

RUDOLF VON BECKERATH ORGELBAU GMBH



The Company's History

Rudolf von Beckerath was born in Munich on February 19th, 1907. He came from an artistic family; his father was a painter, his mother a pianist. In the year of his birth his parents moved to Hamburg, where Rudolf von Beckerath grew up, went to school and initially decided to make a career as a mechanical engineer.

Impressed by the quality of organ building in northern Germany, above all by the organs of Arp Schnitger, Beckerath gave up his apprenticeship and decided to become an organ builder. As preparatory training he went to the art school in Hamburg where he learned cabinet making, and studied at home the theoretical fundamentals of organ building. At this time he built a small house-organ in the cellar of his parents' home, which was heard at concerts and in a radio transmission from the Beckerath house.

For his final instruction and training in organ building Rudolf von Beckerath moved to France on the recommendation of Hans Henny Jahnn and in January 1929 entered the workshop of the organ builder Victor Gonzalez in Chatillon sous Bagneux, near Paris, where they were still making tracker organs. He wrote: "They still knew how to make a mechanical action. " Although the signs were already perceptible that this method of construction would be discontinued, the handicraft skills were still there. The old mechanical action, not only works without delay, but what is more, it is touch-sensitive, allowing the organist to influence the initial sound as the air pressure builds up in the pipe".

After nearly 2 1/2 years of training, Rudolf von Beckerath moved to Denmark to work as a pipe voicer at Frobenius & Co. in Lingby near Copenhagen. During this time he labored independently at the construction of the large organ in the Church of Our Lady in Copenhagen. In 1931 the French company called him back to Paris. He became a Director, and the company took over a patent on him. He wrote: "My tasks also included the management of the company. I contributed much to the setting up and expansion of this relatively young firm. I established the in-house construction of flue stops and reed stops, which had previously been imported from outside. I set up a locksmith's shop and introduced improved working methods. At the same time I undertook independent work in design and construction. When in 1935 the political situation became more and more clear, there was some boycotting of German companies in France, and of French companies with German associations. We began to suffer losses, so, after a friendly, mutual agreement I decided to terminate my contract."

In 1936 Rudolf von Beckerath returned to Germany where at first he worked as a freelance organ-building consultant in Hamburg. The work included planning, construction and supervision of building works. From November 1938 he simultaneously carried out the duties of an expert on both organs and bells in the government Ministry for Church Affairs. Thereafter he moved to Berlin, was called up into the Wehrmacht in 1941, and was taken prisoner by the Americans in 1945. In May 1946 he was released and returned to his native town of Munich, near to which his family still lived.

Whilst he was a consultant in Hamburg, the Sauer company built the organ in Hamburg-Othmarschen (Christuskirche) to his specification and he himself voiced it.

After his release from the Prisoner-of-War camp he resumed his work as an organ expert and worked on the planning and advisory stages for the construction of the organ in the court chapel of the Munich Residence. Meanwhile the Protestant Church in Hanover also retained him to catalogue, measure and describe all the organs in its area.

At the same time he made efforts to set up on his own as an organ builder. Because there was no examination for the Master's certificate in France, he had to make up for it in Hamburg where he had returned in order to settle down with his own workshop. This examination was necessary in Germany since the Nazis had abolished the freedom of trade. In 1949 he was able finally to set up his own firm.

His first large organ, which he built for the Musikhalle Hamburg with 59 stops, 4 manuals, slider chests and mechanical key action, was a remarkable and sensational construction.

From the very beginning he strove to manufacture as much as possible in his own workshops. As early as 1949 his firm was already building reed stops based on his experiences in France.

As the workforce gradually expanded from the 6 initially employed, Rudolf von Beckerath established a pipe workshop in 1956 and after that he built all his flue pipes without outside assistance.

A geographical expansion of his customer base took place from 1957 onwards, starting with the construction of a 4 manual, purely mechanical organ for export to Cleveland, USA, where it was regarded as an absolute novelty. The largest Beckerath instrument to that date was built in 1960 in Montreal (Picture), Canada. This also had mechanical action, with 78 stops spread over 5 manuals.

Today there are Beckerath organs in many countries. Apart from the USA (Hawaii and others) they are also to be found in Australia (Sydney/Perth), in Canada (Montreal/Sault Ste. Marie), in Croatia (Dubrovnik), in South Africa (Kapstadt), in Japan (Kyoto, Tokyo and others), in Poland (Nova Huta), in India (Bombay) and in Russia (Krasnodar, Kondopoga, Samara).

Another important and interesting task has been the restoration of classic organs. Over the years 26 historic instruments have been restored, among them the famous Arp Schnitger organs in Steinkirchen, Cappel and Mariana, Brazil.

After the death of Herr von Beckerath in 1976 a limited company was formed, under which control passed partly to his wife, Veronika von Beckerath, and partly to three of his most trusted employees. All have contributed greatly to the continuance of the Rudolf von Beckerath tradition. Through the use of the best timber and other materials; through the construction of sensitive actions, and not least through the expertise of their pipe-voicing; they continue to build organs of high quality.

Over the years techniques have been perfected which have brought about a revolution in modern organ building. The 30 employees strive constantly to balance the demands of modern construction with those of the historic tradition.

When in 1987 the managing director Herr Helmut Kleemann retired, to be followed in 1990 by Frau Herta Deichmann, the works manager, Mr. Timm Sckopp (Picture), a former pupil of Rudolf von Beckerath, took over as managing director. In 1992 Frau Christel Glasemann was promoted to Commercial Manager from within the company.

In 1995 Frau Veronika von Beckerath decided to sell the company and retire.

In 1995 Mr. Timm Sckopp wanted to pass the control of the firm into younger hands and appointed the long-standing principal organ builder, Rolf Miehl, to take over responsibility for technical activities within the company. Timm remained an important advisor until his death in August 2012.

Since the beginning of 1996, the management is in the hands of Mr. Holger Redlich.

In October 2001, with the assistance of Dr. Whitney Reader as an investor and enthusiastic organ admirer, Mr. Miehl and Mr. Redlich, took over the company.

Following the founders tradition the Rudolf von Beckerath Orgelbau GmbH is constantly increasing its world wide reputation through remarkable installations in Europe and overseas, such as: Russia, Australia, South Korea, United Kingdom, Austria and the United States of America.

