

**Springfield, Massachusetts
Municipal Auditorium/Symphony Hall
J.W. Steere & Sons, 1915**

Feb 17, 2001

William Hansen wrote to me:

Dear Keith,

I am sure you have quite a treasure in that late Steere organ, [Steere IV/49, 1918, Op. 700, Baptist Temple, Brooklyn, NY, ed.]. They were generally well crafted and carefully finished instruments.

By the time your organ was built, , Harry Carruthers had migrated to California to work under Stanley Williams at Robert Morton -- certainly one of the most innovative organ firms since Hope-Jones. He then entered the Army and, after the Armistice went to Portland to service theatre organs for the movie presentation chain of Jensen and Von Herberg.

Harry's move from the early Wurlitzer pipe organ operation to Steere was at the behest of his father, who knew Hope-Jones' reputation around young fellows. Of course, as it turned out, Hope-Jones had a short tenure with Wurlitzer before being banned from the factory and soon committing suicide.

He was particularly proud of the Auditorium organ. From all I have heard it was a very successful instrument, though not immune from the foibles of city and building management. The great Skinner at the Portland, Oregon auditorium was disposed of, despite its considerable popularity.

Be in touch.

Bill

Feb 24, 2001

I posted the first of five messages to the PIPORG-L list:

A number of postings on this list in reference to the organ at Symphony Hall (formerly Municipal Auditorium), Springfield, MA has appeared between Feb 1996 & Oct 1999. Since I am probably the last organ technician to actually see it in its present stored state, I thought it best to give an update.

First, a little history. The following rather extensive quote comes from a convention handbook prepared by William F. Czelusniak, Northhampton, MA, for the combined Region I & II AGO Convention held in Holyoke, MA in 1987, used by kind permission:

"When the Municipal Auditorium was designed, the architects allowed some discreet space for the eventual installation of a pipe organ, and even before the completion of the building construction, the citizenry had begun to raise funds for the purchase of a grand instrument. After several fund-raising events, plus appropriations pledged by the City, a contract in the amount of approximately \$25,000 was signed on November 12, 1914 with the J.W. Steere & Son Organ Company of Springfield, Mass., without competition, for the construction of the Municipal Organ, their Opus 673, installed in May of 1915. The four-manual organ was prepared for the addition of an Echo division and several more reed stops, but fifty-five ranks in the aggregate were actually installed, including two ranks of Solo reeds on 25" wind pressure, plus Chimes and Harp. A full-length wooden 32' Bombarde provided the foundation of the Pedal division. The action was electro-pneumatic, and a combination system typical of the period was provided in the Skinner style within the console. The instrument was dedicated on June 25, 1915 in a concert by Mr. Charles Heinroth, Organist and Director of Music of the Carnegie Institute at Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The outstanding acoustics of the Municipal Auditorium and the large pipe organ there put the City of Springfield high on the list of musicians performing on the municipal circuit in this country. For many years the City supported a municipal organist's position, and in August, 1915 the National Association of Organists gathered at Springfield for their eighth annual convention. The success of the Steere organ at the hands and in the ears of this group prompted their return to Springfield for their conventions of 1916 and 1917, held successfully despite the tenuous world situation and war effort of the time. (The National Association of Organists was perhaps most active in the northeastern area of the country and later merged into the American Guild of Organists.)

"In the mid-1940's, the original Steere console of the Springfield Municipal Organ was replaced by one with all-electric action, and the demise of the instrument began. One must acknowledge also the changing musical tastes and forms of entertainment in the ensuing period however, and eventually the Steere organ slipped into complete disuse. Late in the 1970's several attempts to activate the old organ were made but to no significant avail. At the same time the City began to consider the renovation of the Municipal Auditorium. Despite intense objections and strenuous arguments from several quarters during the period of study and public hearings in 1978-1979, the City contracted shortly thereafter for the complete interior decoration, renovation, and modernization of the Auditorium building, with federal financial support. After a concert in the Auditorium in 1977, using a traveling electronic instrument, Virgil Fox spoke up in defense and support of the Steere pipe organ and its restoration. All suggestions in this vein fell upon deaf ears of the decision-makers, and the renovation of the Auditorium included the removal of the Steere organ, which was presumably stored and preserved in some city location. The Auditorium is now named Symphony Hall, and there is little hope ever of restoring the original pipe organ. That instrument was designed at the Steere firm by Harry Van Wart, formerly of the E. M. Skinner Company in Boston, and was smaller but similar to the Steere opus of 1915 built for Woolsey Hall at Yale University, New Haven.

