

Memories of Charles Hendrickson

By David Engen, January 2021

Life summary

Charles George Hendrickson, 85, died at his home in St. Peter, MN on December 17, 2020. He was born June 10, 1935 in Willmar, MN to Roy and Frances (Eklund) Hendrickson. Roy was an attorney and regent at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, from which Charles graduated in 1957. His intent was to continue in nuclear physics, but he once admitted to me that during his time of graduate study at the University of Minnesota, aspects of nuclear physics “was beyond me”. He taught physics at UW-Superior, Union University in Jackson Tennessee, and Northeast State University, Tahlequah, OK.

I believe it was after his father’s death that his mother became secretary to the president of Gustavus. It was she who decided that Charles should marry Birgitta Gillberg, a language teacher at Gustavus and later at nearby Mankato State University. He taught physics at Mankato State, and he and Birgitta were married in Sweden in 1964. They had two sons: Eric and Andreas (named for Andreas Silbermann). Birgitta preceded him in death by two years.

In 1964 he started building his first organ in his garage in St. Peter for nearby First Lutheran in Winthrop, MN. The 3-manual organ of 34 ranks, which has since been enlarged, had the first Rückpositiv in Minnesota. David N. Johnson of St. Olaf College played the dedication.

Philosophy

I first met Charles at about the time the Winthrop organ was completed in 1966. He was measuring pipes in the new Holtkamp organ (Opus 1778) at my home church in Minneapolis. He told me of the upcoming David Johnson recital at Winthrop, which I later attended. I started working for him (in the garage) in 1970 and continued for much of the time until 1984.

Charles was a fan of Mies van der Rohe and ascribed to his “less is more” philosophy (although in the shop we often changed it to “more is more”). Most of his designs with casework are simple boxes. He



also much admired the work of Robert Noehren, whose unique unit organs on direct electric action were a big influence.

Some 100+ organs came from the Hendrickson shop, ranging in size from a 1-stop, 1-rank portable “organetto” (Opus 19) to his “magnum” Opus 92 of 4 manuals and 70 ranks for Wayzata Community Church in Wayzata, MN. Most organs were for churches, but many were built for colleges (both concert halls and practice rooms) and several were built for individuals. There was a series of three 3-stop portativ organs built for touring groups, the first for the St. Olaf Choir, designed to go through the door of a Greyhound bus.

Many organs had tracker action, and in general the smaller organs were unit organs on direct electric action. These followed the Noehren philosophy of unification where octave unification was avoided if possible.

One of Charles’ notable innovations was use of plywood Subbass pipes. Built in the shop, they were made of ¾” plywood. In the ravages of Minnesota’s wild seasonal humidity swings, almost every old organ we encountered had splits in the big pedal pipes. Plywood avoids this, and these pipes were used in virtually every organ. He also consistently used aluminum for the 16’ Principal pipes, made by Justin Matters of South Dakota.

Another unique feature of the small unit organs has to do with the Celeste and Tierce. In a very small organ it is difficult to justify expense of either of these. Both are typically the softest stops, and both can be either string or flute scale. We found that if the tierce is borrowed from the celeste (tuned flat instead of sharp), you can have both in a single stop by adding just a few more pipes. In tuning, you tune the tierce perfectly from middle C up, then tune from there down for a pleasant flat celeste (beats tend to get too wild in that range if tuned to the perfect tierce), it’s an inexpensive compromise that is of great benefit to a tiny organ.

Friends and consultants

Some of the best organs to come from the shop during my time were designed in conjunction with friends who acted as consultants. The most significant at this time were Merrill (“Jeff”) N. Davis III of Rochester, MN, and William B. Kuhlman of Luther College, Decorah, IA.

Both pushed Charles to some of his most inspired designs, both visually and tonally. Opus 4 was a pair of positiv divisions added to a Wicks in memory of Jeff Davis’ first wife at the Congregational Church in LaCrosse, WI. In an acoustically dry room, these positifs pulled the sound of the enclosed Wicks into the church. This was but the first collaboration. Many other projects resulted in very unique and unusual instruments over the years.

