



The Holy Cross and Immaculata Organs

An organ was installed in Immaculata Church in 1860 and it was either the last work of Matthias Schwab, or most likely, one of the first instruments manufactured by Johann Heinrich Koehnken and Gallus Grimm who purchased Schwab's business when he retired in 1860.

Johann Heinrich (aka John Henry) Koehnken was born in Altenbuehlstadt in Lower Saxony in 1819. He apprenticed there as a master cabinet maker but decided to migrate to America in 1837. He earned one dollar a week plus meals as a worker in furniture factories in Baltimore and Wheeling, West Virginia.

Koehnken arrived in Cincinnati in 1839 and was hired as an apprentice console and pipe finisher in Matthias Schwab's organ factory. Twenty one years later in 1860, Koehnken and a co-worker, Gallus Grimm, bought out Schwab and began building organs under the firm name Koehnken and Grimm. Most organs installed from 1860 to 1895 in Catholic churches in Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky were manufactured by Koehnken and Grimm.

When the first Holy Cross Church was completed in 1873, a melodeon, rather than an organ, was purchased and used to accompany singing. Melodeons were small free standing instruments that had a keyboard, reeds instead of pipes and a foot operated vacuum pump. The reeds were used to create sound using a vacuum rather than air pressure traditionally used in pipe organs. The melodeon was much smaller and less expensive than a pipe organ. Holy Cross was small and couldn't accommodate a large pipe organ so a melodeon was an appropriate choice.

When the second Holy Cross Church was built, a new Koehnken and Grimm organ was installed at a



A melodeon manufactured in 1849.

cost of \$2,163 and dedicated on August 11, 1895. At the dedication, the organ was played by Professor Andrew Boex who was the organist at St. Xavier Church and Mrs. Margaret Abel, the organist at Holy Cross Church.

Mr. Louis Piket, the architect for Immaculata Church and the second Holy Cross Church, also played the Koehnken and Grimm Organ at the dedication. The new church was dedicated two weeks later on August 25, 1895.

The original organ at Immaculata served until 1908. At that time, the Alfred Mathers Church Organ Company, successor to the Koehnken and Grimm Company, enlarged and upgraded the instrument.

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The upgrading proved to be less durable than expected and the organ required frequent maintenance and continuous repair. A decision was made to replace it and several plans were considered but the one that made the most sense financially and historically was moving the Koehnken and Grimm Organ from Holy Cross to Immaculata. Holy Cross had closed in 1970 and the organ was no longer in use.

The Cunningham Pipe Organ Company was contracted to remove the old Mather Organ from Immaculata and dismantle, move and reconstruct the Koehnken and Grimm in the Immaculata choir loft. The work was completed in July 1973.

The newly restored Koehnken and Grimm Organ was dedicated at a Solemn Blessing on July 28, 1973. A grand inaugural concert followed the next day. Ron McCarty, the choirmaster at Immaculata, led the program. He was assisted by R. Harold Clark, the choirmaster and organist at Old St. Mary Church who brought along a nine voice choir. Kathleen Battle, a 1971 graduate of the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music, was a featured soloist. Ms. Battle went on to fame with the Metropolitan Opera.

The 115 year old Koehnken and Grimm Organ is still in use today. It was one of the last built by Koehnken and Grimm and is considered one of the finest remaining nineteenth century church organs in Cincinnati.

~Jim Steiner

The Immaculata Organ as it appeared in 1912. This is the Mather Organ conversion of the original organ installed in 1860. Note the original rose window in the center of the image. This window was removed in 1947 and replaced with concrete blocks and a glass block cross. The current rose window was salvaged from St. Bonaventure Church and installed in 2005. Photograph courtesy of the Passionist Archives, Union City, NJ

