

## **MUSIC AT FIRST CHURCH: Its history and its character**

**By Nancy Gilson Braverman**

From its very beginning in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, First Congregational Church United Church of Christ Columbus has made beautiful music. That high-quality music has been a hallmark of this magnificent and energetic church in downtown Columbus.

For more than 160 years, the finest sacred classical music – what many would call traditional – has been the foundation of the church’s music. Two pipe organs, excellent choirs and the rigorous and demanding work of its ministers of music as well as an enthusiastic singing congregation have ensured that all First Church music is as beautiful as the gothic revival cathedral itself.

The Rev. Dr. Tim Ahrens, senior minister since 2000, describes the music at First Church as “awe inspiring” and “transcendent.”

“There is a movement from earth to heaven,” he said. “The music carries us into some transcendent space and the cross grounds us.”

### **EARLY HISTORY**

In 1852, a year when Millard Fillmore was president of the United States, Harriet Beecher Stowe published “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” and Jenny Lind, the “Swedish Nightingale,” performed in Columbus, the First Congregational Church of Columbus was born.

The church, then known as Third Presbyterian Church, was located in a frame chapel on Third Street and Lynn Alley. Despite its Presbyterian name and heritage, the church was filled with First Congregational spirit and abolitionist fervor. With 42 original members, the little church began to prosper and grow. In 1856 members unanimously voted to change the name to First Congregational Church of Columbus. In 1857, the church relocated to its new building at 73 E. Broad Street and in 1931, built and dedicated the gothic revival cathedral, today’s church, at 444 E. Broad Street.

Rick Sayre, a member of First Church for nearly 50 years and an organist himself, has studied and is the foremost expert on the history of First Church.

“When that first church started – the little wooden one (on Third Street and Lynn Alley), they talked about paying the musicians,” he said. “That was unheard of back then. But (the members), they thought, you pay the clergy, you pay the musicians. So, from the very beginning, music was considered a very, very important part of the church.”

Music in the early years of First Church was described in the pamphlet "The Music of the Church" on the church's golden jubilee in 1902 by Mrs. Abram Brown, one of the church's early organists (1894-1902). The choir of the church's first decade, she wrote, was "usually a small band of volunteer singers," with a director, or a 'leader,' as he was then called." At some point, the leader was paid a small fee, maybe \$50 a year. Eventually, the fee was raised to about \$100 but it also needed to cover a soprano and an alto singer, usually from the family of the leader. While there were a handful of early music leaders, for the most part, Mr. M.D. Gray took charge of the music and with his wife, a soprano, served as the choir singers. Mr. Gray served from 1853 until 1862.

Mrs. Brown also wrote a later pamphlet, "History of the First Congregational Church of Columbus." She had interviewed surviving original members of the church and was able to describe the "venerable figure of the first chorister," Mr. M.D. Gray who, in the 1850s, "without the aid of string or pipe, raised the tune from the queer little fork in his vest pocket and faithfully drilled the volunteer choir in the singers' seats."

In 1859, the first instrument at the church, a cabinet organ, was purchased. The first person to perform on this organ was a man and the second, a young woman with several years of musical training. "Her youth and lack of avoirdupois seemed to be against her," Mrs. Brown wrote. "One of the brethren exclaimed when her name was proposed that he'd 'rather have Mr. Blank's old boots than a girl!' It is recorded that he changed his mind, later, when the girl pulled all the (organ) stops and flung wide the swells."

That little cabinet organ, or pump organ, is an antique now and can still be found at First Church in the choir room. Sometime after the 1950s, it was used to accompany a children's singing group in a Sunday service, according to Rick Sayre. Organist Dene Barnard said he also remembers playing this organ.

In the 1860s, a choir gallery was built in the rear of the auditorium and a pipe organ ("of moderate size and fair quality of tone" according to Mrs. Brown) was purchased. In the 1880s, the church at 73 E. Broad St. was renovated and expanded; likewise, the pipe organ was renovated.

In the early 1860s, John S. Porter from Boston was hired as organist and he and Mr. and Mrs. J.C. Woods, also from Boston, took charge of the music. According to Mrs. Brown, Mrs. Woods was the soprano and chief soloist of the newly organized choir of about 25 voices. At this point, Mrs. Brown wrote, the class of music and excellence of its performance was advanced. However, there is no documentation that the large choir continued for very long.

In the 1870s and 1880s, music directors and organists came and went somewhat frequently. At least two young female organists resigned when they married. From 1873 to 1880, Edmund Mattoon was the regular organist, working with a quartet of singers and a small auxiliary chorus, later disbanded.

So, until the 1880s, music at First Church was almost always provided by a quartet of singers, sometimes with an adjunct chorus.

