

# The John Brombaugh Organ (1970) at First Lutheran Church, Lorain, Ohio

David Boe

THE YEAR 2000 marks the thirtieth anniversary of the completion of John Brombaugh's organ for First Lutheran Church in Lorain, Ohio. At the time of its design and installation, this instrument represented a significant departure from the mechanical action organs, most of them from European makers, which were being built and imported in the late sixties and early seventies.

First Lutheran's commitment to a new instrument grew out of the need to replace a tired and inadequate instrument, installed in chambers at the front of the church when the sanctuary was built in 1924. A decision was made to place a new mechanical action organ, together with seating for the choirs, at the rear of the church. I had come to know John Brombaugh through his brother, Mark, who was studying organ at the Oberlin Conservatory at the time. This led to my playing the dedication recital on a small one-manual organ in a Lutheran church in Ithaca, New York, an instrument designed and constructed by John during his apprenticeships with Fritz Noack and Charles Fisk. Subsequently he went to Hamburg to work with Rudolph von Beckerath. It was during this period that a contract was signed with the understanding that John would return to the States and start his own company. In the meantime, he had the opportunity during his year abroad to study in detail the historic organs of the North German tradition. A chance meeting with the young Harald Vogel, who shared his enthusiasm for this tradition, was the beginning of a long and productive collaboration.

As the design for the new organ was being

developed, John Brombaugh became increasingly desirous of capturing the sheer beauty of sound that he experienced in historic instruments such as the Arp Schnitger Rückpositiv in Der Aa-Kerk in Groningen. As his respect for the old masters grew, so did his resolve to understand the intricacies of their techniques, a quest not unlike the effort of violinmakers to replicate the art of a Stradivarius or Guarneri 'del Jesù'. The resulting plan for First Lutheran reflects this strong historical orientation and was to become an important first step in the development and maturing of Brombaugh's art.

Brombaugh gave considerable thought to the acoustical qualities of the casework. Because of the non-resonant characteristics of plywood, the case is made almost entirely of solid wood, as are the tableboards and other parts of the windchests. The design of the case and the embossed pipes are based on geometrical proportion methods going back to the Gothic period. The pipework utilizes metal thicknesses heavier than were to be found up to this time in modern organs. The low tin alloy (at 30 percent) was similarly unusual for its time, although in later instruments Brombaugh and other builders would utilize a nearly pure lead composition in some voices. In his efforts to achieve the dark and "vocale" sound he heard in the principal pipes of early times, he found himself using higher wind pressures and higher cutups than were to be found in the neo-baroque organs of the day. The old builders had hammered their pipe metal, a technique ignored by modern builders, except for Ahrend and Brunzema in Germany and Metzler in Switzerland,

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who had recently revived the technique. Eager to learn what hammering would do for the sound, he gave detailed instructions to his pipemaker, Jacques Stinkens, for hammering the Great Octave 2'. (On subsequent instruments he would make his own pipes and all of them would be hammered.)

A major design issue was the wind system. In 1969, Charles Fisk's highly provocative article, "The Organ's Breath of Life" (*The Diapason*, September 1969), argued that much of the charm in the sound of early instruments lay in the resilient quality of their wind systems. Fisk and Brombaugh simultaneously developed the first modern wind systems using large wedge bellows and no steadying devices—Fisk for his op. 51 in Souderton, Pa., and Brombaugh for Lorain.

Another challenging issue was that of an appropriate temperament. Historic non-equal temperaments had been used in a very small number of restorations of old instruments, but to Brombaugh's knowledge none had been used in a modern instrument in this country, with the possible exception of chamber instruments using mean-tone tuning. Flentrop's restoration of the 1671 Pieter Backer/1785 Bätz organ in Medemblik, Holland returned that instrument to its original Werckmeister temperament, based on the existing pipe lengths. Since the Lorain instrument was to have the tops soldered fast on covered pipes and open pipes cut to length, any decision regarding temperament would be a nearly permanent commitment. Encouraged by the way in which the sound of Medemblik was enhanced by its temperament, Brombaugh decided to use Werckmeister temperament.

A compromise with early building techniques became necessary with regard to the action. Because of the limited height of the sanctuary, an organ with the desired Principal 16' required some offset bass pipes and a detached keydesk. Electric solenoid stop action greatly simplified this arrangement. Even though the horizontal distance from keydesk to case is substantial, and the tracker angles resulting from the offset keydesk position complex, the action is light and responsive. Although not a suspended action, the trackers are in constant tension. In thirty years, not a single key depth or leveling adjustment has been necessary.

Principal assistance with this project was provided by George Taylor, who was also involved with the tonal finishing. The carving of the keyboard nosings and gold-leafing throughout were the work of Herman Greunke, who designed and executed the pipe shades, which are symbolic of the coming of the

Holy Spirit on Pentecost with the tongues of fire and the dove of peace. Others working on this project were Gerald Lakes, Jeremy Cooper, David Shaffer, Dan Littmann, Scott Shafer, and Norman Ryan.

