

BIRMINGHAM UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

BIRMINGHAM, OHIO

Organ By Charles M. Ruggles Pipe Organs
Cover Feature

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During the American Revolution, British troops led by Benedict Arnold burned out several Connecticut towns. In 1792 the Connecticut Legislature, in an act of recompense, awarded the citizens of those towns 500,000 acres of land in the Connecticut Western Reserve. This area, known as the Firelands, is located in northeastern Ohio. The village of Birmingham lies at the eastern edge of the Firelands.

By 1840 there were five churches in Birmingham; today only the Methodist Church remains. The building stood unchanged until 1908, but has since gained a basement, a Sunday school wing, and a youth and community center. It has also been remodeled several times, both inside and out. What started out as a small meeting house in 1840 has grown into an exciting complex for community outreach.

Part of the church's growth includes the 1948 and 1968 remodelings following the designs of the late Dr. Clarence Ward, professor emeritus of fine arts at Oberlin College. Professor Ward was not the first affiliate of Oberlin College to come to the aid of the Birmingham church, however. In 1911, after being served by circuit preachers for many years, the church was given approval to have a local pastor. A Congregational student from Oberlin College Seminary, E. H. Johnson, was secured. This necessitated a parsonage, the land for which was donated by Lynds Jones, a Birmingham resident and professor at Oberlin College.

Otto Schoepfle, a resident of Birmingham whose family has been associated with the Methodist Church for several generations, served as one of the organists of the church until 1970. At that time, Peter Picerno, a student at the Oberlin Conservatory, was hired as the music director and organist. Since that time, through the generosity of Mr. Schoepfle, the Birmingham church was provided two internships in church music for organ and voice students of the Oberlin Conservatory. Brian E. Vaughn, a voice student of Howard Hatton, is the present choir director. The organist is Corydon J. Carlson, a student of William Porter.

It had been Mr. Schoepfle's dream for a long time to have a pipe organ in the Birmingham church. Once again he turned to Oberlin College. On the advice of David Boe, dean of the Oberlin College Conservatory of Music and my former organ professor, I was contacted by Mr. Schoepfle in the fall of 1980. I was instantly intrigued with the prospect of building an organ for this historic church, since my great, great, great-grandfather surveyed the Firelands. The close ties

of the congregation with my alma mater lent additional appeal to the project. As consultants, David Boe and William Porter were most generous with their time and ideas for the endeavor.

It was decided that the optimum location for the new organ would be the small alcove adjacent to the lectern. The congregation wanted to keep the original symmetry of the chancel, so the pillar and wall to the left of the organ were retained. The original ceiling height of the alcove was restored and the entire sanctuary repainted.

The tonal concept of the organ began with the need for a fine plenum sound for congregational singing. The chorus is based on a Principal 8' and includes an Octave 2', which fills out the gap between the Principals 8' and 4' combination and full plenum, allowing for a gradual dynamic crescendo. As an organist, I have often encountered this gap in smaller instruments, and find it frustrating when accompanying hymns. Complementing the chorus with a rich roundness is a Rohrflöte 8'. It is voiced to function as a quiet solo color or accompanimental stop. The Trumpet, which is duplexed mechanically to the Pedal, is full and smooth for use with the plenum, but has a degree of brilliance for solos. The Sesquialtera is a treble stop, allowing it to be accompanied by principal stops on the same manual if desired. It adds an exciting crown to the full plenum and augments the treble of the Trumpet. It has a small lever allowing the selection of c' or c-sharp' for the lowest note, making cantus use for various national styles possible.

Such a small organ might well have been a one-manual instrument. However, it was determined that even a small Brustwerk with doors would be extremely useful for choir accompaniment, as well as allowing for the performance of substantially more of the solo literature. The wooden Flutes 8' and 4' are gently voiced and especially suited to this small room. The Blockflöte 4' is charming as an open 8' color when played an octave lower. With the addition of the Principal 2', the division provides a pleasant contrast to the Great chorus. The Pedal, although small, offers a solid foundation to the organ, especially with its duplexed Trumpet and both manual couplers.

