

## Harold August Paul Rutz (1930-2020)



Lutheranism in the State of Texas has always managed to foster its own identity within the context of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in the United States, although geographic isolation from the centers of American Lutheranism belie its historical importance to the greater Church. Two Synod presidents (Behnken and Kieschnick) were born in Texas, and a third (Harms) served in the state through much of his career, both as pastor and District President. Lutherans from the German lands had begun to settle in Texas in the 1830s, although these early pioneers were largely motivated by capitalist aspirations. However, the Wendish Lutherans, arriving in 1854 and settling in the post-oak forests and plains between Austin and Houston, had grown frustrated by the strictures imposed by the Prussian Union of 1817, which had greatly curtailed their ability to administer sacraments properly and to preach the Gospel freely.<sup>1</sup> In Texas, these faithful Wendish Lutherans established parochial schools wherever they settled, calling both a pastor and a separate teacher/musician when possible. It was through their labors that the Lutheran Concordia College was established in Austin, Texas, opening for classes in 1926, its main building, Kilian Hall, a tribute to Jan Kilian (and his descendants) who had first brought confessional Lutheranism to Texas.<sup>2</sup>

Through its years as a boarding school in the German *Gymnasium* format, to its eventual development into a four-year college and now university, Concordia educated many of the state's parish teachers, lay workers, pastors, and musicians. At this seminal institution, poised as it was to lead Texas Lutherans, Harold ("Hal") Rutz served as a professor of music from 1964 until 1996, shaping the practice of Lutheran sacred music in Texas through his years of teaching, conducting, performing, and mentoring.

Born on March 20, 1930, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to Elmer and Elva Kuphal Rutz, Harold Rutz commenced piano lessons at age six, studying with Gerhard Schroth of Mt. Olive Lutheran Church, Milwaukee, and founder of the Walther League Acappella Choir, an ensemble for Lutheran youth. At age 12, Rutz began organ study with Hugo Gehrke, music director at Immanuel Lutheran Church, with whom he learned Bach's *Orgelbüchlein*. Rutz attended Concordia College in Milwaukee which, like most of the Concordias at the time, offered a residential high school followed by two years of college, with graduates receiving the equivalent of an associates' degree. He sang in both Schroth's chorus and in Harold Alber's choir at Concordia, Milwaukee, both of which Rutz counted as important formative experiences in his early life. Upon graduation, Rutz transferred as a junior to Concordia, River Forest, where he studied organ with Carl Halter and Paul Bunjes, both of whom instilled in him an appreciation for baroque music, Rutz benefitting from the spirit of the *Orgelbewegung* which these elder teachers so embodied. He recalled the colorful Sunday evening parties the bachelor Bunjes would host at his home, during which he regaled his students with tales of his own European organ explorations, conveying to them as best he could the mystical tonal world those ancient instruments inhabit. Rutz earned his undergraduate degree in 1952, shortly thereafter receiving a call as musician/teacher to Zion Lutheran Church and School in Detroit, Michigan.<sup>3</sup>



*Hal Rutz playing the organ, as found in the 1951 Concordia River Forest yearbook, Pillars.*

The four years he would spend at Zion shaped his formation as a Lutheran musician. The church, founded in 1882, had established a parochial school which, by the late nineteenth century, counted some 500 pupils, by some accounts the largest Lutheran school in the USA, while at one point in the 1890s the congregation numbered some 3,100 members, the largest church in the LCMS.<sup>4</sup> During the 1950s, the pastor, Rev. Kenneth Runge, cultivated a high church Lutheranism which included masses on saints' days, a full observance of the Tres Ors,<sup>5</sup> a weekly eucharist, and a general concern for liturgical propriety decades before care for such matters became the ecclesiastical fashion. Rutz remembered the workload at this congregation. He served as fifth and sixth grade teacher during the weekdays, but also played organ and directed the adult choir and a small children's choir. By the 1950s, Zion's church and school membership had declined, its inner city location necessitating its members to drive some 45 minutes from suburbia, thus largely

precluding their returning on Sundays and thus frustrating Rutz's musical vision. Nonetheless, he considered the organ one of the most satisfying he had ever played. The church's 1914 Felgemaker had been repurposed and installed in the new, Gothic-styled sanctuary, when it was constructed in 1933. The work, undertaken by the Vottler-Holtkamp-Sparling Organ Company of Cleveland, Ohio, as Opus 1536,<sup>6</sup> was personally supervised by Walter Holtkamp, resulting in a 32-rank instrument of neo-baroque tendencies with an unenclosed Great, which Rutz particularly enjoyed. Perhaps the transcendent sounds of European organs that Bunjes had attempted to convey to his students found a certain embodiment in this instrument. While in Detroit, he also served as accompanist for the Detroit Bach Chorus.<sup>7</sup>