"In this convention year there is no organ to visit at Symphony Hall, Springfield, and the success of the renovations, both functionally and acoustically, remains a real, if moot, question in the minds of many area musicians. The actual state of the Steere pipe organ remains uncertain at this time."

In Part II, I hope to fill in some of the details on the above quote with some corroborating history.

Over the next several weeks I hope to bring us all up to date on this immanently restorable instrument. Please hold off on any serious discussion until I complete my report.

God Bless,

Keith Bigger, Organ Curator
IV/49 J.W. Steere & Son, Opus 700, 1918
The Baptist Temple, Brooklyn, NY

Feb 27, 2001

My second post to PIPORG-L as follows:

In Part I, I quoted from a convention brochure prepared by Bill Czelusniak concerning the Springfield, MA Municipal Auditorium and its Steere organ of 1915. Now, a little commentary.

In 1908, a competition was held ..."For the Selection of an Architect for the Municipal Building in the City of Springfield..." Item No. 67 stated: "The stage of the auditorium is not to be adapted to scenery but an organ should be included in the scheme of treatment."

One of the fund raising events mentioned was held Tuesday Evening, February 18, 1913 in the completed auditorium. The next day, a local paper reported:

"AUDITORIUM OPENING IS BRILLIANT EVENT, Audience of 4000 Hears Concert by Artists of International Fame for Organ Fund. Expressions of Admiration for Magnificent New Building Heard on Every Hand; Net Proceeds Probably \$15,000; Acoustic Properties of Hall Are Perfect.

"Springfield's magnificent new municipal auditorium, conceded to be one of the finest assembly halls in the United States and the like of which no city this size in the world can boast, became a brilliant realization last night, when it was formally thrown open to the public with an event that in every way measured up to the grand dignity of the building, which is a part of the splendid \$2,000,000 civic group that is nearing completion.

"Primarily last night's interest was in the spectacle presented by the beautiful auditorium, which, with its seating capacity of 4200 persons, was practically filled. Second in interest was the splendid concert program, for which artists were secured without regard for expense. The Philadelphia Symphony orchestra, one of the great permanent orchestral organizations in this country; Mme. Marcella Sembrich, the famous singer; and Dinh Gilly of the Metropolitan Opera company, made up a program that from any point of view could hardly have been bettered."

It might be mentioned, that the 109 members of the orchestra played under the baton of Leopold Stokowski!!! The actual program lists the two vocalists as Mme. Sembrich and Pasquale Amato. The orchestra played Wagner's "Meistersinger" Vorspiel, Liszt's "Tasso" Symphonic Poem, Sibelius's Valse Triste, Jarnefelt's Praeludium, and Tchaikowsky's Marche Slav.

According to list member Bill Baker, not only did the full length 32' bombarde ..."provide the foundation for the Pedal division," but the 10 lowest mitered wood pipes also formed the only top to one of the expression chambers!!!

The Steere factory was only a few blocks north of the Hall on the corner of Chestnut and Sharon Streets. A picture of the factory, sent me by Richard Parsons of Parsons Organ Co., shows a 3 story wood framed structure with a sign painted in large letters on the side "J.W. Steere & Son Organ Company," "Church Organs." Ric and his brother Cal, are the great-great grandsons of Gideon Levi Parsons, Head flue voicer for Steere at the time. Duaine Prill tells me he still uses "Gid" Parsons' voicing tools.

When I visited the factory site in 1991, it was the parking lot of the Holiday Inn.

\$25,000 seems about right for a 55 Rank organ, as only 3 years later, the Baptist Temple, Brooklyn, NY, paid \$17,600 for 38 Ranks.

The dedicatory recital by Charles Heinroth consisted of: Overture to "Tannhauser," Wagner; Pastorale in A Major, Guilmant; Andante from Symphony in D, "Clock Movement," Haydn; Symphonic Poem, "Finlandia," Sibelius; "La Fileuse," Joachim Raff; Introduction to Third Act and Bridal Chorus from "Lohengrin," Wagner; Fugue in D Major, Bach; Funeral March of a Marionette, Gounod; Toccata from Fifth Symphony, Widor.

Two letters were included in the program, both addressed to the Steere Company. One, dated July 7th, 1915, and signed by H.G. Chapin, organ committee chairman, reads in part:

"I investigated thoroughly organs of various makers and finally decided to entrust the building of our organ to your company. The contract was signed November 21st, 1914, and called for the completion of the organ in May, 1915.