In his book “Steps Toward a Singing Church” (1948), Donald D. Kettring, who served as First Church’s fourth organist and music director, discussed these quartets: “It was obvious from the first that among church quartets, (those at First Church) could be considered among the finest. All the members and soloists were musicians of high professional caliber who enjoyed a fine and deserved reputation in the community and central Ohio. They were in great demand as concert and oratorio artists ... In many respects, a quartet can become a kind of church symbol. It brings together a musical competency, a caliber of professional musicianship, and individual solo capabilities, which can become a matter of church-wide recognition and pride. This was the kind of quartet and quartet tradition maintained in First Church through the years.”

In 1873, a quartet was formed with Miss Emma Lathrop (later Mrs. Emma Lathrop Lewis, who had studied music in Italy) as soprano and director. This quartet, according to Mrs. Brown, “did brilliant service for a number of years – the first half of the fourth decade – (and eventually, the early) years of Dr. Gladden’s pastorate.” Dr. Washington Gladden, First Congregational Church’s most famous pastor, served for 36 years, from 1882 to 1918.

Between the quartet and the next form of a choir, young singers were often trained in choral work by Dr. Gladden who, Mrs. Brown wrote, “had always taken a great and intelligent and sometimes active interest in the music of the church.”

As mentioned above, the church building was renovated in 1888 and the two-manual organ was renovated and improved. Delivering the music in this new period of the church was a solo quartet with an occasional adjunct chorus, a group of between 12 to 20 trained voices directed by William H. Lott, superintendent of music in the Columbus schools. He was also the tenor in the quartet. Organist was Herman Ebeling, an esteemed musician much admired by members of the church. Ebeling secured prominent local soloists for the quartet.

Throughout this period Dr. Gladden, as Mrs. Brown wrote, was “a most valuable influence in the music of the church. His musical intelligence and judgment, particularly in the field of sacred music, and his excellent ideas of the proper sphere of music in the church, have done much to guide and uplift this part of the service. For the music of the church must be an integral part of its worship.”

In his research of Dr. Gladden, Rev. Tim Ahrens discovered an intriguing anecdote. Dr. Gladden apparently wanted to add choir director to his responsibilities. He took charge of the choir, but his work apparently did not find favor with the singers. After only a few weeks, they walked out in mutiny and original order was restored.

While Dr. Gladden may be best known throughout the country for his leadership in social justice causes, it is significant to note that Gladden himself was a musician and the author of many hymns, including “O Master Let Me Walk With Thee.” In the church’s choir room hang Gladden’s hand-written lyrics to his hymn and a 1915 photo of Gladden posing with an all-boy choir.

Also in the choir room are photographs of the church's organists from 1894 on, beginning with Mrs. Abram Brown.

## **THE FIRST CHURCH ORGANISTS/MUSIC DIRECTORS**

1894-1902: Mrs. Abram Brown

1914-1924: Rowland W. Dunham

1925-1944: Glenn Grant Grabill

1944-1948: Donald D. Kettring

1948-1950: Theodore R. Cook

1950-1968: Edward H. Johe

1969-1973: John L. Schaefer

1973-2003: G. Dene Barnard

2003-2008: Timothy E. Smith

2008-2009: Marti Rideout (interim for 16 months); 2012 (interim six months)

2009-2012: James E. Bobb

2012-2022: Kevin Jones

There is a gap of about a dozen years between the service of Mrs. Brown and her successor, organist **Rowland W. Dunham**, who served from 1914 to 1924. Dunham, well known in national organist circles, worked locally with Broad Street Methodist Church organists to establish the Columbus chapter of the American Guild of Organists. He was also the author of the pamphlet "Pedal Mastery – a Manual for Organists," which included this rather pithy quote:

"Organ playing involves two basic techniques: that of the hands on the manuals, and that of the feet on the pedals. The first depends upon a training in piano playing at least up to a medium difficulty. Unfortunately, this background is usually insufficient and inefficient for more than minimum needs. More will be said about the fingers later."

Succeeding Dunham as First Church organist was **Glenn Grant Grabill**, serving from 1925 to 1944. Grabill was head of the music department and an instructor in organ and piano at Otterbein College (later Otterbein University). With his wife, Grabill wrote the college's alma mater, "The Otterbein Love Song." During his years at First Church, the Gothic Revival cathedral was built and dedicated. The time seemed prime for a larger choir.

"Obviously, they anticipated a bigger choir when they built the church, the sacristy and the original choir room," Sayre said. (The original choir room was the small room currently used to prepare communion, located to the west of the altar.)

Shortly after the new church was dedicated on Dec. 6, 1931, the Kimball organ, a gift from Alice Robbins Martin in memory of her husband, Walter Henry Martin, was installed on Dec. 13, 1931. (See **ORGANS AT FIRST CHURCH** for a discussion of the instruments.)

Grabill, who had served in a part-time capacity at the church, left after nearly two decades. First Church now wanted a full-time organist and music director. **Donald D. Kettring** was hired as minister of music and served First Church during the World War II years.