When Mr. Schoepfle, the donor of the organ, asked me to play the dedicatory recital, I gladly accepted and suggested my two assistants perform as well. They are both graduates of the Oberlin College Conservatory of Music: Greg Sparks was a student of William Porter and Kevin McClure a student of Haskell Thomson. We offered the accompanying program to demonstrate some of the capabilities of the new instrument.

While this modest-sized instrument bears resemblance to northern European organs from the sixteenth

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through eighteenth century, it is by no means a historic copy. It is limited to a degree in playing certain large-scale compositions and some specific national styles, principally because of its size. However, a considerable variety of literature is quite successfully performable if one uses imagination when registering. To illustrate this we programmed our dedicatory recital to include nineteenth- and twentieth-century pieces as well as traditional early works. I still believe a solid principal chorus with no gaps should be the basis for any sized instrument; however, the way in which I would approach the tonal design of a much larger instrument, in a different musical environment might vary considerably from that which was achieved here.

With the exception of the metal pipes, the organ was constructed entirely in our new three-story, passive-solar workshop outside Cleveland, Ohio. The cherry Gedackt 8' and cedar Blockflöte 4' are based on two stops of the seventeenth-century north German organbuilder Berendt Huss. Both stops and the poplar Subbass 16' were made by Greg Sparks. The case, bench, pedalboard and carved pipe shades were constructed of cherry provided by Otto Schoepfle. The tree grew on his land in Birmingham, was cut into lumber and carefully air-dried for nearly twenty years before being incorporated into the new organ. The music rack inset is a South American wood called ipe. The stop-knobs are hand-turned Brazilian rosewood with bone tips. The manual naturals are covered with bone which we prepared in our shop. It has been scored and beveled. The sharps are of grenadil, the stop labels of boxwood and the key cheeks of walnut.

The organ is 16 feet tall and fits snugly into the place for which it was designed. It speaks out clearly to all parts of the room, which seats approximately 180 people. With plaster ceiling and walls and a hardwood floor, the church has just enough life to allow the organ to bloom in its intimate setting. There is no carpeting, which is so detrimental to congregational singing and a lively organ sound, under the pews.

The organ was formally dedicated on February 26, 1984. It was enthusiastically received and the recital recorded for radio broadcast at a later date. Further dedicatory events include recitals, beginning in the fall of 1984, by David Boe, William Porter and past organists of the Birmingham United Methodist Church. In November 1984, the organ will be featured on "Organ Masterpieces," a weekly broadcast over WCLV, Cleveland's fine arts radio station. I will be playing the program to be aired. It is our hope, as the builders of this instrument, that it will glorify God and enrich the congregation and community in which it stands for many generations to come.

CHARLES RUGGLES

RECITAL

HYMN No. 49 "Now thank we all our God" (Nun danket)

Salve Regina Pieter Cornet
(c. 1560-c. 1625)
Salve
Ad te clamamus
Eia ergo
O clemens
Pro fine

How Brightly Shines the Morning Anonymous
(c. 1610, from the
Lynar Manuscript)
Star (5 variations)

My Soul, Now Praise Thy Michael Praetorius
(c. 1571-1621)
Maker (2 variations)

GREG SPARKS

Praeludium in E minor Nicolaus Bruhns
(1655-1697)
Prelude, Fugue and Variation César Franck
(1822-1890)
Sketch in D-flat Major Robert Schumann
(1810-1856)
Jubilate William Mathias
(b. 1934)

KEVIN McCLURE

Fifteen Pieces for organ founded Marcel Dupré
(1886-1971)
on antiphons
Antiphon III: I am black but comely, O ye
daughters of Jerusalem
Antiphon V: How fair and how pleasant art thou.
Ave Maris Stella III: So now as we journey, aid
our weak endeavor.
Prelude and Fugue in E-flat Major J.S. Bach
(BWV 552) (1685-1750)

CHARLES M. RUGGLES

Charles M. Ruggles Pipe Organs

Charles Ruggles: Design, voicing, casework, pipe shades, keyboards, windchests, assembly
Greg Sparks: Casework, pedalboard, wood pipe making and voicing, action, bellows and wind system, assembly
Kevin McClure: Casework, action, windchests, pre-voicing, assembly
Cynthia Bush-Ruggles: Business, public relations, gilding