In June, 1954, Rutz married Viola Larkin at his home church of Immanuel, Milwaukee, with Rev. Runge officiating.<sup>8</sup> Larkin, from Florida, had met Rutz at Concordia, River Forest, where she had graduated in 1953 with a Bachelor of Education degree. They would begin their married life in Detroit.<sup>9</sup>

Zion's location posed increasing challenges for recruiting musicians, and in 1956 Rutz accepted a call to Immanuel Lutheran Church in Kansas City, noting that "it had the potential for a larger music program." This congregation already had a fine adult choir, a high school girls' choir, and three school children's choirs, of which he directed only the upper grades. His call was still primarily as a school teacher—in this case, sixth grade only—but still involved parish music. For four years during the summer, Rutz studied for his Master of Church Music degree at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, availing himself of organ study with Dr. Thomas Matthews at the nearby St. Luke's Episcopal Church. For his graduate recital in July, 1960, Rutz performed Hanff's "Ein feste Burg," Bach's Prelude and Fugue in E Minor ("The Wedge"), BWV 548, Franck's "Prelude, Fugue, and Variation," Opus 18, Flor Peeters' *Modale Suite*, Opus 43, Langlais' "Prelude

Modal,” No. 1 of the *24 Pieces*, concluding with Hindemith’s entire Sonata #1 for Organ. Rutz received his diploma in 1960.<sup>10</sup>

In the classroom, Rutz routinely mentored student teachers, most of whom came from Concordia Teachers College in Seward, Nebraska. He found these experiences with college-age students rewarding, enkindling in him the notion that he might consider teaching on the university level in due course. He recalled the support of the school by the church and the healthy church music program the collaboration engendered. The happiness of these years was enriched with the arrival of three children, Faith, Hope, and Paul. At the Rutz home, early music enthusiasts from around the city would gather a couple of times a month to indulge in recorder playing, with Hal playing the family harpsichord.<sup>11</sup> Yet, there had been murmurings of political discord within the Western District of the LCMS, prompting Rutz to consider other job prospects. He realized now that he enjoyed parish music more than teaching school, and he thus desired a position that would allow him to devote his whole energies to a parish music program. Yet, these were the days before churches maintained any notion that they could support a full-time Director of Music or Kantor, and he even explored a potential position in the music department at St John’s College in Winfield, Kansas, but was never issued a call. In the spring of 1964, however, Concordia College in Austin, Texas, extended him a call to join the faculty, which he promptly accepted, moving his family to Central Texas that summer.

At the time of the Rutz family’s arrival, Concordia was still functioning as a high school. Only open to boys, the high school’s curriculum was strictly preministerial, with emphasis on Greek, Latin, and theology. Although there were no music courses at first, Rutz directed the school chorus, for which he plumbed the depths of the TTBB repertoire. These boys would occasionally sing for a local church, but would never prepare a formal concert. By 1966, the high school component had been phased out and a junior college instituted. An assistant, Dorothy Zielke Meyer directed the