Bill Kuhlman was behind what was to become the first tracker organ constructed in Minnesota in the late 20th Century. This was a 36-rank teaching organ for Luther College (Opus 10) in Decorah, IA. As a successful teacher, Bill had many students study on that organ who went on to careers in music.

Other consultants included Robert Kendall and Robert Thompson of St. Olaf College and Kim Kasling, then of Mankato State University.

Significant instruments

I had personal experience and/or input in almost all of the organs from Opus 1 through Opus 70, and it would be tempting to tell stories of each one. Except for the three portatives, no two were alike. (Fritz Noack once told me that when you mass produce organs, you have opportunity to replicate your mistakes!)

One overriding memory I have is that every time we built a tracker, the shop looked forward to building electric action. When we were lost in the wiring of electric action we'd long to build another tracker.

Luther College, Opus 10, 36 ranks, 2 manuals

<http://www.pipeorganlist.com/OrganList/dataia/IA-DecorahLutherColl-HENDRICKSON.html>

After the Winthrop organ had launched the company (we cleaned and added to it some years later after a Christmas Eve fire), all organs through Opus 9 were built in the garage and back yard. Starting with the Luther College organ (Opus 10) the operation moved to the current shop location at the north end of St. Peter in an industrial park. The shop was built during the winter of 1970-71. During the first rainstorm in 1971 the skylights leaked, and several of us frantically covered the Luther windchests in the middle of the night to prevent damage.

There was a lot of over-compensation in design. Frankly, none of us knew what we were doing! The pallets were large, we had overly-complex bleed holes in the channels, and we used foam slider seals. Fearing a heavy coupled action (which it had) it had optional electric couplers. The horizontal trumpet was on electric action and played at 16', 8' 4' on the Great and 8', 4', 2' on the Pedal to create maximum "blast". There were prepared stops on each division. Perhaps the most unique feature was that the whole organ could be moved around Koren Chapel at Luther with an air flotation system by one person! Gerald Near wrote his Second Fantasy for the dedication concert.

Jensen-Noble hall of music was opened in late 1982 on the Luther campus, so the Hendrickson company was engaged to move the organ into a teaching studio in the spring and summer prior to the opening. Being the only employee left who had helped build it, I wound up in charge of disassembly and re-installation. We were able to take what we'd learned from building about a dozen tracker organs in the intervening years and apply those lessons to what became a successful renovation. Since there was no need for the flotation system in a studio, we removed it and built a new and more reliable pedal action in that space. Pallet openings and pallets were reduced in size, resulting in a lighter action that no longer needed electric couplers. The blast from the horizontal trumpet at multiple pitches was not needed in a smaller space, so the trumpet was converted to tracker action and revoiced on lower pressure, speaking from the Great channels. Three of the 5 prepared stops were added. It continues to

function, 50 years after construction, as a teaching and practice organ under Bill Kuhlman's successor Gregory Peterson.

St. John Lutheran, Owatonna, MN, Opus 34, 51 ranks, 3 manuals

<http://www.pipeorganlist.com/OrganList/datamn/MNOwatonnaStJohnsLutheran.html>

St. John Lutheran is a huge A-frame building, but the typical front transepts are in the back balcony. Floor to ceiling windows in the balcony provide wonderful light, but the acoustic issues for a gallery organ are significant since glass does not reflect bass. Charles solution was to cantilever the main organ as far into the room as possible, and to provide a very large Rückpositiv as well as a prominent horizontal trumpet.

Since there was virtually no unification on the manuals, I talked Charles into building slider chests. We opted to try the Holtkamp slider chest design with direct electric magnets on the channels rather than pallets with pull-downs.

45 years later the organ continues to serve the church – as does Shirley Erickson, who was organist when the organ was installed!

Sts Peter and Paul Catholic, Mankato, MN, Opus 35, 59 ranks, 3 manuals

<http://www.pipeorganlist.com/OrganList/datamn/MNMankatoPeterPaul.html>

Following right behind the 51 rank Owatonna organ we tackled what would briefly become the largest tracker organ in Minnesota. (The Fisk at House of Hope followed very soon after.) Kim Kasling was consultant and Jim Dorn was organist. An original plan for a high, stacked organ in the right front eventually became a balcony installation. Again, a large Rückpositiv was in the design, but the ancient church balcony could not hold its weight if placed in the normal location on the rail. It sits instead on the floor, right behind the keydesk, with new steel beams under the floor to hold the weight.