Kettring was the author of the aforementioned 1948 book “Steps Toward a Singing Church,” in which he described how he built and administered choirs at the churches he served. The book includes several pages describing music and acoustics at First Church.

During Kettring’s tenure, the First Church minister was Rev. Boynton Merrill, who wrote poetry and loved art and music. Martha Worth, who spent her childhood years in First Church when Rev. Merrill was minister, believes that he was greatly responsible for an increased emphasis on music at First Church.

During his first week as minister in 1943, Rev. Merrill wrote a letter to the congregation that included this challenge: “You have a beautiful church. We must conspire together to set that beauty free. For when beauty’s wings are spread and beauty’s face is seen, men may not call it God, but in their hearts they know that it is.”

The 1931 cathedral, however, had not been designed with a specific place to accommodate a large choir. Lola Edwards, who celebrated her 99<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2022 and has been a member of First Church since 1947, remembers that Dr. Merrill preferred a quartet to a choir.

Following Kettring, **Theodore R. Cook** was minister of music at First Church from 1948 to 1950. Lola Edwards said that Cook continued working with a quartet of singers in accordance with Dr. Merrill’s preferences.

She also said that Cook “was quite young and I believe he left because he and one of the choir members got married.”

In 1950, **Edward H. Johe** began an 18-year stint as minister of music. He was an organist, composer and arranger with a special affinity for working with youth. Nancy Loy, a member of First Church since she was a child growing up in Upper Arlington, began singing in the Treble Choir for grade school children when she was in third grade in 1965. The choir met on Saturday mornings. (There was another class meeting at the same time – a session on music, art and architecture taught by longtime church leader Arlene Reynolds.) The older children in Treble Choir began learning to ring bells. The Treble Choir sang occasionally in church. At the same time, Johe led a teen or high school choir.

Martha Worth said that at that time, children did not regularly attend the worship services in the sanctuary but had their own worship in the chapel with a piano to accompany their hymns. Only occasionally did they attend services in the sanctuary.

Loy remembers that Johe regularly brought children to look at the Kimball organ while he explained how it functioned.

Following Edward Johe, **John L. Schaefer** was organist and music director from 1969 to 1973. (The list in the choir room states that his service began in 1968, but Schaefer said the year was 1969.)

Schaefer was the organist when the Beckerath organ was installed and began the radio program celebrating that instrument, “An Organ of Our Time,” on WOSU-FM.

He also began to develop the Congregational Concerts series.

Schaefer, who lives in Kansas City, Missouri, and retired in 2016 from his position there as organist at Grace and Holy Trinity Cathedral, returned to First Church to play in the April 24, 2022, “Organist Alumni Gala” concert.

During his time at First Church, Schaefer said one of the highlights was a performance of the Maurice Duruflé Requiem. The composer conducted; his wife, Marie Madeleine, played the organ, and the First Church choir was joined by other downtown Columbus church choirs.

Nancy Loy remembers Schaefer as a young and dynamic choir director who enabled the youth choir to sing some contemporary works such as “Good Morning Starshine” from the musical “Hair.”

Rick Sayre remembers Schaefer as very good organist. His mother donated money for “proper choir robes.” The robes, purchased from England, had been designed for cathedrals without heat and consequently, Sayre said, “they were too hot to wear at First Church.”

The year 1973 marked the beginning of the longest-serving organist and music director to date at First Church – **G. Dene Barnard** who led the church’s music for 30 years until his retirement.

## **THE DENE BARNARD YEARS**

G. Dene Barnard, who turned 90 in 2022, arrived at First Church as organist and choir master in 1973. Born in Canton, Ohio, he began playing the piano at the age of 5. His teacher discovered he had perfect pitch. The church his family attended had an old pipe organ and “I was fascinated,” Barnard said. “I never thought I would be anything else but a church organist.”

Barnard attended Kent State University and Union Theological Seminary in New York. He played recitals throughout the United States and Canada. He has served on college and university faculties and has been active in the American Guild of Organists.

At First Church, Barnard directed the Gallery Choir (adults), the Treble Choir (children) and the First Church Ringers (youth). He also directed a high school chorale, bell ringing classes and an adult bell choir. Barnard declined the title minister of music, preferring to be called the church’s organist and choir master.

He built upon and expanded the Congregational Concerts series, directing concerts and bringing organists from around the world to First Church. These continue to bring audiences and prestige to First Church.

The Congregational Concerts series, said Rev. Ahrens, “has kept the tradition of classical music and organ music alive in this city ... The people who come to the concerts from all over are

usually musically oriented people. These concerts feed the souls of musically gifted and oriented people of all faiths.”

In addition to the concert series, Barnard collaborated with professional musicians throughout Columbus, bringing them to the church for music presented during services and working with them in a variety of concerts and performances.

