

# Apprenticing with Herman Schlicker

Joseph E. Robinson

## I meet Herman Schlicker

After completing a master's degree, I talked over options with my teacher, Robert Prichard. Since I was very interested in all things related to pipe organs, a career in organbuilding looked promising. Mr. Prichard was well acquainted with Herman Schlicker, and broached the subject of my joining his firm as an apprentice. Schlicker was not interested. He said that the best apprentices come right out of high school and he had bad luck with those who had master's degrees.

Herr Schlicker flew to Southern California on business, and so it was arranged that while he was here I would be his chauffeur. One stop that I remember was at what is now the Crystal Cathedral. Their first building contained a small Wicks organ, which was to be replaced with a substantial instrument. Schlicker was among the contenders. At another stop, I was disgusted with the way they treated Mr. Schlicker—didn't they realize they were talking with a great man?

After our final stop, Schlicker said to come on to Buffalo, and I would be their newest apprentice. I drove my red Corvair across the country and rented a room from Mrs. Herbst, who had rented to many a Schlicker apprentice. She asked us to keep our stereo playing of organ music down—it reminded her of her husband's funeral.

## The factory

The factory is described in sales literature from the late 1960s:

From a modest beginning, the company has expanded to include 65 persons at the Buffalo factory-office, as well as sales and service representatives throughout the United States. The construction of the present modern factory was begun in 1947, and since that time six additions have been made to the building, giving a total working area of over 36,000 square feet, and including a spacious erecting room.

That there was no master plan for this expansion from the beginning was obvious. For example, there was a large room devoted to lumber, that in most respects functioned well. However, there was no loading dock, or even a door to the outside. When a lumber truck came, Herr Friedrich (foreman) would announce "LUMBER!" and we would all drop what we were doing and rush to the truck to unload the lumber piece by piece and feed them through a window in the lumber room. On a cold winter day, that was a very unpleasant task.

## Factory tours

Occasionally music committees or groups of organists would tour the factory. I was among those selected to conduct the tours. At first I would meet visitors at the door and then physically take them through the building, saying this is where we do this, and this is where we do that. Then I witnessed a tour led by Manuel Rosales, who was then at Schlicker Organ Co. He started at the melting pot in the pipe shop, went step by step in the construction of an organ, ending in the erecting room. Even though there was some crisscrossing in that method, it explained the organbuilding process better, and I changed my approach accordingly.

## Organization chart

When Schlicker described the apprentice position to me, he said that I would work in all aspects of organbuilding and eventually be able to do any task. In fact, his factory was full of workers that could do any task. He was proud of that. So, organization was simple: Herman Schlicker, President; Ken List, Vice President; Herr Friedrich, Foreman; organ builders, and apprentice, with a few exceptions such as the accountant. In practice,



Herman Schlicker

however, people would tend to gravitate to that which they did best. Take Don Bohall, for example. In many organizations, he would be referred to as Service Manager. He could quickly diagnose and fix problems, clearly the best man to call if an organ under the ten-year warranty experienced an unexpected malfunction. I asked Don how he managed to be exempt from the lumber calls. He told me that after I had been there a few years and made myself valuable in a particular operation I could announce that I was no longer going to do lumber. But I would have to be sure I was valuable enough. Some who tried that too soon were no longer doing lumber or anything else at the firm.

## Apprentice duties

The apprentice program at Schlicker's was more typical of the German apprentice system than what we are used to in the USA. The view at the Schlicker Organ Company was: we pay you for this time and so you do whatever we ask of you, be it sweeping, cleaning messes, painting walls, or shoveling snow! So this, I thought, is why people who have worked so hard for a master's degree don't like it here. I was told a story of one such, who after driving from California worked one day, got in his car and drove back home. One unhappy apprentice had given the place a nickname "Stalag 15-30" [the address was 1530 Military Road]. Stories of this nature were a kind of unofficial initiation exam.