A huge Great with two mixtures sits above a relatively small Swell, with Pedal split and across the back inside the organ. There are many pipes from the previous organ spread throughout, as well as a 32' Bourdon from the old Soul's Harbor organ in Minneapolis and a 16' open wood diapason discarded from the Sipe rebuild at Christ Methodist in Rochester.

The church interior has been tastefully remodeled since the organ went in, and there is now less carpet than there had been. The dedication was not well advertised or well attended. It was played by Cherry Rhodes who played the Messiaen 'Combat between life and death', a singularly unsuitable piece of music for a rural Minnesota farm community. There was dislike for the organ from that day on for many years.

First Lutheran, St. Peter, MN, Opus 45, 44 ranks, 2 manuals (with coupler)

<http://www.pipeorganlist.com/OrganList/datamn/MNStPeterFLC.html>

First Lutheran Church in St. Peter was the Hendrickson family church. Founded in 1857 by Swedish immigrants, 164 years later it retains its Swedish roots, although services have been held in English for 100 years. It has always been closely connected with Gustavus Adolphus College which is just a mile away. On Mother's Day, May 13, 1962 the old church was struck by lightning and burned to the ground. Charles was already involved in organ renovations and there was an existing organ fund.

The firm of Harold Spitznagel and Associates of Sioux Falls designed the church to replace the old after the fire on land purchased on the edge of town. The first service was held September 5, 1965. The new sanctuary was half a cube, 76' on a side and 40' high topped with clerestory windows. The congregation did not want to suffer another fire, so this building is made of concrete and brick. As a result, the sanctuary has incredible acoustics for music.

To avoid a temporary electronic organ, Charles assembled parts he had on hand into an 8-rank exposed organ which he leased temporarily to the church. The 4 second reverberation made this mongrel organ surprisingly successful. It was later rebuilt and sold.

In 1975 plans began in earnest for a new organ. The original concept had 4-manuals with a Rückpositiv. Fund raising and unrelated issues delayed the project, and in a period of high inflation the organ shrank by the month. We finally decided to start over, and took the tonal design of the Luther organ as a starting point. The entire Luther organ can be found within the specification of the First Lutheran organ. One major difference is inclusion of a coupler manual.

This became the flagship demonstration organ for the company, being located just a mile from the shop and in a room having incredible acoustics. What many do not realize is that the asymmetrical design is inspired by the brick sculpture on the front wall of the church (the story of creation). The pipe shades are inspired by the bird figures in that sculpture. The asymmetrical "Family of Man" and the birds are at the top.



Figure 1: Brick sculpture of the Creation at First Lutheran

St. Wenceslaus Catholic, New Prague, MN, Opus 47, 43 ranks, 3 manual

<http://www.pipeorganlist.com/OrganList/datamn/MNNewPragueStWenceslaus.html>

Robert Thompson of nearby St. Olaf College was consultant, and gave the organ a decidedly French accent, although this is a Czech congregation. This was the only organ built during my time at the shop with supply house chests (Laukhuff). Sperling always voiced in a Germanic style, so he and I disagreed quite a bit during tonal finishing in the church to give French stop names more of a French sound. In particular, the Recit 8' flute sounded like a quintadena. After reworking it with higher cutup and nicks, it was the stop that elicited the most comments from visitors. Sperling thought he'd ruined it. The whole time he was revoicing he grumbled that he was turning it into a 1920 Moller Melodia!

First Unitarian, Rochester, MN, Opus 49, 24 ranks, 2 manuals (with coupler)

<http://www.pipeorganlist.com/OrganList/datamn/MNRochesterFirstUU-HENDRICKSON49.html>

Merrill N. Davis III of Rochester was consultant. Fondly called “The Bell Organ”, the 2’ on the Ripieno division is a Glockenspiel; there is a wind-driven Zimbelstern; the Continuo mixture is a Glockenzimbel, which starts at 2/5’ pitch and includes a tierce on every note. (The unison on the F above middle C is the F above high C of a 2’ and had to be voiced with a magnifying glass.) Davis said this tiny mixture was a replica of a similar stop at the Mother Church in Boston. Like First Lutheran, it has a third coupler manual. Casework is walnut, and the Continuo division in Rückpositiv position has no facade.