Barnard continued to host a radio program begun by his predecessor, John L. Schaefer. “An Organ of Our Time,” a 30-minute program that celebrated the Beckerath organ, was aired weekly during the 1970s on WOSU-FM. Barnard would tape performances on the Beckerath and use excerpts for the show. While “An Organ of Our Time” is no longer aired, the Lessons and Carols services are broadcast on WOSU-FM every holiday season.

At First Church, Barnard worked with four senior ministers and more than 20 associate ministers. He continues to be active in church life in his retirement, serving as a substitute organist, performing recitals and offering his support to the ministers of music.

Among the numerous highlights of his years with First Church music, Barnard gave a few examples:

- \* The performance of two French masses for choir and two organs in the 1970s;
- \* A Bach cantata with orchestra in 1975;
- \* Three separate performances of the Faure Requiem;
- \* Two programs of organ concertos presented with Columbus Symphony Conductor Evan Whallon; and,
- \* A program titled “Columbus Brass,” initiated with Richard Early, co-founder of the ProMusica Chamber Orchestra.

Choir members adored Barnard – and still do.

Jan Wade, an alto and choir member for more than 25 years who has sung with four choir directors, described Barnard as “very positive and possessing very high standards.”

The choir also enjoyed Barnard’s sense of humor.

“He had a habit of labeling certain hymns,” Wade said. “He called ‘I Need Thee Every Hour’ the ‘Baker’s Hymn.’ He called the Treble Choir the ‘Trouble Choir.’”

Barnard is passionate about incorporating the congregation in the music of church services. He describes First Church as “probably the most singing church I’ve ever been in ... and singing and friendliness go hand-in-hand, don’t they?”

He believes that First Church is renowned for its “stunningly good music.”

“There’s no specific period that we excel at, just everything – modern music like Bernstein, Poulenc and the classical, the B minor Bach mass ... Very few churches are good enough to pull that off.”

When Barnard retired in 2003, he was feted with an Italian dinner and a program as well as the installation of an honorary stained-glass window in the narthex.

Kevin Jones, minister of music at First Church from 2012 to 2022, has known Barnard since 1984 and considers him a mentor and dear friend.

“It’s hard to calculate the influence that Dene has doggedly had at First Church and in Columbus. He kept the choirs going, the youth choirs, the handbells. He has brought hundreds of the best organists in the world to perform at First Church. Since he retired, he’s been an incredible support and counsel to me and the other organists. He is a true treasure.”

John Deliman, a professional music educator who was head of the orchestra program in the Upper Arlington City Schools and who is a member of the First Church choir and handbell choir, joined the church after Barnard had retired from his post as minister of music. But Deliman praised the Dene Barnard years as transformational for First Church.

“His 30-year tenure so deeply embraced good quality, classical sacred music so that is what we now always expect,” Deliman said.

## **THE 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY ORGANISTS**

Upon Barnard’s retirement, **Timothy E. Smith** was tapped to fill the position. With Smith, the choir grew in membership and began to travel, conducting a New England tour in 2005 during which they performed a morning worship service at Trinity Church in Boston.

Smith founded the First Church Choral Society, bringing together singers from Broad Street Presbyterian Church and St. Joseph Cathedral, bringing greater awareness of the quality of First Church and outreach music to the greater Columbus community. The group was discontinued after Smith’s tenure. Smith also began a monthly end-of-day compline service.

In 2007, Smith released a two-CD set in which he performed on the church’s two pipe organs, the recently restored Kimball organ and the 1972 Rudolf von Beckerath organ.

When Smith departed abruptly in 2008, Marti Rideout stepped in as interim organist and music director for 16 months. Later, in 2012, she again served as organist and music director for six months after the departure of Jamie Bobb.

**Marti Rideout** began playing the organ when she was 12, growing up in a small village in upstate New York. She studied applied organ performance at Ithaca College and then organ performance, earning her master’s degree, from Catholic University in Washington, D.C.

John Deliman noted that Rideout is known nationally throughout organ and choir circles as “a go-to interim organist.” “You can count on her to not just playing the service and direct the choir. She’ll do worship planning; she’ll look at the library of choral music and see what it



needs, even organizing and cataloging as needed. And when she leaves an interim position, she leaves a guidebook for the next person coming in.”

Rideout has helped to organize the First Church music library. She describes the quality of the choral library as “amazing” thanks especially to the work of organists Barnard, Smith and Jamie Bobb. Another of her projects has been the hymnal supplement, begun in 2018 and involving a committee of more than 20 people. See **HYMNS AND THE HYMNAL SUPPLEMENT**.

Rideout believes that First Church owes much of its musical excellence and breadth to the organists and their backgrounds from a variety of protestant religious traditions. “The First Church choir’s ability to sing psalms exceeds that at most British cathedrals I’ve seen,” she said.