## Information on a need-to-know basis

At graduate school, you are filled with information and encouraged to ask questions and find answers. There were many things I wanted to know. For example, on most three-manual Schlicker organs, the pedal contains a unit 16–8 principal rank, but the 16 and 8-foot stopped flutes are always separate ranks. How come? I learned that awhile before my arrival, some former employees had stolen plans, records, scalings, and materials—everything they needed to make copies of Schlicker organs. So Mr. Schlicker was now cautious in sharing information, and an apprentice is at the bottom of the totem pole in need-to-know.

I got my lecture in Schlicker organ design in a most unexpected way. One holiday season, there was in the factory a 32' Bombarde, which was to be placed in an organ previously finished with that stop prepared for. Schlicker had placed a small two-rank unit organ in a Buffalo bank for publicity purposes. Since I could play, I was assigned to play Christmas music on the little organ while the bank was open. One day after the bank closed, I returned to the factory, where I was



The Schlicker factory as it appeared in 1970

greeted by Ken List. Ken said, "So how is Merry Christmas on the Gedeckt?" I responded, "Well, it's OK, but that little organ really lacks a proper foundation. Too bad we could not have hooked up that 32' Bombarde with it."

Schlicker overheard the conversation, and while I thought anyone would recognize that I was being outlandishly facetious, Schlicker thought I was serious that the third rank in an organ should be a 32' Bombarde. "You are there representing the Schlicker Organ Company," he said. "You know nothing. A lot has to happen in an organ before you include a 32' Bombarde." So I heard all about small to medium to large organs in a very informative lecture, though I could have done without the frequent "You know nothing" comments.

## A wiring error

An electro-pneumatic organ was being set up for testing. There was a testing wiring harness used for such purposes. I said, "I have never done this before; there are surely a lot of wires here." I was told, "There is nothing to it, just start here at the end, and take each wire in sequence." So I did, but it was the wrong end. Final result was that low C sounded from the highest note on the keyboard and vice versa. I started to play a hymn. "What on earth are you doing?" "I thought I might never again have the opportunity to hear music inverted and wanted to see what it sounds like." "You idiot, why don't you just broadcast to the world what a fool you are!" So I stopped abruptly. Fortunately this was the testing wiring harness and not the organ's permanent wiring.

## A bright and dim bulb

Sometimes my education was of use. When something unusual came along, such as "What the heck is an 8/9 None?," I would know the answer. There was a fine older gentleman, whose name I unfortunately no longer remember, who was in charge of Schlicker consoles. He would review with me console layouts, controls, order of stops, etc. He said, "You know much more than those guys. You should be recognized for your knowledge and taken off the lumber run." Obviously I liked him. On the other hand, as the wiring example shows, in construction matters I was a rookie. One day I was assigned to a task and heard rumblings, "I don't know why they assigned HIM this task. HE doesn't even know how to use a HAM-MER." The speaker usually got this task. Since in this case it was an overtime task, I was robbing him of time-and-a-half pay. Welcome to the world of office politics. I did not like it, and was a rookie there as well. Fortunately for future employment I learned 1) never be cruel to someone and 2) never be the company scapegoat.

## Organ pipes

Most flue pipes were manufactured in the pipe shop. Reed pipes built to



'Merry Christmas on the Gedeckt'. This 2-rank semi-portable pipe organ is similar to the one the author played in a Buffalo, New York bank.



High C of a 4' flue rank showing distortion of pipe shape caused by tuning collar

Schlicker specifications were imported from Europe. For flue pipes it was considered that for the vast majority of cases, such things as tuning scrolls, pipe slotting, and tuning collars were detrimental. Take tuning collars, for example. A tuning collar means that at the top of the pipe there is a sudden increase in scale. On bass pipes that were nearly cut to length, the effect is minimal. But on treble pipes, the distortion of pipe shape is considerable. Thus Schlicker organs had pipes cut to length and were cone tuned. This practice was one reason why Schlicker mixtures had outstanding cohesion with the principal chorus.