St John’s Lutheran, Kasson, MN, Opus 57, 29 ranks, 2 manuals

<http://www.pipeorganlist.com/OrganList/datamn/MNKassonStJohnLutheran.html>

Merrill N. Davis III was again consultant. Kasson is not far from Rochester. This organ was conceived with a big blockwerk on the Great based on a 16’ principal with a big mixture. There are two cornets on the Great – a 4-rank mounted cornet of flute scale, and a 3-rank Sesquialtera of principal scale, along with a dark trumpet. Originally the Swell did not couple to either the Great or Pedal. That coupler has since been added. What started as an unsuccessful 1’ Principal on the Great was changed to 8/9’ to add spice to the ensemble and to the two cornets. The organ was originally tuned to Chaumont temperament.

St. John’s Lutheran, Minneapolis, MN, Opus 63, 47 ranks, 3 manuals

<http://www.pipeorganlist.com/OrganList/datamn/MNMplsStJohnLutheranHendrickson.html>

St. John’s in south Minneapolis is one of the biggest rebuild projects we undertook. Hillgreen-Lane had rebuilt the previous organ (perhaps Hall) in 1959 at 32 ranks. Our 1983 rebuild significantly enlarged the organ and made access for tuning and servicing much easier than it had been in the Hillgreen-Lane. Many ranks were retained. Much of the Pedal is direct from the Hillgreen-Lane. A string had been converted into an 8’ Gelind Gedackt by Hillgreen-Lane, but the scale was very small and the caps did not seal. We rescaled it again. We presume it had been Hillgreen-Lane that had soldered two diapasons together end-to-end to make a 16’ Salicional, which was retained. This organ has one of the early multiplex relay systems, this one donated by Dirk Moibroeck of Cincinnati (ICMI).

Union Presbyterian, St. Peter, MN, Opus 64, 11 ranks, 2 manuals

<http://www.pipeorganlist.com/OrganList/datamn/MNStPeterUnion-HENDRICKSON-64.html>

Though far from a significant organ, Union Presbyterian is an example of the smaller direct electric unit organs that were quite successful. Union’s acoustics were horribly dry when the organ was designed, but when the chancel was modified for the new organ we discovered a small space with a very warm acoustic. When the organ was first played the room amplified it too much! We dropped the pressure and revoiced everything. For many years this was the location of a well attended hymn festival, and the organ has often been used with instruments. A small scale trumpet was added in later

years, and the relay and combination action were recently replaced with current technology. The 4' Octave, mixture and trumpet are on the right side near the console. The Bourdon/Rohrflute and 8' Principal trebles are on the left side behind the choir. The swell is in the middle behind the grill, with the largest 16' subbass pipes (plywood) on its roof. Organist at the time Charles Eggert was consultant.

St. Joseph's Cathedral, Sioux Falls, MN, Opus 78, 62 ranks, 3 manuals

<http://www.pipeorganlist.com/OrganList/datasd/SDSiouxFallsStJosephsCathedralRCHendrickson.html>

The two largest organs were built after I left, and I've never seen the Sioux Falls organ. Nonetheless, it is a significant instrument in a large and very reverberant space.

Wayzata Community Church, Wayzata, MN, Opus 92, 70 ranks, 4 manuals

<http://www.pipeorganlist.com/OrganList/datamn/MNWayzataWCC-HENDRICKSON-92.html>

The company's magnum opus is in a suburb west of Minneapolis. The Jackson family gave funds for it in memory of C. Charles Jackson, and Charles Hendrickson's long friendship with sculptor Paul Granlund (pictured with Charles) at Gustavus was the genesis of the sculpture ("Aegis") in the middle of the organ case. For many years this was home to an extensive organ concert series under staff organist Diana Lee Lucker. Charles attended most of these concerts.