**Jamie Bobb** began his tenure in 2009 as organist and minister of music. In Columbus, he taught organ and organ literature at Capital University. Bobb was beloved by the First Church Choir with members describing him as a consummate musician and a director who was “fun to sing for.”

Bobb took the choir to Washington D.C. where members sang several services at the Washington National Cathedral in 2011.

Long-time choir member Jan Wade said that Bobb came from a Lutheran tradition and so, “he did a lot of Bach.”

“He was a master at introducing the mood of a hymn with improvisation,” Wade said. “For instance, if the hymn had something to do with baptismal water, he’d introduce it with a rippling water sound. He believed in setting the mood for the singing of hymns.”

Nobody in the country, said Marti Rideout, “plays a hymn like Jamie Bobb.”

Bobb departed in 2012 to become associate professor of music and chair of organ and church music at St. Olaf College in Minnesota. He returns often to perform at First Church and indeed, in 2021, performed the Hymn Festival celebrating the new hymnal supplement, and in April 2022, in the Organist Alumni Gala.

## **KEVIN JONES**

In 2012, First Church hired as its minister of music - Kevin Jones, well-known as an organist and harpsichordist as well as a music director, including of the New York City Gilbert and Sullivan Ensemble. An Ohio native, Jones studied organ and harpsichord at Southern Methodist University and did advanced studies at the Cleveland Institute of Music, earning masters’ degrees in both organ performance and collaborative piano.

“Of all the directors,” Jan Wade said, “Kevin has the most credentials in vocal performance instruction. He is precise in his choral leadership – perfecting vowel pronunciation, for example ... Each rehearsal is like a master class. We’re up to 53 members now, which is the largest the choir has ever been.”

During his tenure, Jones and the choir had to deal with two years of the COVID19 pandemic, during which, in-person services were discontinued for great stretches of time. For a brief few months in 2021, in-person services were held at the church with choir members rehearsing and singing in masks and practicing as much social distancing as possible. Singing in masks, Jones said, is not impossible but is difficult and results in singers getting winded more quickly.

The pandemic made planning difficult and the lack of live music at services and in concerts, disappointing. For some services, a quartet of singers performed. No choir members were lost to COVID, Jones said, and the size of the choir – 53 members – remained constant.

Jones took the choir twice to the United Kingdom, in 2015 for a seven-day residency at Gloucester Cathedral, and in 2018 for residencies at the Lincoln and Norwich Cathedrals. The choir spent a week in England in August 2022, performing at Winchester Cathedral.

Under Jones, First Church released two CDs, one by the choir and another of him performing on the Kimball organ.

Jones began the monthly Sunday Evensong services and expanded the scope of the Congregational Concerts to include the December Lessons and Carols event, handbell concerts, and harpsichord concerts. He also embellished the First Tuesdays concerts to include more instrumental variety.

Dene Barnard described Jones as “a genius.” During Jones’ tenure at First Church, Barnard said, “the music was better than ever. Kevin made the choir the finest musical instrument in the church.”

First Church was shocked and deeply saddened in the spring of 2022 to learn that Kevin Jones would be resigning from his position, leaving at the end of July 2022. His musical brilliance, vast knowledge of church music and exceptional leadership skills will be most difficult to replace.

## **THE ORGANS**

First Church is blessed to be one of the few churches in North American with two world-class organs, totaling more than 8,100 pipes.

“Even as an organist, I have to admit it’s an embarrassment of riches,” Kevin Jones said. “There are churches in the U.S. with two pipe organs but to have two completely diverse instruments in one room is really incredible.”

The two pipe organs at First Church were built 40 years apart. The organs – each with a totally different tonal palette - are both used in church services and in concerts and sometimes, even performed together. Before a discussion of each organ, a few definitions: In pipe organs, a rank is a row of pipes all of which make the same sound but at different pitches. Stops control the passage of air to the pipes and are used selectively by the organist.

The Chancel Organ is the **Martin-MacNevin Memorial Organ** or the **Kimball Organ**, built by W. W. Kimball in Chicago, Ill., in 1931. The organ was a gift from the estate of Alice Robbins Martin in memory of her husband, Walter Henry Martin. It has 66 stops, 66 ranks, 4,407 pipes and electropneumatic key and stop action. By the late 1960s, the organ was experiencing maintenance issues. Also at that time, the symphonic style of organs, which the Kimball was, was going out of fashion.

In 1972, another organ, the Beckerath, was installed and the Kimball was then rarely used from 1972 to 2004. In 2004 a four-year restoration of the Kimball began. It was funded through the estate of Jean MacNevin (a First Church choir member) who designated the funds in memory of her husband, Bill. The restoration was led by the Peebles-Herzog Company of Columbus with significant labor supplied by church volunteers.

“We worked at the organ company washing pipes and other jobs,” Rick Sayre said. “This helped with the cost of the restoration, and it also provided a sense of ownership for the congregation.”

