

## New organ for First Lutheran Lorain continues Boe & Brombaugh legacy

by Daniel Hathaway



The staff and parishioners of Lorain's First Lutheran Church must have found images of the burning of Notre-Dame de Paris last April especially poignant. In August of 2014, arson reduced their sanctuary to rubble, taking with it the church's stained glass windows and its historically important organ built by John Brombaugh in 1970.

On Sunday, August 25, nearly five years to the day after that conflagration, the church will formally inaugurate a [new instrument](#) by Paul Fritts of Tacoma, Washington in a 3:00 pm recital by Katelyn Emerson. The recitalist, who graduated from Oberlin in 2015 with degrees in organ performance and French and is now based in Stuttgart, Germany, will play a varied program of music by Lübeck, J.S. Bach, Muffat, Bridge,

Brahms, and Franck, as well as the premiere of a commissioned work by Aaron David Miller. The recital is free.

Music director Brian Wentzel said in a recent telephone conversation that working on the project of a new sanctuary and organ has been a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. "It's one that I never imagined I'd have. But it's been very fulfilling, and a joy to work with Paul Fritts and his crew. I'm very pleased with the result."

Based on the experience of the Lorain congregation, French president Emmanuel Macron might need a reality check on his pledge to rebuild Notre-Dame in five years: it took that amount of time just to plan, build, and install the Fritts organ. That process was complicated by the special nature of the instrument that perished in the fire — an experiment in replicating historical instruments in Europe that featured

mechanical action, pipes with high lead content, flexible winding, solid wood cases, and unequal temperaments.

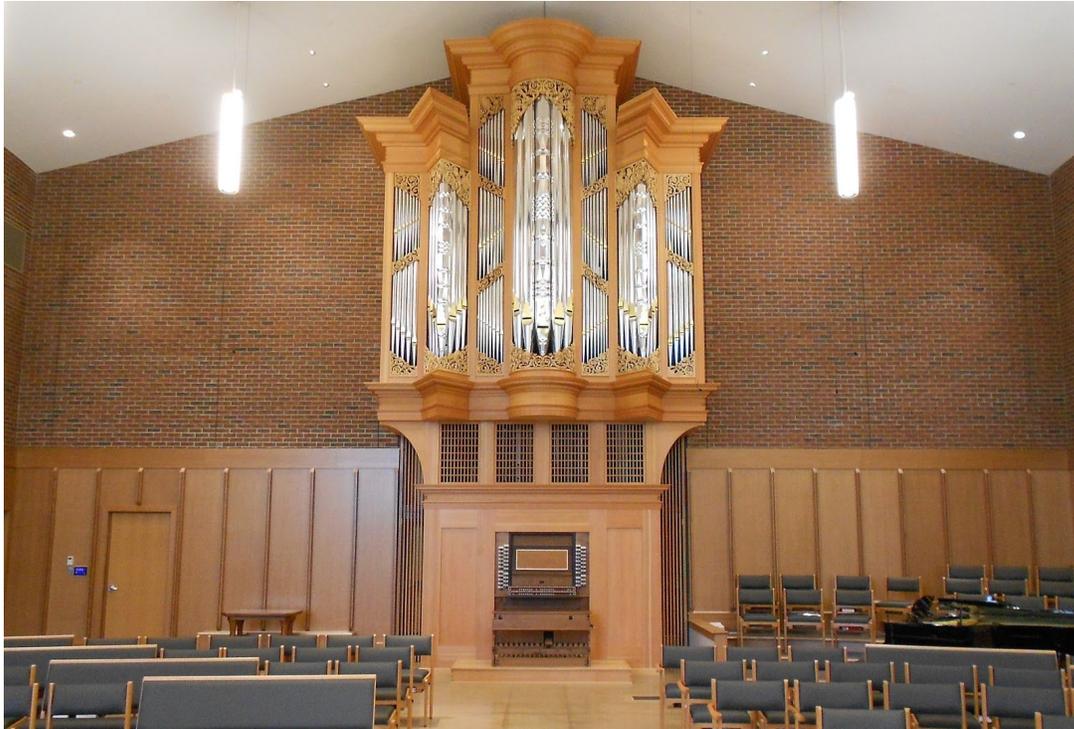


John Brombaugh was commissioned to build his 1970 organ for First Lutheran under the watch of David Boe, who taught at Oberlin from 1962 to 2008 and served as Music Director of the church for 40 of those years. Boe described the ethos of that instrument in an article for *CrossAccent*. [[Link to pdf](#)]



Wentzel took the responsibility to see that the ruined instrument was succeeded by one with equally high aspirations. “Luckily, the congregation had great foresight in insuring the old building and its contents, so there was never a question of whether the organ would be replaced. We formed a committee and I polled every organist I knew. We arrived at a fairly clear consensus about three different builders. The committee went around and visited two or three instruments by each of them, then we had them submit proposals and come to Lorain for a face-to-face meeting. It was pretty clear that Paul Fritts was the best choice for us. All his instruments were consistently great and reliable, and the waiting time was not too long.”

It was also important to Wentzel that the organ builder be part of the design team for the new building, which is located across the way from the old church complex. Accordingly, a contract was signed less than a year after the fire.



Like the Brombaugh it replaces, the Fritts instrument deploys its extensive resources over only two manuals. During the design process, Wentzel said he wanted to remain hands-off as much as possible in respect for the builder, although he did request the inclusion of a couple of stops that he admired from the earlier instrument, including a *Zimbelstern* that had been a congregational favorite. “They would ask me, ‘Are you going to use the little bells today?’”



The choice of a dedicatory recitalist was easy for Wentzel. “I have a wonderful memory of hearing Katelyn Emerson play a Bach trio sonata on the Silbermann-style organ at Peace Community Church in Oberlin. She was so self-assured and musical that it made me sit up and take notice.” Emerson’s rise on the international recital circuit has been so phenomenal that her limited availability made a late-August recital date necessary. “That was the only time we could fit her in,” he said.

The commissioned work on the program by Aaron David Miller, one of Wentzel's favorite composers, is courtesy of First Lutheran's endowment fund for special projects. "His music is classic, modern, rhythmic, colorful, and fun to play — everything you could want in an 8-9 minute piece." Wentzel will perform the work himself later this season as the dedication festivities continue. A February concert by Oberlin professor Jonathan Moyer will feature J.S. Bach's *Clavierübung III*, or *German Organ Mass*, a monumental collection of chorales that also figured in the dedication of the Brombaugh instrument more than four decades ago.

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