

Preview

New gallery organ at Church of the Covenant to be dedicated in two events on Sunday, May 12

by Daniel Hathaway



As pipe organ projects go, the new Richards, Fowkes & Co. gallery organ at the Church of the Covenant in Cleveland's University Circle is something quite special. Built in the late 17th century North German-Dutch style that coincided with a great flowering of organ composers beginning with Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck and continuing on through Dietrich Buxtehude, the instrument is the first church organ in Northeast Ohio to replicate the kind of instrument invented to support the psalm and chorale singing of a Protestant congregation of that era as well as the organ

literature that surrounded and enhanced its worship.

The Newberry Gallery Organ will be formally dedicated this Sunday, May 12 in a 10 am service and 2 pm recital. "It's the crown jewel of Cleveland", exclaimed Oberlin organ professor and dedicatory recitalist James David Christie, who talked to us during a break from practicing earlier this week. "This organ is so beautiful — you have no idea!"

How did this project come about? The Covenant's music director and organist Jonathan Moyer told us that soon after he arrived in Cleveland, a renovation project took quite a different turn. "Originally there was an Aeolian-Skinner antiphonal organ in the gallery that was much in need of repair or replacement. The granddaughter of the original donor, who was still alive at the time wanted to donate the funds. She actually gave us too much money."

A nice problem to have, but one which soon turned the conversation toward creating a new, contrasting organ to live in the rear gallery of the church. "The donor was not an organist but was extremely engaged by the concept of an organ in a different style. We started with the general then got specific."

Having narrowed the concept to a mechanical action instrument in 18th or 17th century style tuned in a historical temperament, the committee drew up a short list of builders and paid visits to their instruments, eventually settling on the small organbuilding firm of Richards, Fowkes & Co. in Ooltewah, Tennessee, whose work James David Christie has

known about for a long time. “Ralph Richards grew up on a farm next to the city where I lived in Wisconsin. I was already at Oberlin when I came back and heard this young man play the organ with such potential. I told him he should come to Oberlin to study and he said, ‘my father would kill me — he wants me to be a farmer.’ But he did come to Oberlin and later decided to become an organbuilder. He worked first with Paul Fritts then formed a company with Bruce Fowkes. Now they’re in the top 1% of organbuilders in the nation.”



The instrument arrived late in the winter and though it was assembled in short order, voicing of the pipes in the church took a number of weeks. Nonetheless, the organ was heard in concerts by Case early music ensembles and the Newberry Consort even in its incomplete state and has gradually assimilated itself into the musical life of the church. Moyer is delighted, especially with the instrument's modified mean-tone tuning. “It's a great hymn-playing machine. The pure thirds make psalms and chorales burst into three-dimensional color.” He also applauds the decision to pitch the organ at A=415 hz. rather than the more historically-correct high pitch of A=460. “That makes it possible to play with most period instruments as well as providing an amazing, rich sonority.”

The congregation seems to be pleased with the instrument as well, “though a new piece of furniture always takes getting used to,” Moyer says. “The organ case obscures part of the rear window, which was part of our conversations a few years ago, but we decided on a case design after the ‘Totentanz’ organ at the Marienkirche in Lübeck with side towers and a more open middle, and we’re backlighting the window so it can be seen from outside at night.”

The formal dedication activities on Sunday, May 12 begin with a worship service at 10 am and an 11:30 am lecture by Jonathan Moyer. Christie's dedication recital at 2 pm will be bookended by concerted pieces by Heinrich Schütz (*Psalms 150* from *Psalmen Davids*) and Giovanni Gabrieli (*Omnes gentes plaudite*) including the Covenant Choir and period instruments.

“The recital includes an hour of organ music, about an hour and twenty minutes altogether with talking and the choral pieces,” Christie says about the program, which includes organ works by Sweelinck, Scheidt, Jakob Praetorius, Storace, Buttstett, J.S. Bach and Buxtehude as well as dances from the Dutch collection of Susanne van Soldt. “It's all short pieces to show all the stops of the organ in all combinations, which will be friendly for people who have never been to an early music program.”

When we spoke, Christie was having fun deciding on his registrations. “For the Bach Neumeister chorale, I'm using two gorgeous 2' flutes coupled together to make something like a flute celeste.” And he likes the effect of the instrument's natural winding system.

“Buttstedt's *Fugue in e* has constantly repeated notes which shake the wind. It makes its own tremulant. This is a small organ, but its possibilities are never exhausted.”

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