The four-manual symphonic organ was rededicated Sept. 26, 2004. Thus, the organ is now called the Martin-MacNevin Memorial Organ.

Long before the restoration, in his 1948 book, “Steps Toward a Singing Church,” Donald D. Kettring described the Kimball organ: “The Walter H. Martin memorial organ is an instrument of four manuals and echo, built by Kimball, and all the chambers, apart from the echo division behind a case in the rear balcony, are located behind a beautifully carved screen above the west chancel. The organ of 80 registers is notable for a high quality of workmanship. The organ does not speak directly toward the congregation except for those in and toward the east transept, but even so the body of tone is adequate for the entire nave. The console is located in a recess under the east chancel window and originally was placed at chancel floor level. The specification of the organ permits great freedom in styles of organ interpretation . . . With its mechanical flexibility and resources in tone color, the organ is generally ideal either for recital or accompaniment.”

Kevin Jones described the Kimball as an “American organ but with British lineage. The Kimball is much more a British cathedral organ than an American symphonic organ. It’s a quality instrument. The pipework is spectacular.”

When he talked about the Kimball, Jones called the instrument “a grand old lady.” He might also have used the term “diva.”

“This is an organ with a definite personality,” he said. “She is a greedy mistress. I have broken a toe, torn my meniscus with her. I love this organ, but she has it out for me. It takes a lot to look after her.”

The Gallery Organ is the **Beckerath Organ** built by Rudolf von Beckerath of Hamburg, Germany, in 1972. It has 47 stops, 73 ranks, 3,719 pipes, mechanical key action and electric stop action. It is an extremely versatile instrument capable of playing organ music from many different musical eras. Acquisition of the Beckerath, said Jones, was “a great investment. It is a great work of art.”

When the Beckerath was installed in the gallery, it was positioned so that it blocked the congregation's view of the stained-glass Rose Window, a controversy at the time, according to Lola Edwards. "There was a big argument," she said. Nevertheless, the organ remained where it was positioned, probably the best location to keep it secure and its sound, ideal.

The Beckerath was inaugurated in 1972 with a series of three recitals featuring national and international artists. Since then, artists and organ enthusiasts have traveled to Columbus and First Church to hear the Beckerath.

"The Beckerath has brought tens of thousands of people into First Church who otherwise would not have entered the door," Jones said. "How it has added to the cultural fabric of central Ohio is incalculable."

Dene Barnard began, and the sequential organists including Kevin Jones, have continued a book – something like a guest book in a country inn – logging the names and laudatory comments of the organists who have performed on the Beckerath.

At the age of 18, Jones played his first recital on the Beckerath.

Dene Barnard said that when he began his tenure at First Church, the Beckerath organ was about a year old. "I wanted the job because of the Beckerath. It's mechanical. There's no electric in the keyboard. It's all muscle."

Jan Wade said that each of the organs is "considered a stellar example of its type. The Beckerath is so beautifully suited for Baroque music and the Kimball is symphonic and can replicate all the instruments of the orchestra."

Choral director James Gallagher, retired music professor at Ohio State University and interim choir director after Jones' departure, said both organs "can do wonderful things in warmth and brilliance. The Kimball has a more French Romantic, warmer sound. But if you notice when Kevin Jones plays Bach, he always makes his way to the Beckerath in the gallery. There's just a brilliance to that instrument."

Jones said that having the two organs means that "we can cover literally five centuries of organ repertoire with the right sounds."

Dene Barnard said: "It used to be – what do you have two organs for? Such nonsense.

"I don't believe you should compare the two of them. Judge them for what they are – the two best organs in Ohio."

## **OTHER IMPORTANT INSTRUMENTS AT FIRST CHURCH**

### **Handbells**

The English White Chapel Handbells were given to the church in 1955 as a memorial to a young man named David W. Lattimer, a member of the church and the choir who died in an automobile accident. His photograph and a copy of the handbells' dedication hang in the choir room. The handbells were one of the first such sets in Ohio and were expanded to five octaves in the 1980s and '90s. According to Dene Barnard, the English White Chapel Handbells are no longer being made.

## **Harpsichord**

Ben Bechtel, a member of First Church, was an accomplished musician – a pianist and a specialist in early music as well as a builder of instruments. Before he died in 2008, he built a harpsichord for First Church, donating his time and labor and only charging for materials. The harpsichord is a two-manual instrument, adapted from a 1765 instrument by Francois Blanchet. The case is made of sugar pine with a basswood bottom; the soundboard is Swiss white pine and the keyboard has ebony-covered naturals with bone-topped solid ebony sharps and boxwood arcades.

Wyatt Shimeall-Shanahan, who had apprenticed with Bechtel, worked with him on the instrument. The debut concert was given by Ed Parmentier from the University of Michigan.