"The problem presented to you was not an easy one. The organ had to be divided and placed in two rooms, with but little space for the tone to emerge. This difficult problem was ingeniously solved by your company, and the result is most satisfactory.

"...In quality of tone and workmanship, there may be organs in this country that equal this-I know not where they are-but I question if any excel it. It has been a delight...to feel that the work was done not in any perfunctory manner, but everyone seemed to take especial pride and interest in his particular part of the work..."

The second, dated July 3rd, 1915 by Charles Heinroth, reads in part:

"After scarcely a day's acquaintance, I was in position to render an exacting program upon this new and, naturally, complicated instrument with freedom, ease, and abandon; which speaks volumes, not only for its tonal satisfaction, its impeccable mechanism, but also the numerous arrangements tending toward the general comfort of the performer.

"I welcome the day when instruments such as this shall become fairly common, for they...assist in making apparent to the public in general the fact that the organ is a concert instrument of extraordinarily expressive capabilities, in the hands of a sensitive artist able to hold the attention and sway the emotions of vast multitudes in a manner second to no other solo instrument."

It is stated that "...the City supported a municipal organist's position..." At the time the Baptist Temple Steere was dedicated in a concert on April 23, 1918, the recitalist, Charles Courboin, (1886-1973) held the position of municipal organist in Springfield, MA

The National Association of Organists was founded by Tali Esen Morgan, director of music of the Baptist Temple from 1906 until ca. 1914, as well as director at Ocean Grove, NJ. I wonder if either of these two gentlemen had any influence on the choice of builder for the Baptist Temple?

Almost all of the above information was gleaned from "The Red Book," a rather large, red 3-ring binder, produced in the mid 1970's by an ad hoc citizen's committee called "POSH," (Preserve Our Symphony Hall). Bill Baker sent me his copy, and after making a copy of the section pertaining to the organ, some 60 pages, sent the original to The American Organ Archive, in Princeton, NJ. But more about that and the subsequent years in Part III, God willing.

Keith Bigger

Feb 28, 2001

I posted to PIPORG-L:

Duane [prill, head voicer at Parsons Organ Company), had told me he had G.L. Parson's tool chest with all his voicing tools with the scorch marks still on it from the fire that destroyed the Springfield, MA factory on February 15, 1920.

In a 3 hour taped interview I had with G.L.'s son Bryant G. Parsons, Sr., age 92, back in the late 80's, he said the voicing room was attached to the back of the factory, and it gave them time during the fire to rescue the voicing machine, notes, scale sticks and tools. The picture of the factory does show a one story brick attachment to the rear.

Keith Bigger
Feb 28, 2001

Bob Tempest wrote me:

Keith-

Good to hear back from you and am glad that I was able to give you some of the information you needed... I did get your voicemail and will give you a buzz so we can talk further on this...

For your reference, Charlies proper name is Charles C. Aitken. He trained in the art of organ-building with the firm J. W. Walker of London (where he was born), starting around the age of 16. He was with that firm for many years until, upon the urging of his friend David A. J. Broome (who of course went on to become the Tonal Director at Austin Organs), he emigrated to the US. He

went to work for Austin and became their "service manager".. After several years in that capacity he decided to go out on his own.

While Charlie has not attained the "celebrity status" of many of the other smaller builders, his work is nonetheless important. He is a craftsman of the highest order and I consider myself lucky to have been able to work with and learn from him. Well that's about it for now... I will give you a call sometime soon and we can chat... I do check my email daily if you'd care to carry on this correspondence in that fashion...

For now, Best Regards,
Bob Tempest
New England Music Rolls

[Note-Charles Aitken was the one who did the actual work of removing Opus 673 to storage-Ed.]

Mar 5, 2001

My third post to PIPORG-L:

In these last two parts, I hope to bring us up to date, as to the present disposition of the IV manual, 81 stop, 58 rank, 3,907 pipe instrument which once resided in Symphony Hall, Springfield, MA. This organ was a near-duplicate of opus 663, 1914, in Bailey Hall, at Cornell University, Ithaca, NY. (See post [to PIPORG-L Ed.] by Cullie Mowers Thu 22 Feb, 1996 for stop list).

As reported by POSH (Preserve our Symphony Hall): "The organ was the ONLY instrument employed in the 1915 and 1916 conventions of the National Association of Organists. The 1917 convention was scheduled for Springfield, as well, but was canceled because of the war.