## The Schlicker sound

Open-toe voicing, low wind pressure, low cutups, etc. are only part of the story. It is well known that some Aeolian-Skinner contracts, such as the Mormon Tabernacle and Grace Cathedral, speci-





The author's teacher, Clarence Mader, was consultant for the large organ at First Congregational Church, Los Angeles

fied that G. Donald Harrison do the final voicing. It is the artist who does the finishing that gives an organ its distinctive sound; thus organs of the same manufacturer may sound different depending upon who does the finishing. At the Schlicker Company, we had two superb voicers who finished at least the more important instruments. Wally Guzowski voiced with a bold, fresh, exciting sound. I decided that someday I would like him to voice my residence organ when I could afford such. Louis Rothenberger Jr. had a more elegant, refined sound. [We always specified the Jr. because LR senior had also been a voicer.]

They were aware that their styles were different, and Wally told me that they worked together to try and make a uniform result. There should be a specific sound quality associated with the brand. These men produced some instruments of distinction. As voicers, they would physically adjust pipes. As finishers in the final location, they would sit at the console, playing through a rank of pipes, pick a note and shout a command to someone like me in the pipes: "Lower the languid," "Pull the upper lip forward," "Narrow the windway," "Increase the cutup," and so forth.

### Deterioration of the Schlicker sound

As years have passed, I have noticed that some of my favorite instruments no longer have the magic they possessed when they were new. More is involved than just my ears getting older; recordings of the original instruments captured the magic. Here is what I think may have happened. Schlicker instruments were cone tuned and were very stable in tuning within themselves, but the whole instrument goes flat in winter and sharp in summer.

Take a fictitious organ service man Sam Cifodelance, for example. Sam gets a customer who has a Schlicker organ. He orders some tuning cones from a supply house. In winter, when the organ goes flat, he pounds the pipes with the pointed end of the tuning cones to bring the pitch up to A440. In summer, he pounds the pipes with the other end to bring the pipes down to A440. Over time this attention alters pipe mouth dimensions slightly, and what was an outstanding sound becomes an ordinary sound.

This theory is an educated guess, but

I do know that who does the servicing makes a huge difference, is a concern of organbuilders, and improper servicing deteriorates an organ's sound. It saddens me that some of my favorite instruments have deteriorated.

### Schlicker's bias

Bad for Aeolian-Skinner, but providential for Herman Schlicker was the rise in popularity of the *Orgelbewegung*. With his strong German accent and experience in German organbuilding, he was in an ideal place to be the foremost American builder in that style. I discussed with Schlicker a trip to Europe I was going to take. We went through the German instruments I was going to see. "Yah, you must see that," he would say. For Holland, "There are some good things there." For France, "A waste of time."

### The good consultants

One of the first things you do as an apprentice is to rack pipes on a windchest. Here were some pipes that looked like a double row of little milk cans with their lids soldered on top. This experimental rank had been specified by Paul Manz. Louie Rothenberger Jr. was having a very difficult time getting the pipes to speak at all. I made the comment, "I don't see why we need organ consultants at all. A church should just choose a builder and let their expertise do the job." Louie responded, "You are new here. You will eventually have the opportunity to visit many organs. When you do, compare those that were built under consultants such as Paul Manz, your teacher Clarence Mader, Paul Bunjes, E. Power Biggs and so forth, with those that had no consultant. I think you will find that our best organs had consultants such as these." He was right!

When I was at Occidental College, I played among other things French Romantic organ music that I liked. I commented to my teacher Clarence Mader how well the Schlicker played that music. He replied, "Yes, you need French reeds to play that music and I requested that Schlicker include them in the Swell One division." I bring this up because on his own, Herman Schlicker would not have given the Swell One division a French flavor. Somehow they managed to do that and yet have it integrate beautifully with the rest of the instrument, resulting in far greater versatility. The very best in-



One of the duplicate consoles at First Congregational Church, Los Angeles. A lot of thought went into the logic allowing both consoles to be played simultaneously by two organists.

struments somehow achieved a result of being more than the sum of their parts, a joy to play and to hear.

### The not-so-good consultants

These are the ones who think they know more about organbuilding than the organbuilder, specifying scales, wind pressures, mouth widths, voicing techniques and so forth. One such organ had so many conditions that the final result did not have the distinctive Schlicker sound. Herman Schlicker summed it up

thus: "It might as well have been built by ———." [I don't know if ——— would want to claim it either.]

