



Climbing Mountains

Organist Florence Mustric has recorded a series of CDs featuring one of Greater Cleveland's most unusual instruments.

BY RORY O'CONNOR
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Florence Mustric is one of the most talented of Shaker's numerous and gifted amateur musicians. She also might be the most physically fit. She told The Plain Dealer arts writer Donald Rosenberg that recording her recently released CD of classical music, *East of Berlin*, on a unique old pipe organ "was like climbing mountains."

So she demonstrates for Shaker Life, punctuating the explanation with words like "strenuous" and "aerobic."

"Up here you have four keyboards," she gestures. "Down here you have the pedals. You're playing with both your hands and feet," she gestures again, pumping her shoulders, raising and lowering her legs. "And to top it off, this music is very challenging."

The reference is to the CD's centerpiece, Mussorgsky's famous "Pictures at an Exhibition," which Mustric, a graduate of Oberlin College and the Cleveland Institute of Music, transcribed for organ. This is not to leave out several pieces by three other composers – Ben-Haim, Sokola, and Suda – that round out the CD. Combine the extraordinary music with the unique



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instrument on which Florence performed – the Beckerath pipe organ at Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church on West 30th Street in Cleveland – and you have a musical (and physical) workout nonpareil.

Then add into the mix Alan Bise, one of Greater Cleveland’s preeminent recording engineers and a very exacting classical music producer. He had his recording gear set up in the church, getting every pitch and nuance while Florence wrestled with and caressed the enormous Beckerath. “I finish a piece, and Alan says, ‘That was great, Florence. Can we do it again?’”

Mustric performs on the Beckerath the first two Wednesdays of every month for a free program called Music Near the Market. Robert Myers, Trinity’s music and choir director, plays the last two Wednesdays. But for all their talent, the real attraction in the choir loft is the Beckerath.

Built in German workshops in the early 1950s, it was the first pipe organ Rudolph von Beckerath built for the international market. It came to Cleveland down the St. Lawrence Seaway in 1956 and was trucked to Trinity and assembled by technicians who had accompanied it on its journey. Beckerath himself came a few months later for a run-through.

According to the Beckerath web site, the instrument “was regarded as an absolute novelty” when it got here. It has 3,467 pipes, some as small as a little finger, some 16 feet long.

It is a purely mechanical instrument (as opposed to electrical) and as such could have been built in the 17th century were it not for the tiny electrical motor that silently pumps air to the pipes. “The Beckerath is beautiful, you can clearly hear every nuance of every pitch,” Mustric says, calling it a “showcase” instrument.

“Beckerath had instruments all over Europe, but he wanted one in the United States,” she says. “This was difficult for him because he had been in the German army during the Second World War.”

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A partial array of the Beckerath organ's 3,467 pipes as seen from the church floor.

That's to say, in post-war America, some strong prejudices remained against German combat soldiers. But Trinity's organist and choir director at the time, Ralph Schultz, was not hobbled by resentment. He just wanted a great instrument. He ordered the Beckerath sight unseen, based on a recommendation by Robert Noehren, who taught organ at the University of Michigan.

"Gee, I don't know, back in those days it probably would have cost somewhere around \$50,000 maybe?" Mustric says.

Mustric and Bise began recording in November 2006, took a break in December and January, and wrapped in March 2007. It was a harsh winter, frequently making recording impossible. The radiators in the church clanged, and there were blizzards that kept at least one of the registrants – those necessary human adjuncts to organ performance who operate the instrument's numerous stop knobs – from showing up.

But eventually they recorded enough music for five CDs, which will be released as a series by the MSR Classical label. *East of Berlin*, the first in the series, was released in June 2008. It has been entered in the 2008 Grammy competition. Rosenberg, writing in *Gramophone* magazine, said, "Mustric plays the Mussorgsky as if the work were born for organ."

Mustric, a native Clevelander, financed the recording sessions herself. She makes her living as a writer and editor, but just because she doesn't earn a living from music day-to-day, it seems somehow disingenuous to call her an amateur: Her musical dedication, her world-class skills, and her master's degree in organ performance mark her otherwise.

And, interestingly, she does not keep an organ in her Shaker Boulevard home.

She practices on a piano, taking a much-needed break from mountain climbing. ■

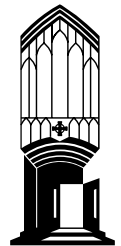
Florence Mustric's CD can be purchased from her web site, www.Florencemustric.com or from MSR Classical at www.msacd.com

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