"The organ has been presented in solo performances by such artists as Marcel Dupre... Our first municipal organist was Charles Courboin, subsequently organist of the John Wanamaker Store in Philadelphia, and later of St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City."

Also: "The original console was replaced by one of inferior quality in 1947. [The name plate states ..."built by H.T. Beal Organ Co. 1950," ed.] Electrical connections were soldered using acid flux." "The use of acid flux for soldering has resulted in many wires breaking within the insulation area."

The reason why the console was replaced may have been due to chronic contact failure. The contacts on the Baptist Temple Steere were all made of phosphor-bronze. A letter in the church records from the 1920's to the trustees from the organist states that the organ tuner was recommending having the contacts filed because of such failures. However, my solution was to sweat channel silver to all the manual and pedal key contact plates.

POSH was formed in the late 1970's because the City began to consider a "modernization" of the Hall. As reported in a post by William Baker, [to PIPORG-L]who was a member of the Committee, Thursday, 21 Oct, 1999, "the results were disappointing."

The recommendations of the Symphony Hall Organ Committee Members, Charles E. Page and

Richard S. Hedgebeth, conveners and subsequently co-chairmen, along with 22 other members was to the effect that:

1. Unless an independent acoustical engineer would assure them that the acoustics would not be adversely affected by any proposed changes, they stood opposed to any renovation.
2. They should use Organ Historical Society guidelines for any organ preservation, and
3. That a replacement Steere console of the same vintage be used or a replica of the original be built.

In a letter from the Historic Organs Committee of the OHS, to then Mayor HON. William C. Sullivan, dated December 8, 1977, it was announced that a Recognition Plaque was being prepared which read: "This organ, built by J.W. Steere & Son Organ Co. of Springfield, MA in the year 1915, has been selected for recognition as an instrument of exceptional historic merit worthy of preservation. (Signed) Alan M. Laufman - PRESIDENT, Organ Historical Society / Culver L. Mowers - CHAIRMAN, Historic Organs Committee."

One evening in 1977, Virgil Fox was scheduled to perform at the Hall with his touring electronic substitute. While practicing that day, he was given an opportunity to play the Steere organ. A photo of Virgil at the console with a surprised look, which appeared the next day in a local paper was captioned "Astounded." It said that, having heard the organ, he called the Steere, "...the Stradivarius of organs," and promised to help promote its preservation.

All these efforts fell on deaf ears and the renovation of the Hall was begun in 1978-79.

I hope, in Part IV to bring this story to a conclusion, God willing.

Keith Bigger

Mar 6, 2001

Peter Storandt wrote me:

Hi Keith:

This is such great reading! I grew up on Opus 663, [Cornell University] playing it on the sly when the building's custodian, Ted, would let me have the occasional hour alone during my high school and college years in Ithaca. (Ted had been my family's milkman until the dairy company went out of the home delivery business in the early 1950s.) The organ by then was in poor condition, never having recovered fully from the flooding of its winding system in the early years of the hall. But it was capable of great sounds even in its compromised state. I don't know where its parts ended up, having gotten to know Cullie [Mowers] only in the last couple of years.

I look forward to more history from Springfield.

Peter

Mar 9, 2001

My forth post to PIPORG-L:

In a report of the Chair of the OHS Citation Program in *The Tracker* (35:3:27), 1992, Timothy Smith reported that number 15 on the list, the Steere organ at Symphony Hall, Springfield, MA was "destroyed." There is only one problem with that statement. Only months before, I had seen the organ in its present stored state with my own eyes, and I had the pictures to prove it!!!

That the organ was removed, who did the work, the rumors of partial or total destruction, its re-discovery, and its possible future, are the subject of the last part of this report.

Bill Czelusniak's Convention Brochure of 1987 continues: "...Despite intense objections and strenuous arguments from several quarters during the period of study and public hearings in 1978-1979, the City contracted shortly thereafter for complete interior decoration, renovation, and modernization of the Auditorium building, with federal financial support." "...the renovation of the Auditorium included the removal of the Steere organ, which was presumably stored and preserved in some city location." "...there is little hope of ever restoring the original pipe organ.

"In this convention year there is no organ to visit at Symphony Hall, Springfield..." "The actual state of the Steere pipe organ remains uncertain at this time."

Part of those federal funds that Bill mentions above, was "for the removal AND RE-INSTALLATION of the organ." Unfortunately, the renovations to the Hall precluded its re-installation.