In finishing an organ, Wally Guzowski explained to me, "You have to be very diplomatic with the organists. When they tell you what they want, smile and nod your head like you agree with them. When they are gone, disregard everything they said. Organists know nothing about organ finishing." A quite common occurrence in finishing an organ would be the arrival of the organist with some

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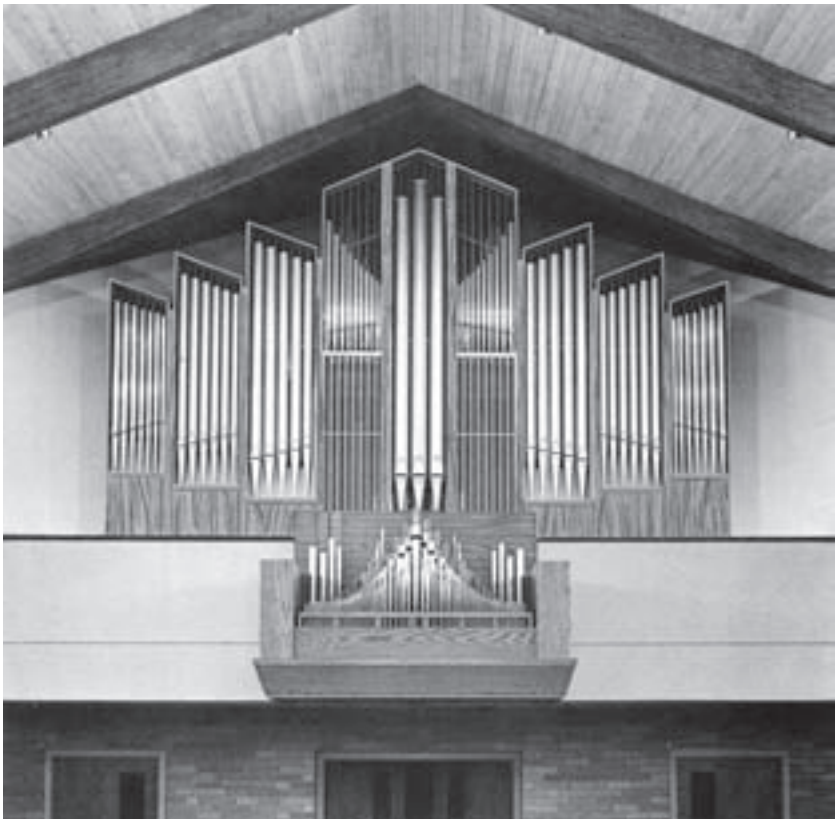
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Mr. Schlicker arranged practice time for the author on this organ at Trinity Lutheran Church in Tonawanda, New York.

last requests for what was going to be his instrument. At that time, it is too late. A successful finishing process brings out the maximum beauty a pipe was designed to give. An organist's request to now make a German Principal more like a French Montre, for example, robs the instrument of its potential. That decision should have been made long before.<sup>1</sup>

Insubordination

I was given two rules, which probably came about due to prior difficulties with employees who were also organists: 1) When you are on an assignment do not play the organ, even during a break or after you are done. Customers are charged by the hour and we don't want them to think they are paying for you to play the organ. 2) Because you may be called at any time to travel, do not accept a church organist position. It is not fair to the company, the church, or yourself. Rule 1 was difficult to manage; we worked on some beautiful instruments. But I did manage this rule in spite of working on some instruments I longed to play.

After arriving in Buffalo, each Sunday I visited various churches to see and hear organs and get a feeling of that particular church. One Sunday, I visited the University United Methodist Church. While certainly not the finest organ in town, the people were very friendly and

when they discovered that I was from California and knew no one in town, they invited me to meals and made me feel at home and said, "You have friends here." Shortly thereafter their organist moved away. "Do you play, Joe? Would you mind substituting for a while till we find a permanent organist?" A few Sundays later, "We want you to be our organist." "Impossible—I can be called out of town at any time without notice." "We can have someone fill in on the piano when that happens. Please be our organist." It seemed like this would work; they knew I would leave without notice when Schlicker called. I would fulfill my obligation to him, and what he did not know would not hurt anyone. This happy arrangement continued for many months.