girls' choir, while Rutz directed the mixed choir; this choir would tour each spring, singing all sacred music, both traditional and more modern, pulling repertoire heavily from the CPH and Augsburg catalogues. Programs from this decade reveal the choir learning music by leading contemporary Lutheran composers as Paul Manz, Charles Ore, Paul Bunjes, Paul Christiansen, and Jan Bender, non-Lutheran living composers as Natalie Sleeth and Donald Marsh, as well as standard chorale repertoire from Bach, Cornelius, Buxtehude, Billings, Holst, Scheidt, among others. For tours, Rutz programmed music that was neither avant-garde nor likely to be sung by the average church choir. He intentionally programmed Bach when possible. At the college level, he taught two semesters each of music theory and music history, in addition to keyboard, which all education majors were required to study. An assistant, Ronald Trampe, also a graduate of Concordia, River Forest, taught some piano students, relieving Rutz' workload, Rutz remembers teaching about 7-8 organ students each term during this era. Most of these students were neither music majors, nor did they expect to work in church music full time. Non-majors and preministerial students were exempt from the keyboard study requirement, probably as much a function of practicality as of curricular concerns, as the piano lab housed only about six pianos, in addition to an electronic organ in the music building and a limited Reuter pipe organ in the chapel, which functioned as his main teaching instrument.

Designed by Trampe and Ivan Olsen, Rutz' predecessor, the college had dedicated this organ in 1959, of which a newspaper article proclaimed at the time:

. . .[the organ] contains eight ranks of pipes, most of which are free standing and exposed to view. Provisions were made in the organ for the addition of more ranks in the near future.

Low wind pressures, un-nicked voicing, and adroit use of flute type sounds give the organ the brilliance and charm sought by German and Dutch builders of several centuries past.<sup>12</sup>

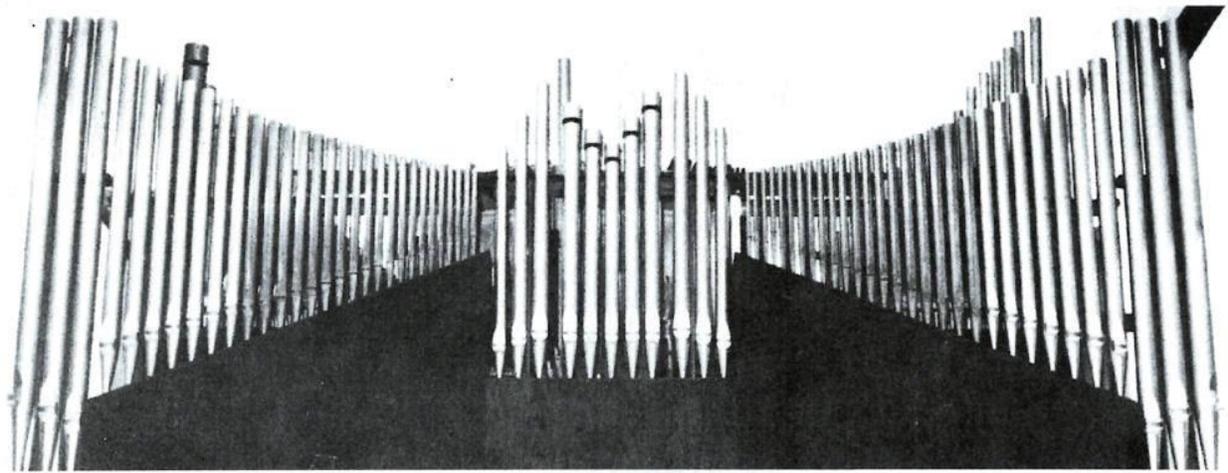
Romanticized newspaper accounts aside, Reuter's Opus 1287 was an unexceptional instrument. Lacking reeds, its eight ranks were hindered by the chapel's low ceiling and dry acoustics, which reinforced its lack of color, but it provided the college's main teaching instrument for almost 30 years. However, organ students benefitted from the close proximity to St. Paul's Lutheran Church, adjacent to the campus, with its sumptuous acoustics and, after 1967, an Otto Hofmann organ of sufficient size and variety to play much of the concert and church repertoire. The church also provided a venue for choral concerts.

At his ten-year anniversary at Concordia, Harold Rutz became eligible for a one-semester sabbatical, which he took in the autumn of 1975, his family in tow, spending time at Cambridge University, participating in lectures and studying organ with Peter Hurford at St. Alban's Cathedral. He rented a house in Cambridge and availed himself of life in the university town. His lessons with Hurford took place at the teacher's house once every two weeks, with Hurford himself selecting the organ repertoire Rutz would study, which he remembered included a Bach trio sonata. The semester ended with a recital of about ten of Hurford's students at the cathedral, for which none of the players had any rehearsal time. Hurford himself set pistons and registered for each student as he or she played! Rutz additionally attended the International Organ Festival at St. Alban's and studied with Michael Radulescu at the Summer Mastercourse for Organists in Vaduz, Liechtenstein. Rutz remembers returning to Austin enriched by his European experience. In 1985, he co-led a tour of Bach and Luther sites in East Germany, and in 1986 he returned to Cambridge for additional study at his next sabbatical.