Following Diana Lee's retirement, this series has ceased. The late congressman Jim Ramstad was a member of this church.

Trinity Episcopal Church, Excelsior, MN, Opus 111, 29 ranks, 2 manuals

<http://www.pipeorganlist.com/OrganList/datamn/MNExcelsiorTrinityHendrickson.html>

Trinity had been home to a very small and undistinguished 5-rank Moller (Opus 8026). The new organ was impetus for a complete church remodel project, which is quite successful with movable chairs and hard surfaces. The organ includes pipes from the Moller as well as pipes from a practice organ (Opus 20) built for the University of Wisconsin in Eau Claire that was re-purchased. Andreas Hendrickson designed the unique facade. I was engaged by the organist following installation to revoice a number of ranks.

Shop stories

Every organ shop generates a multitude of stories, and the Hendrickson shop is no different. During my first summer in 1970, Eric Hendrikson was 3 and was always in the shop (garage), watching what was

going on. He was at the “Why, Daddy?” stage, and Charles occasionally lost patience and would say “That’s the way it is!” Eric was also called “little one”, which I suspect was not appreciated as he grew.

The current shop was built in the winter of 1970-71 for the Luther organ, so there was a central erecting room built to accommodate it. There were skylights throughout, and during the first rainstorm the summer of 1971 they leaked – onto the Luther windchests. A group of us were there in the middle of the night with plastic to cover the organ parts. The next day the lowest in seniority was on the roof with caulk.

The Luther College organ had a flotation system, which Charles developed the summer of 1971. Each iteration of his design resulted in the call to everyone in the shop to come and stand on a piece of plywood to see if it would float with the added weight. We eventually had a winner which was installed on the organ.

The Rochester Unitarian organ was set up and playing in the shop when consultant Jeff Davis came to see it. He didn’t like the relationship between the 4’ and 2’ of the Continuo, so a new rank was ordered and the ranks affected were re-racked.

The late Robert Sperling of New Ulm was hired away from the Ulm Orgelwerke in 1971 to do voicing for the Luther organ. He remained until the Rochester Unitarian organ was half voiced in 1979 when he went to work for Lynn Dobson. He was unique character and talked to himself all day while voicing, often giving mock sermons. At one point he was reading the Book of Mormon, so all of his “sermons” involved references to it. I recall one of his sermons began: “The reading for today is the entire Bible. Please stand.”

On one occasion Charles was inspecting work in the shop, saying nothing. Finally he said “I think I’ll leave before I’m disappointed.”

The St. John’s multiplex system from ICMI was new to us, so the foreman was very carefully following the instructions that came with it. Charles came in and complained it was taking too long, so he picked up a hot soldering iron and, not realizing the power was on to the relay, started soldering. The iron shorted out and sent 110 volts into the low voltage system. We called the maker, who really had no idea. He suggested the voltage spike probably had shortened the life of some of the components. To this day the whole organ shuts down for no obvious reason when the temperature in the church is hot.

There was a fire at the shop late in 2013, which originated in one of the lights. This was not much of a surprise to me because the wiring was a mix of aluminum and copper. The light switches were always warm. Even though the majority of the building was left intact, insurance deemed it a loss and a new building was put up in its place. Amazingly, only one wood rank was in the shop at the time. The remainder of that particular project was down the hill in the shop warehouse.



Figure 2: Hendrickson shop before the fire

Children of the shop

Most organ shops have spinoffs, and Hendrickson's shop was no exception. Notable among the "children" of the shop is Lynn Dobson, Dobson Organbuilders of Lake City, IA. Founded in 1974, the Dobson shop has completed some 100 organs, many of them large and significant. I succeeded Sperling as voicer in 1979 and remained until 1984. My company, Grandall and Engen LLC of Maple Grove, MN, operating since 1984, does tuning and enhancements for many clients in the Twin Cities area and western Wisconsin, including a number of universities. The third offshoot is Rob Hoppe, Robert D. Hoppe & Associates of Algoma, WI, founded in 1986. He often builds new organs with digital enhancements.

Charles' two sons, Eric and Andreas, took over the business when Charles retired in 2015 and continue, mostly doing tuning and maintenance.