Remember, the original architects had stated that the stage was not to be adapted to scenery, but that an organ would be placed there instead. The organ was installed primarily in two large lofts at the side of the stage, and spoke through grilles at the stage sides and cutouts in the rounded edges of the coffered ceiling.

These chambers were removed when the stage area was gutted to allow for more theatrical presentations. The only other place the organ could go would be in the rear balcony, in the open. But for a pipe organ, voiced on 10, 12, and 25" wind pressure, this arrangement would be totally unmusical. The organ was built and voiced with limited tonal egress in mind.

An so, the organ was never re-installed. Sealed bids went out for its removal and placement to storage. Only two were received. One from Berkshire Organ Company (David Cogswell), and a lesser bid from Charles Aitken. As Charlie explained it to me in a phone conversation this week, Cogswell won the contract by default because Charlie had been disqualified. Affirmative Action was the by-word then, and neither Charlie or his 7 or so men, belonged to a minority group. List member Bob Tempest adds in a post dated Mon, 26 February, 2001, that "...Cogswell was not particularly interested in doing the job and ended up subcontracting the whole job to Charlie..."

The rumors that parts of the organ were dragged thru the mud, or that chests were sawn in half, or that the organ is stored in a barn some were, or that the organ was trucked to the landfill, simply are not true. As Charlie told me, everything (except the blowing plant, and 25HP Spencer blower), was

moved from the Hall, directly to the present storage site, just West of the Hall, in the basement. The building was called City Hall Annex back in 1991 and had been the old District Court of Springfield. [as of 2015, the Springfield Good Life Center, 1600 E. Columbus Avenue-Ed.] In reference to the blowing plant, apparently, Mr. Cogswell (unsubstantiated), convinced the city fathers that it was un-restorable, and so it probably went out to the landfill during the Hall's renovation.

And now to the organ's re-discovery. I was scheduled to attend a week long Seminar in the city of Springfield, to be held at Symphony Hall in early August of 1991. Having heard the rumor concerning the fate of the organ for several years, I determined to get to the bottom of things, if I could. After many phone calls to the Mayor's office and being bounced around to other municipal agencies, I finally got in touch with the Director of Public Buildings, Jack Teague, and on a certain morning that Seminar week, an associate and myself met with Jack at a site used by Maintenance personnel, high on a hill overlooking the City. There Jack showed us the replacement console to the organ that was stored there, separately from the rest of the organ.

We then followed him down the hill and parked in front of the City Hall Annex building. As we stood outside the door to this basement storage area, Jack assured this was one of only two keys to the room. The other was held by maintenance personnel. As Jack unlocked the door, there, before our eyes, was a rather large room, filled with pipe trays and chests, almost up to the ceiling, and monster size 32' Bombarde resonators. All this, Jack had lovingly covered over in heavy plastic sheets.

It is hard to describe one's emotions at such a site. But whatever joy we may have had was quickly quelled as we contemplated the job ahead of going thru all 60 or so pipe trays. Armed with a pipe count by rank, supplied by Bill Baker, we proceed with our task, while I shot off a roll of film to document the event.

I have to say, Charlie did a magnificent job. The pipe trays are of the best construction, (supplied by Cogswell-Charlie), the chest work and regulators are immaculate, (Charlie had sealed up all the openings to preserve the leather from deterioration). All the 58 ranks of pipes seem complete with some reversible damage to a few Great Diapason pipes. Imagine a 3' x 4' solo regulator with 24 coil springs!!!

There are two more pieces to this story. One, a rumor that a recording of the organ was made during a concert, shortly before its removal. And second, what is to become of the organ, now that we know it is eminently restorable?

I see, however, by the clock on the wall that it is now after 11:30 PM and I haven't had dinner yet. So, I'm afraid there will have to be a Part V,

God willing.

Keith Bigger

May 17, 2001

My fifth post to PIPORG-L:

This is the conclusion, (at long last), of a thread begun Feb. 24th on the 4 manual Steere organ for

Symphony Hall, Springfield, MA.

The goal of these postings is to make the organ world aware of the existence of this historic, OHS cited instrument, presently in storage, and eminently restorable, and to encourage it's re-installation into the Hall.

The good news is, 23 years after the organs removal, and the halls renovation to provide space for scenery, (but not the organ), the City of Springfield is facing the need for another renovation of the Hall, because of the need for additional space, as well as dealing with a leaking roof. A recent article in the local newspaper indicated that a show had brought in 4 truckloads of scenery, but there was only enough space on stage to unload two trucks.

