneer of the North American Organ Reform Movement, earned esteem in his career. His instruments are entrenched in the traditions of his German heritage, but full of modern and visionary architectural and mechanical elements. Beckerath, a maverick of the European reform movement who adhered to no tonal philosophy but his own, attained distinction both at home and abroad through his visionary synthesis of Classic tonal and mechanical elements. The Cleveland Beckerath stands today as a monument in North American organ culture, as does the Holtkamp in Setnor Auditorium at Syracuse University, both achieved equal success through remarkably different approaches.

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32. Lawrence Phelps, "A Short History of the Organ Revival," Lawrence Phelps & Associates, A Corporation for Organbuilding. Accessed November 2, 2017. <https://www.lawrencephelps.com/Documents/Articles/Phelps/ashorhistory.shtml>.

33. Christophe Linde, "Rudolf von Beckerath." Lecture, August 1999.

34. Ibid.