In 1980, the college transitioned into a four-year institution, adding a year until its first seniors graduated in 1982. Although the curriculum had remained largely static until that time, Rutz remembers spending the preceding two years expanding the music curriculum to accommodate courses leading to a new bachelor's degree in parish music, which would be offered with an organ or

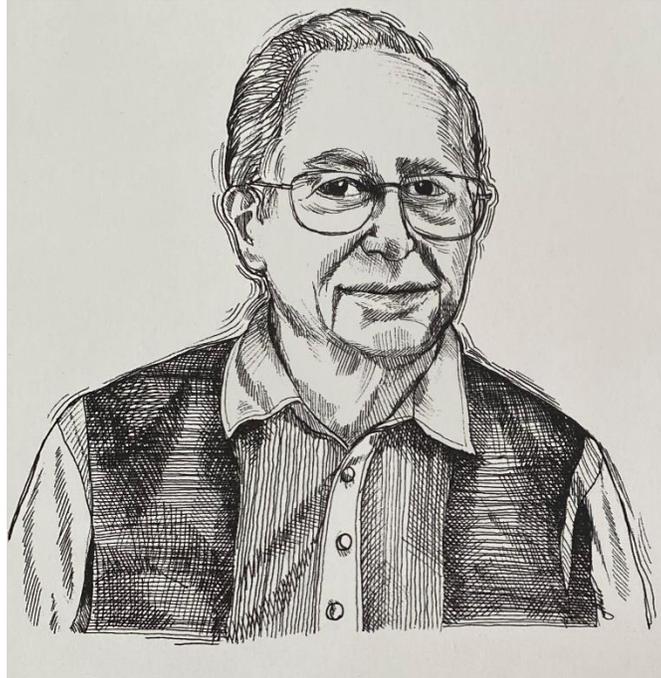
conducting concentration, the overall curriculum modeled after the programs offered by the Concordias at River Forest and Seward. Rutz continued to teach 7-8 organ students each year, the majority of which were parish education majors. Graduates of the parish music major, like those of the education major, would receive divine calls administered on the synodical level. Although increasingly parish music graduates would be placed in Texas, Rutz recalled that originally there were not many full-time, professional teacher/musician positions in the Texas District.

In 1987, Louise T. Peter, a granddaughter of Jan Kilian, donated \$4 million for a new fine arts center on the Concordia campus. Rutz knew the university needed a concert organ and space to house that instrument, so, at his urging, a concert hall had been incorporated into the building's design. Yet, the opportunity to install an organ would come only late in the construction process. St. John's College in Winfield, Kansas, a two-year college of the LCMS, had recently closed, and its Paul Bunjes-designed 1960 Schlicker was offered for sale. Seizing the opportunity, Rutz secured the organ for purchase by Concordia, only to find that the stage that had been carefully designed for an organ was just shy of the dimensions required to house this instrument. Nonetheless, as the building was still under construction, the architects were able to revise their plans for another wall in order for a steel cantilever to be constructed. Rutz remembers that, had the opportunity to purchase the Schlicker come only six months later, the building process would have been too far along and the instrument could not have been accommodated. Rutz played the dedication of this instrument in January, 1988.



*The Schlicker organ originally at St John's College, Winfield, Kansas, but reconfigured and installed at Concordia in Austin.*

This new building allowed Rutz to expand sacred music education beyond Concordia students. Already in the late 1960s, under the auspices of the Texas District—LCMS, Rutz had served on a District music committee whose half dozen or so members, both clergy and musicians, were charged with planning events such as hymn festivals, concerts, or educational events. Building on this experience, Rutz initiated the Concordia Summer Church Music Workshop in the late 1980s, hosting as many as 150 musicians and pastors throughout the Southwest for a week of intensive sacred music study on the Concordia campus. Donald Busarow, David Cherwien, Michael Burkhardt, John Folkening, and Carl Schalk were only a few of the lecturers and performers who taught church music and played a hymn festival for workshop participants. In addition to their pedagogical benefits, these summer gatherings fostered fellowship and networking among Texan church musicians.