I'm told a Boston architectural firm has completed a survey indicating a cost of \$4 million would be needed to do essential repairs. Additional space could be provided for fly space by moving the back wall some 20 feet which would raise the cost to \$11 million.

The bad news is, none of these plans include space for organ chambers.

If we are to hear this organ again in our lifetime, perhaps now is the time to act.

Some may recall, it was only a few years ago that a similar story began to unfold at City Hall, Portland, Maine, home of the Kotschmar Memorial Organ, Austin op. 323/323A. What follows comes from an article written by David E. Wallace entitled "What Went Right?," and published in the July/August 1994 New England Organist.

"The concept for the renovation is to be a finely wrought plan, based on input from all the key players and future users of the hall, that will result in a charming, historic yet technically and acoustically refined performance space that will be second to none. The plan won the accolades and support of present and future user groups including the Symphony, the Concert Association, the Kotschmar Organ group, the Maine Historic Preservation Commission, Greater Portland Landmarks, the ballet and opera supporters, as well as the stage, light and sound technicians. So what was all the controversy?

"The original request for proposals (RFP) for the renovation of the auditorium focused on three primary areas needing improvement - acoustics, sight lines and improving the multi-use capabilities of the hall. The project also had to fit into a 6 million dollar predetermined budget.

"The only proposal presented to the building committee claiming to be able to meet the three criteria and the budget was based on a design developed by a team headed by acoustics engineer ...
"The plan called for the removal of the two sweeping balconies and replacing them with a two story grand tier continental seating arrangement plus two wing balconies, narrowing of the room by installing new floor to ceiling sheet rock side walls, hanging adjustable acoustic clouds above the audience, hanging an adjustable orchestra shell above the stage and installing heavy roll-away draperies that could be let out of the auditorium ceiling to make room acoustically smaller when desired. The plan was a dramatic departure from the original design of the hall.

"The first group to raise a protest to the (...) Plan was Friends of the Kotschmar Organ (FOKO). The initial public presentation of the (...) plan was a dizzying session that left the FOKO attendees

in a state of shocked disbelief. The severe acoustical re-engineering of the hall would have left the organ an overpowering monster in a room incapable of handling an instrument of its size... "FOKO's initial protests were discounted by the design team as overstatement. FOKO then consulted with acoustical engineer David Klepper to confirm their belief that the proposed changes to the hall would seriously downgrade the quality of the Kotzschmar Organ. Dr. Klepper made a number of suggestions that could, if accepted by the building committee, ease the anticipated effect on the organ. All but a very few aspects of the suggested changes were rejected as being too expensive.

"Contrary to published rumors, FOKO was not at all ready to give in to the plan. FOKO instead joined forces with a newly formed group of concerned citizens who pushed and paid for a second opinion on the renovation of the hall. The Second Opinion Committee demanded the preservation of the historic appearance of the hall be given as much weight as the acoustics, sight line and multi-use criteria for the auditorium renovation. The Second Opinion Committee asked acoustics engineer R. Lawrence Kirkegaard of Chicago to determine the feasibility of preserving the architectural heritage of the hall while resolving the long standing problems identified in the original request for proposal of the building committee. The determination was that the problems could indeed be solved while retaining the historic appearance of the room. It would be neither easy nor inexpensive, but it could be done.

"After nearly two years of often times heated public and private debate...the building committee asked Portland architect Winton Scott and Lawrence Kirkegaard to come up with a proposal that would 'do it right.' A significant contribution to the decision made by the building committee to reconsider the initial plan came out of a successful letter writing campaign urged by FOKO and also independently by the Symphonic Organ Society in an article by Jonathan Ambrosino in the April 1992 issue of the 'Erzähler.'

"The proposal, dubbed 'Scheme Z' (Z - because everyone expected this to be the final plan!), retains the original architectural grace and beauty of the hall while resolving the acoustical and sight line problems in much more subtle ways than deemed necessary by the original proposal. Outside the auditorium space itself, the plan provides for bringing the hall into compliance with current building, access and safety codes and provides for a smaller rehearsal hall to be added to the rear of the building. A major goal of the project is to have a performing arts facility that can be financially self sustaining. A professional facilities manager will be hired to promote and oversee the use of the auditorium."

"...Scheme Z is \$2.25 million more expensive than the original budget for the renovation of the hall. To date all but \$140,000 of the \$8.25 million budget has been raised. \$3 million has come from a municipal bond passed in 1990, \$1 million from the estate of local businessman Paul E. Merrill, \$1.7 million from a revenue bond provided by a consortium of four Portland banks and the remaining \$2.55 million from private donations, grants and pledges. The enthusiasm for Scheme Z and the 'Let's do it right' campaign has brought far more financial support from the private sector than earlier estimates ever thought possible."