Of course, the use of historic techniques such as unequal temperament, flexible wind, resonant casework, hammered metal, and high cutups would mean little if the musical result were not significant. This instrument has a compelling and beautiful voice. It is particularly well suited to the organ literature, liturgy, and hymns and chorales of the Lutheran tradition. It inspires and leads the congregation in song and complements beautifully the singing of the choirs.

Following this project, John Brombaugh went on to other instruments which more closely defined his artistic personality, among them the 1973 organ for Ashland Avenue Baptist Church in Toledo, Op. 9, and the 1976 organ for Central Lutheran Church, Eugene, Oregon, Op. 19. This church was to become Brombaugh's home congregation following the move of his shop from a rural setting west of Middletown, Ohio to Eugene in 1977. Over the years, a number of his shop colleagues have gone on to establish successful organ building firms of their own. Besides George Taylor, they include, among others, John Boody, Bruce Shull (who later joined Taylor and Boody), Michael Bigelow, Charles Ruggles, and Munetaka Yokota. One can point to countless instruments, many of them in Lutheran churches, that directly or indirectly reflect the influence of Brombaugh's own work.

The vote of the congregation in Lorain to enter into a contract for a new organ was taken without any funds in hand or pledged. A few weeks following the vote, a woman from Cleveland, Thelma Melin Schumann, who had no prior connection with the congregation, arrived unannounced and introduced herself to the Pastor, Robert Boettger. She indicated an interest in providing a memorial to her parents, who had been members of the congregation many years earlier. When shown John Brombaugh's drawing of the proposed organ, she immediately pledged a gift covering 60 percent of the contract price.

The builders' plaque on the rear of the main casework states: "In a world filled with man-made strife, hatred, and ugliness, all of us connected with the making of this instrument hope that it will edify those who see and hear it and point their hearts and minds once again back to the Source of our salvation, and all Goodness and Beauty. And in any event All Glory be to God Alone!"



Organ by John Brombaugh, First Lutheran Church, Lorain, Ohio.  
(Photograph by Larry Lathwell)

First Lutheran Church, Lorain, Ohio  
John Brombaugh (1970)

Registers given in order of their location on the windchests from front to back.

**Pedal**

Chest located in center of upper main casework.

Praestant	16	Ten unpolished copper pipes located in tower to right of main casework, rest in facade.
Octave	8	Ten pipes common with Gt. Praestant 8.
Octave	4	
Nachthorn	2	
Mixture	VI	
Posaune	16	
Trumpet	8	

**Great**

Chests located on both sides of Pedal in upper main casework.

Praestant	8	In facade, doubled from c' to g'''
Bourdon	16	Oak, lowest ten form side columns of lower case.
Rohrflöte	8	
Spitzflöte	4	
Nasard	2 2/3	
Gemshorn	2	
Octave	4	
Quinte	2 2/3	
Octave	2	Hammered metal
Tierce	1 3/5	
Mixture	IV	
Scharff	III	
Trumpet	8	

**Positive**

Chest located in lower main casework.

Praestant	4	In facade
Gedackt	8	
Flute	4	
Larigot	1 1/3	
Octave	2	
Sesquialtera	II	
Scharff	IV	
Dulcian	8	

Tremulant to the whole organ with two speeds.

Hinged bellows.

Couplers: Great/Pedal, Positive/Pedal, Positive/Great.

Manuals: 56 notes, C-g'''

Pedals: 30 notes, C-f'

Front pipes: 75% tin, burnished

All remaining metal pipes: 33% tin, planed.

Tops of all covered stops are soldered fast.

**David Boe** is Professor of Organ and Harpsichord at the Conservatory of Music at Oberlin College. Joining the faculty of the Conservatory in 1962, he was appointed Associate Dean in 1974 and became Dean of the Conservatory in 1976, a position he held until mid-1990. Throughout the period of his Deanship he continued to perform and teach. He serves also as Organist and Director of Music at First Lutheran Church in Lorain, Ohio.

Boe received the B.A. degree magna cum laude from St. Olaf College and was a University Fellow at Syracuse University where he received the Mus. M. degree, studying organ with Arthur Poister. On a Fulbright grant, he went on to study with Helmut Walcha at the Staatliche Hochschule für Musik in Frankfurt, Germany. He returned to Europe in 1968 to study with the Dutch harpsichordist and organist, Gustav Leonhardt. On subsequent trips to Europe, he has appeared in concerts and on the radio, and has done research on North European instruments and early keyboard temperaments. He appears frequently in recital in this country and has recorded on the Gasparo label. He appeared on the nationally televised program "The Wind at One's Fingertips."

Boe is a member of Phi Beta Kappa, and served a four-year term as National President of Pi Kappa Lambda, the national music honor society. From 1981 until 1987 he served as elected Secretary of the National Association of Schools of Music and has continued to serve that organization as a consultant. He has chaired music accreditation teams or served as a consultant to the music programs at over 35 institutions. He has served as Vice President of the American Organ Academy and is currently on the Board of the Westfield Center. On leave from the Oberlin Conservatory during the 1990–91 school year, he served in the spring semester as Visiting Professor at Florida State University in Tallahassee. For the fall semester of the 1991–92 academic year, he was a visiting professor at the University of Notre Dame.