Judy Smith, Bechtel's widow, said that the harpsichord is "one of his best instruments and his last one." It has been played by a number of renowned keyboardists and, Smith said, "they have especially commented on its responsiveness, reliability and even tone production."

Jones described the harpsichord as visually and aurally beautiful and noted that it is frequently rented by the ProMusica Chamber Orchestra and the Columbus Symphony.

## **Steinway Grand Piano**

Owned by the Columbus Chamber Music Society, the piano makes its home at First Church where it is often used in performances. The instrument also is frequently rented to other musical organizations.

## **HYMNS AND THE HYMNAL SUPPLEMENT**

Organists including Dene Barnard and Kevin Jones describe First Church as "a singing church" with members contributing robustly during services. For years, the 1990 Presbyterian Church hymnal, "Hymn Psalms and Spiritual Songs," has been used for the 11 a.m. service and the "New Century Hymnal of the United Church of Christ" used for the 9 a.m. service. These two hymnals "provide wonderful hymns but collectively are not sufficient given First Church's mission of social justice," according to Marti Rideout, the church's interim organist who describes herself as "passionate about hymns."

In 2018, Rideout (whose license plate reads HYMNS) began to lead a committee to evaluate and select additional hymns to be included in a hymnal supplement for First Church. Her committee of more than 20 people studied and sang together more than 500 hymns. (Rideout had culled a

list of more than 4,000 hymns down to 500.) They arrived at 152 additional hymns plus 22 pieces of service music (different settings of “Holy, Holy, Holy,” for example) to be included in the supplement.

“We were looking not to replace the two hymnals ... but to give us more opportunities to sing our faith with words that reveal the world we now live in and the missions before us,” Rideout said. “We ought to include more texts and tunes by women, people of color and from different cultures, as well as excellent hymns known and sung by other communities of God’s children.”

The hymnal supplement project was celebrated with a Hymn Festival presented with organist Jamie Bobb on Nov. 7, 2021.

The supplement will be published in a three-ring notebook (with additions possible) and placed in the pews. It will not be for sale or able to be used outside First Church.

The creation of this hymnal supplement testifies to the importance that First Church places on music and particularly the incorporation of hymns in services.

“The hymn is not the music but the text, the poetry and the music just conveys it – or doesn’t,” Rideout said. “When we sing to the glory of God, we understand our connection more.”

Rideout recalled Paul’s letter to the Colossians 3:16: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart.”

## **THE ACOUSTICS AND AMBIANCE OF FIRST CHURCH**

Since the gothic cathedral was built in 1931, First Church has become renowned as an exemplary setting for music.

Kevin Jones praised the church’s architecture and proportions, designed to “draw the eye upward and lead the music heavenward.”

Rev. Ahrens calls the cathedral “a great music box.”

Choral director James Gallagher called the acoustics at First Church “our best instrument.”

“The right acoustics can amplify and mold the sound. It just enhances the overall beauty especially of choral music.”

In his book “Steps Toward a Singing Church,” Donald D. Kettring, the church’s fourth organist and music director, described how the sanctuary of the Gothic church, especially its height and length and the jewel-like windows, account for an atmosphere conducive to music. “It is the kind of church that invites reverence and listening,” he wrote.

He continued to describe the acoustics: “The acoustic properties of the church generally are good. The great arch directly behind the high pulpit acts as a sounding board which sends even words spoken softly the length of the nave. The slate floor, in combination with the acoustical treatment of the ceiling, seems to give an ideal acoustical condition for speech, choral and organ tones. There is some tendency for choral tone to be confined behind the great arch of the chancel, and the ensemble so located seldom gives the impression of resonance which seems to lend great beauty to a soft ensemble of mixed voices. The nave is also particularly kind to treble voices.”

Church acoustics were made even better upon the installation of the Beckerath organ. Rudolph Von Beckerath refused to install the new gallery organ until the too-absorbent ceiling was treated to make it more reflective and the walls were replastered, all in service of ensuring finer acoustics.

Jan Wade noted how symphony musicians, when performing at First Church, “love playing in the sanctuary because it’s very alive.”

Kevin Jones and Dene Barnard, both of whom call First Church “a singing church,” say the acoustics are friendly to members who sing heartily and are not overpowered by the organs.

“I think a lot of that is because of the leadership and sound quality of the Beckerath,” Jones said. “The room doesn’t feel huge when you’re in it but is a 67-foot ceiling and that’s huge. You can have all this incredible organ sound going over your head and you don’t feel overwhelmed.”

“There’s an old saying among organists,” Jones continued. “The best stop on any organ is the room in which it sits.”

## **THE CHARACTER OF FIRST CHURCH MUSIC**

As mentioned in the beginning paragraphs of this composition, First Church has an uninterrupted history of presenting sacred, classical music, often termed traditional music. When asked why they began to come to First Church and to join as members, many people cite two reasons: the strength of the social justice preaching and mission – and the music.

