

The guiding figure in the selection of the new instrument was Dr. Henry Fusner, who became organist-choirmaster at First Presbyterian in 1970 and served until 1989. Dr. Fusner came to Nashville from Church of the Covenant (Presbyterian) in Cleveland, Ohio, where he had just overseen the rebuilding and enlargement of the church's historic 1932 Aeolian-Skinner organ, rededicated in 1959.

In Cleveland, Dr. Fusner had known many historic organs, particularly those of Ernest Skinner and the 1957 Beckerath at Trinity Evangelical Lutheran. The Beckerath instrument reflected a growing interest in the principles of organ building utilized during the baroque era (the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries). Baroque builders used tracker (mechanical) action; their pipes were placed on slider chests and in wooden cases (reflective boxes); they spoke directly into the long axes of their buildings, instead of into a chancel or side aisle.

After much study, and after listening to the new tracker organ just installed in Wightman Chapel at Scarritt College, the organ committee of First Presbyterian Church, Nashville established certain priorities based on the following principles:

- 1) The acoustical environment for both choir and organ must be one that allows for the natural development of a sound that is bright and alive.
- 2) Both choir and organ should be placed on the long axis of the building.
- 3) A builder should be selected who would observe the principles of organ building utilized during the "golden age" or baroque organ building.

The committee consulted with several builders from the United States, Canada, and abroad and selected Rudolf von Beckerath (1907-1976) to build the new instrument. Born in Munich, then raised in Hamburg, Beckerath had studied organ building in France in the 1920s, because of the large numbers of baroque instruments still found there. After World War II he established his own company in Hamburg. His enterprise observed its twenty-fifth anniversary during the installation of First Presbyterian's organ. By the early 1970s, Beckerath was one of the best-known organ builders in the world. His instruments remain known for what Henry Fusner characterized as "their friendly, singing quality." The exact placement of the new organ stirred considerable congregational debate. The new organ was originally to be placed at the building's liturgical east end, behind the communion table. However, a close congregational vote caused the instrument to be placed laterally (to allow ample room for the choir) on an extension of the gallery, which was built out to allow the organ cases to stand completely within the room and not behind the Greek entablature.

All acoustically absorbent materials were removed from walls and ceiling. Improved acoustics and proper placement of the instrument permitted the builder to use low wind pressures. This in turn allowed for relatively little if any "nicking" of the windways of the pipes, producing a sound rich in harmonics. Certain acoustical features of the room, however, could not be easily amended. The ceiling, suspended rather than weight bearing, although reflecting sound, does not allow lower frequencies to develop. Beckerath sought to compensate for the absorption of lower registers by the increased scale of the bass pipes.

The organ, built of the finest materials, is an instrument of very high workmanship. The metal pipes are made with an unusually high percentage of tin, the pipe metal being a type of pewter. The burnished facade pipes are of seventy-percent tin. The great 17th-century German builder Arp Schnitger used pipes with high tin content when the congregation could afford it. The wooden pipes are of oak and mahogany, and the wind chests were made from the finest,

seasoned American Douglas fir wood (Beckerath believed that American wood would be most at home in the American climate).

The interior of the console is of pear wood, with manual keys of Madagascar granadilla, a wood used in oboes and clarinets. In each division, the stops are organized by families and placed in stop jambns on either side of the keyboards. Combination pistons (capture type) are placed under each manual. Thirty workers in the Beckerath shop contributed painstaking labor to the building of the instrument. Rudolph von Beckerath and his head voicer, Mr. Timm Schopp, tonally finished all the pipes during their installation in Nashville during the summer of 1974. The organ case is of limba wood that has been painted an antique white with decorative moldings in gold. The various divisions are laid out as follows: The Great Case is the large central one at the top. This division produces a full, notable tone. The Rückpositiv stands at the gallery rail and in appearance is half the size of the Great. This division is lighter and more brilliant in tone and acts as a foil to the Great. The Swell Division is in the large louvered case standing behind the Great. The organist opens and closes the louvers to alter the volume. The large Pedal Case, displaying the sixteen foot Principals, stands to the right.

Though sometimes described as a German baroque organ, the First Presbyterian Beckerath is in reality a versatile, eclectic instrument. The Rückpositiv is classic German, but with a French Cromorne. The Great principales are modeled after French examples (they could easily be called ‘Montres’, as on French organs). The Great reeds are modeled after those on an Arp Schnitger instrument which Beckerath and Fusner heard outside Hamburg. The Swell (unknown in the baroque era) provides versatile accompaniment for choir and soloists. Though its construction techniques derive from the baroque ‘golden age,’ the First Presbyterian Beckerath was intended as an instrument for “our time.” As Beckerath wrote: “The classic organ or the baroque organ is no longer possible except through an imitative return to the past. Our time is neither classic nor baroque. The vitality of a modern instrument demands instead the translation of the spirit of past greatness into contemporary forms.”

Dr. Fusner played the dedicatory service on Sunday evening October 27, 1974. Norman Lockwood was commissioned to write a choral setting of Psalm 19, and Dr. Fusner played a recital of Bach, Schroeder, Clérambault, Duruflé, and Vierne. From the distance of three decades, we can now see the organ as part of the great early-music revival of the 1960s and 1970s. But, of course, the instrument is more than a historical phenomenon. It transcends its era, for it is a great work of art and artistry. It is as von Beckerath’s son once said of it, “an instrument for artists.”

All who had a hand in its planning and installation – the builder, the organ committee, Henry Fusner – intended First Presbyterian’s organ to sing, and it has done so gloriously for more than a quarter-century. It has eloquently given voice to God’s people: it has mourned the dead; it has welcomed the newly baptized; it has expressed the longing for the Savior; it has sung the blessed Birth; it has marked the solemnities of Lent; it has voiced the blazing joy of Easter. The organs built by Schnitger, Silbermann, and Cliquot that the young Rudolph von Beckerath studied in the 1920s are still played after three centuries.

May his Nashville masterpiece, built upon the same principles, lead the praise of the people of God for centuries to come.