*A line drawing of Hal Rutz from his biography in the July, 2016, The Organist's Companion, published by Wayne Leupold Editions.*

Rutz was in ever-increasing demand to play organ recitals around the state, a few of his organ dedications including Our Redeemer Lutheran in Dallas (1969), Memorial Lutheran in Houston (1972), Redeemer Lutheran in Odessa (1974), Trinity Lutheran in Tyler (1974), and Shepherd of the Hills in San Antonio (1976).<sup>13</sup> A mechanical action pipe organ in classical style built by the Houston firm Visser-Rowland replaced the old Reuter in Birkmann chapel in the mid-1990s. Harold Rutz retired in 1996, at which time he was named Professor Emeritus at Concordia University and was presented the Martin J. Neeb Teaching Excellence Award by vote of the student body.<sup>14</sup> During his retirement, he had time to compose over two dozen organ settings for Wayne Leupold's *The Organist's Companion*. He remained active in the American Guild of Organists, the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians, and served on the board for La Follia Baroque, an Austin early music ensemble. He faithfully tended to his wife, Vi, during her final days. After her death in 2017, Rutz enjoyed attending local concerts, AGO conventions, and even driving himself up to Lectures in Church Music in Chicago in 2018. Ever humble and evidencing the heart of a

servant, Hal Rutz died on 17 November, 2020, at the age of 90, leaving a legacy of hundreds of students still actively engaged in parish music.

--Benjamin Kolodziej



*Harold Rutz conducting the Concordia Choir in the Louise T Peter Center's Schroeder Hall.*

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<sup>1</sup> George R. Nielsen, *Johann Kilian, Pastor: a Wendish Lutheran in Germany and Texas* (Serbin, TX: Texas Wendish Heritage Society, 2003): 44.

<sup>2</sup> "Lutherans to Lay College Cornerstone Sunday Afternoon," *Austin American-Statesman* (June 27, 1926.) The school was originally called "Lutheran Concordia College" to differentiate it from masonic nomenclature, which also tended to use "Concordia."

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all biographical information on Harold Rutz came from personal interviews with him during June and August, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Zion Lutheran Church, Detroit church website, "History," (<https://www.ziondetroit.org/our-history>), accessed June 9, 2021.

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<sup>5</sup> "Good Friday Services Offered," *Detroit Free Press* (March 23, 1951.)

<sup>6</sup> Zion Lutheran Church, Detroit, "Votteler-Holtkamp-Sparling Organ, Opus 1576), (<https://pipeorgandatabase.org/organ/5384>), accessed June 8, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> "Lutherans Will Install Two," *Kansas City Star* (July 28, 1956.)

<sup>8</sup> "Miss Viola Larkin Tells Plans for Wedding June 26," *The Tampa Tribune* (June 18, 1954.)

<sup>9</sup> "Viola ('Vi') Larkin Rutz," obituary, (<https://www.dignitymemorial.com/obituaries/austin-tx/viola-vi-rutz-8209806>), accessed June 8, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Northwestern University School of Music Student Recital: Harold Rutz." July 10, 1960. From the personal archive of Harold Rutz.

<sup>11</sup> Marjean Phillips, "Music in the 18<sup>th</sup>-Century Manner is Still Beguiling," *Kansas City Star* (March 9, 1961.)

<sup>12</sup> "Dedication Set for New Organ," *The Austin Statesman* (January 7, 1960): 20. The organ was never expanded. One of the windchests (of four ranks) was purchased by Lord of Life Lutheran Church in Plano, TX, in 2008, when this author was Director of Music there, to create an antiphonal choir division.

<sup>13</sup> All programs from the personal files of Harold Rutz.

<sup>14</sup> "Harold Rutz dead at 90," *The Diapason*, (<https://www.thediapason.com/news/harold-rutz-dead-90>), accessed 8 June, 2021.