The combination of a ministry that places great importance on Christian love, equality and justice with high-quality, impeccably performed music has attracted and retained the sizeable congregation of the downtown church.

Before musicians John and Cindy Deliman joined the church in 2008, John had a conversation with Mary Weaver, a choir member at First Church. “She asked us if we had a church home and said, ‘if you want to hear great church music, come down to First Church.’ We went to Lessons and Carols in 2006 and we were amazed. And then we realized that sort of quality extended to the regular Sunday services. While there is so much more at First Church – social justice and living the concept of open and affirming – what drew us in was the music.”

According to Kevin Jones, “sacred, classical music – what many term traditional church music – has been the rule at First Church since the beginning. In the 1980s and ‘90s, the trend at many

churches in America was to offer more contemporary music – folk, popular, rock styles – with some churches even ripping out their pipe organs.”

Not First Church. The Barnard Music Fund was created in honor of Dene Barnard in the 1970s with a contribution from church members Robert and Clare Harsh. The couple, who greatly appreciated the work of Barnard, wanted the fund to guarantee support of traditional, sacred classical music. The Barnard Fund mandates that any movement away from that concept, and the money will leave First Church and go to the Columbus Symphony.

Jones believes that a church’s music and liturgy must coordinate with the architectural environment of the building.

“What we do at First Church is dignified. Yes, the music is what some people would call traditional and it’s definitely sacred. . . . The church is not a building, of course, but the space does influence what we do on Sundays for liturgical and musical expression.”

Lola Edwards, a member for 75 years, said “the music emphasizes the beauty of the church.”

Jan Wade put her preference succinctly: “No two screens and a praise band for me,” she said. “If I was forced to do that, I’d stay home and watch the birds.”

Rev. Dr. Tim Ahrens, who credits Protestantism with bringing about both a preaching and a singing revival, said that the music presented at First Church is high quality and complex, matching the character of the church’s ministry.

“If you pick bubble gum hymns, then one would expect that you match those with bubble gum preaching and your work in the world,” Ahrens said. “But if you pick magnificent music, you expect the work that you do and the word that you preach will be just as deep.”

John Deliman said that the music at First Church “fills your soul beyond the words. The kind of music we do at First Church speaks to me. It goes beyond the word to feed my soul.”

## **REFLECTIONS AND GOING FORWARD**

As of this writing and because of the departure of Kevin Jones, the future of music at First Church has question marks. Who will become the next minister of music and will that person have the ability and mandate needed to maintain the high musical standards the congregation has become accustomed to?

After Jones’ departure in 2022, the trio of James Gallagher, Marti Rideout and Sandra Mathias stepped up to oversee the choir and guide the music committee and music programs. Gallagher became interim choir director and Barry Moenter was named interim organist.

Gallagher and a devoted music committee had worked closely with Kevin Jones in planning and supporting all aspects of music. Before announcing his resignation, Jones said his primary goals included: the presence of a really good choir forever; a vibrant choral program; commitment to



the health of the two organs; continuing to record and commission music for organ and choir; continuation of the hymnal supplement project; ensuring a widening of the repertoire; and enhancement of the children's music program.

"I am concerned about children's music programs," Jones said. "It's hard at First Church because we're an urban setting and because of the fast pace of life for children and parents. I would love to see a really rigorous children's choir but that will take someone whose sole focus it is – and probably a decade to make it happen."

"The legacy you leave behind is important," Jones said. "The reason we have the music program we have is that I'm standing at the front of a long line of very good ministers of music."

The music committee as well as the congregation is united in the wish that Jones' time to "do his part" would have been far longer.

In discussing the musical legacy of First Church, Rev. Ahrens said that First Church is the only downtown church in Columbus that is growing and that he attributed much of that success to the social justice ministry – and music.

"Music and social justice, social justice and music," Ahrens said. "If we go off course with either, I think we will be in trouble."

Rev. Ahrens said in the future, First Church may be inspired to expand musical offerings – an afternoon jazz service, perhaps – but that the commitment to traditional, sacred classical music will remain firm.

"The future holds a continuance of the excellence that we have along with the possibility of adding to it in the future," Ahrens said. "What's important to say about the music in this church is that it will be top quality always. We won't put up with anything but the best."

With God's will, the beautiful and exceptional music at First Church will continue to be of utmost importance. Organist Marti Rideout contemplated its critical place in faith and worship.

She referred to a quote from Soren Kierkegaard: "God is the audience. Those sitting in the congregation are the participants. Those who are vested are the prompters."

Added Rideout: "What we do in church is not for us but to lift others up and to recognize the glory of God."

One final bit of philosophy, from a saying that is posted in the First Church choir room:

"We are awakened through poetry,  
We are affirmed through ritual,  
We are fulfilled through music."  
- Confucius