I have a couple theories of how Ken List found out about this arrangement. "Joe, you have to tell Schlicker." I dreaded that conversation, but I was caught, so I set up a time to meet with him. Schlicker told me he understood after all the time I had put into learning to play the organ that I would not want to just let the talent die. So he instructed me to resign and he would arrange for me to have practice time at his church, which had a very nice organ. As a naive young person, I thought as long as I can do my job, he has no business telling me what I can and can't do on my own time. And there were



22-rank [+50 digital] Hausorgel, Robinson Opus 1 (also known as 'Opus Last')



The author playing Duruflé on the Occidental College Schlicker organ c. 1968

many around me who encouraged that thinking. Perhaps more than the mundane tasks, this kind of thing is the reason Schlicker had trouble with master's degree organists. In subsequent employment 'my own time' would be redefined by being on call 24/7 with aids such as beepers and later, cell phones. One boss would even follow me into a restroom stall. So now I see that Schlicker was at least trying to meet me half way.

Money

Perhaps because organs are very expensive instruments, money is a problem in organbuilding. Herman Schlicker was a master of finance. We did not look forward to his daily rounds at the factory. "Robinson, why don't you gold-plate it while you are at it?" That comment translates to the work is very good, but your progress is too slow and we can't afford it. So I would speed up. Then, "Robinson, what is this? It will never do! The Schlicker organ is a quality instrument." While making us employees stressed out during his rounds, he did achieve the right balance, getting us to do good work with enough production speed to be cost effective and keep the firm in business. After he died, that balance was lost and the firm eventually went bankrupt, as have far too many organbuilding firms.<sup>2</sup>

As an apprentice I made very little. One day I got an unexpected raise. Congress had just passed an increase in the minimum wage, and the salary I was making was below the new minimum. Schlicker added an extra five cents an hour because he did not want to be seen as paying minimum wage. As an apprentice, I rented a room. Most full-fledged organbuilders lived in apartments. I wanted to live in a house in the suburbs and I did not see that happening at any time in the future if I stayed on my current path. Many things I loved about organbuilding—your part in making a thing of beauty. But there were other important things to me that were either



Texas Lutheran College, Sequin, Texas. This organ was unfortunately destroyed by fire. The decision was made to create a replacement organ exactly like the one destroyed. It was one of the author's favorite instruments in the factory.

denied or out of reach. So my house in the suburbs was financed by leaving organbuilding and becoming a business systems analyst. And I am quite happy with my self-built 22-rank residence organ. Unfortunately, lack of space in my residence made it impossible for the third rank to be a 32' Bombarde. ■

Notes

- 1. For an interesting exchange between an organbuilder and organist who wanted very different things see Charles Callahan, *Aeolian-Skinner Remembered*, letter 161.
- 2. *Ibid.*, p. 32, paragraph 4.

The author wishes to thank Justin Matters for permission to use the photographs of Schlicker organs.

Joseph E. Robinson received his B.A. from California State University at Long Beach and his M.A. from Occidental College in Los Angeles. He studied piano with Charles Shepherd, and organ with Clarence Mader, Paul Stroud, and Robert Prichard. He studied choral conducting with Frank Pooler and Howard Swan. During 1970–71 he was an organbuilding apprentice with the Schlicker Organ Co. under the direction of Herman Schlicker. He was organist at the University United Methodist Church in Buffalo, New York, and later St. James' United Methodist Church in Pasadena, California.

Now a retired business systems analyst, he is currently organist for the Mission Lake Ward, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. His interest in pipe organs and their music was sparked years ago when, as a sixth grade student, his class was taken on a field trip to a recital on the Mormon Tabernacle Organ. He has been married 35 years to his wife Pat, who has given her support for the large pipe organ in their home. One day during construction Pat said, "You need help, and I have found just the help you need—G. Donald Harrison." She had found a golden retriever named Harrison on a rescue site. Harrison is now a happy member of the family.

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