In a follow-up article in the November/December 1997 NEO, entitled "The Mighty Kotzschmar

Memorial Organ is Back!" author David E. Wallace writes: "The Building Committee was inundated with feedback from the organ world encouraging consideration of a different approach to the renovation or, if nothing more satisfactory could be found, to do nothing at all. However, something had to be done. The aging City Hall Auditorium was in severe need of improvement. The plaster walls were crumbling in spots, the roof leaked badly, the acoustics were terrible, the old seats were falling apart, there was little accommodation for performers, it was far out of code for fire safety, handicapped access, and emergency egress. In short, it was on the verge of being shut down by the code enforcement officer and the State Fire Marshal's office."

And were they successful? In a commemorative booklet put out by Greater Portland CARES announcing the "Grand Opening" celebration on May 10th, 1997, it is stated: "In January 1995, after years of planning, a renovation project began, lead by a gift from the Merrill Family Trust. Completed in February 1997, the \$9.7 million project represented a well-orchestrated and collaborative effort by the community, the Auditorium tenants - PCA Great Performances, Portland Symphony Orchestra and the Friends of the Kotzschmar Organ - Greater Portland CARES, a community fund-raising organization (\$2.6 million, \$50,000 more than CARES had committed to raise, ed.), and the City Council of Portland.

"...The re-designed auditorium offers clear views of the stage from anywhere in the hall. Acoustical improvements make it as easy to hear a softly plucked violin string as a booming operatic aria.

"...'Below decks' are dressing rooms with restrooms for performers, private 'star' dressing rooms and instrument storage areas. The specially designed stage has a sprung wood floor for dance, enough height to 'fly' theatrical scenery and plenty of wing space on both sides. With a quick change, the new orchestra pit can be converted to add more room to the stage or a few extra rows of seats. The new ventilation system with air conditioning will keep audiences and performers cool and comfortable in all seasons. The Kotzschmar Organ, centerpiece of the City Hall Auditorium for decades, is flanked by several new banks of pipes that were removed during earlier renovations. With its neo-Baroque facade polished to a high gloss and stately columns of pipes reverberating with beautiful music, the organ remains the crowning glory of the Merrill Auditorium."

Peter S. Plumb, former Vice President of Greater Portland CARES sent me this e-mail update on this May 9th: "CARES actually finally raised \$3.4 million for the project (exclusive of the \$1 million Merrill gift), rather than the \$2.6 million quoted. The total was \$400,000 in excess of the "revised" goal of \$3 million. The early goal, before the project was designed in its final form, was \$2 million. The total project cost was just under \$10 million, with roughly \$5.3 million coming from a combination of revenue bonds (to be repaid through a \$2 ticket surcharge), general obligation bonds of the city of Portland, and some city participation as well. You might also be interested to know that the renovation process included the complete removal and subsequent re-installation of the entire organ."

So you see, the situation in Springfield is not a unique one. Now granted, the city of Portland had input in the beginning from Friends of the Kotzschmar Organ, (FOKO). According to a cover feature article in "The American Organist," for November 1997, David E. Wallace writes: "In 1981, the City of Portland decided to eliminate the municipal organist position and declined to renew the contract for municipal organist Douglas Rafter. At the same time, at age 82, technician Burt Witham decided to retire.

"The termination of the funding for the Kotschmar Memorial Organ and its programs prompted a number of local organists and supporters to create the Friends of the Kotschmar Organ in 1981 for the express purpose of keeping the organ programs active. Friends of the Kotschmar Organ, Inc. (FOKO) was chartered in 1981 as a nonprofit corporation and was granted authority by the City Council for the ongoing programming, hiring of the municipal organist, and for the restoration of the Kotschmar Organ."

The City of Springfield, too has had its support group of local organists and those interested in the historic preservation of Symphony Hall. As stated in earlier postings, the group called POSH (Preserve our Symphony Hall), was formed in the 70's with Francis Gagnon, presently, (August, 1991, ed.), of the Springfield Historical Commission, as its president. It was stated that its 24 member Symphony Hall Organ Committee, "...represents as 'blue ribbon' a committee as could possibly be drawn from this area. Many members are of national reputation." Many of these members are still with us a quarter of a century later.

According to POSH's "Red Book", "The Symphony Hall Organ Committee was formed in response to concern for the fate of the Steere organ in the city's plans for the rebuilding of Symphony Hall. Charles E. Page (Organist & Choir Director of Old First Church, Springfield, then & now, ed.) and Richard S. Hedgebeth, conveners and subsequently co-chairmen, invited those occupying academic positions in the field of organ performance at colleges and universities throughout the Connecticut Valley, several other organists important to the musical life of the city, organ builders meeting commonly held criteria for professionalism, as well as Alan Laufman, President of the Organ Historical Society."

"Pursuant to this meeting, the co-chairmen met, on December 6, 1977, with then Mayor William Sullivan, presenting the request of this committee for advisory status to the city concerning plans for the organ....This request for advisory status was denied by Mayor Sullivan."

"This committee remains ready to serve in an advisory capacity, should the city become willing to so allow, without charge, in the public interest."

So here we have it. An historic instrument, considered a "flagship organ" by its builder, in storage in the basement of a building across the street from the hall it was originally intended for, built by a big name organ company whose factory was several blocks North of the hall on Chestnut and Sharon streets, with private groups waiting to assist with expertise and resources, if necessary. There is also a new generation of organists and listeners who are rediscovering the joys of the orchestral organ as a solo concert instrument as well as a support to the symphony orchestra. Is this a no-brainer or what?

The recording I am listening to, provided by Warren Myers, is of a live performance of The Manfred Symphony by Tchaikovsky, performed by the Springfield Symphony Orchestra, under the baton of Robert Gutter. The date is November 22, 1977. Finally, 18 minutes and 31 seconds into the fourth movement of this almost hour long piece, the organ enters and plays for a scant but tantalizing 87 seconds. Charles Page of Old First Church, tells me he had all the stops out that night. Mr. Gutter has informed me that the organ was also used in large choral works such as the Brahms Requiem. Somehow, listening to a recording of this organ is like looking at a picture of the Grand Canyon as opposed to seeing the real thing.

I would like to thank the following for their input, as well as permission to quote from their published works: William F. Czelusniak, organ builder, Francis Gagnon, Springfield Historical Commission, Robert Gutter, former director, Springfield Symphony Orchestra, Robert McCarroll of the Office of the Director of Planning, City of Springfield, Charles Aitken, organ builder, Charles E. Page, organist and choir director, Old First Church, Springfield, Warren Myers, Peter S. Plumb, former Vice President, Greater Portland CARES, David E. Wallace of David E. Wallace & Company, LLC, organ builders, Robert Tempest of New England Music Rolls, William A. Hansen, organ builder, and Len Levesseur of the NEO,

Keith Bigger, Curator
J.W. Steere & Son Organ
The Baptist Temple, Brooklyn, NY

Oct 26, 2003

Robert Tempest wrote:

Hi Keith,

Just wanted to congratulate you on your wonderful article about the J.W. Steere organ in the Springfield Symphony Hall in the latest edition of the OHS publication "The Tracker," (Vol. 47, No. 4). It was beautifully and eloquently written. In reading the article I am taken back to a wonderful time in my life when I truly thought pipe organs would be my life's work. I'm curious.. The one big piece of this organ that was left behind up in the attic in a room next to the 32' Bombards above the stage was the monstrous 25 HP Spencer Orgoblo. What happened to that? Was it just left there? Did they demolish it when they did the reconstruction of the stage house? That was a pretty scary thing starting that blower while in that space. The old 1900s wiring, everything fully exposed- pressing the start relay in on that big resistor contactor unit and watching and hearing that gigantic thing come up to speed, it was just marvelous. I remember a warning plaque on the contactor stating not to start it more than once every 30 minutes to allow the start resistors to cool. The huge motor was built for 4-wire, 2 phase- a configuration I'd never seen and have never heard of since. I remember going through the labyrinth of sub floors and hallways under the main hall and coming across an extremely scary looking electrical panel from which the organ blower took its power. As was typical for its vintage it was a large slate electrical panel with meters for voltage and amperage and numerous open air knife switches, with each one labeled what it was for with nice little engraved (copper I believe) plaques- one had four conductors and labeled simply "Organ". My God, how I wish we had digital cameras in those days!!

Anyway, thanks again for the wonderful article and thanks too for the "Honorable Mention". I doubt I helped very much with the content, but thanks nonetheless... See you at the next AMICA convention!

Best regards,
Bob

[NB. This material was edited down by Tracker Editor Frank Morana for a story in The Tracker, Volume 47, No. 4. – Keith Bigger]