

The Kotschmar Organ

A Brief History of the Centennial Renovation

The Organ Committee, Friends of the Kotschmar Organ
John Bishop, Clerk of the Works

June 1, 2016

Portland, Maine's new City Hall was dedicated on August 22, 1912, replacing the earlier building destroyed by fire in 1908. The new building was designed by Carrere and Hastings (famous for designing the New York Public Library), and featured a large public auditorium. Publishing Magnate Cyrus H. K. Curtis, founder of the *Saturday Evening Post*, commissioned the Austin Organ Company of Hartford, Connecticut to build a new concert pipe organ to be installed in the auditorium. He presented the organ to the people of the City during the dedication of the new City Hall. We understand that at the time this instrument was the largest concert organ in the Western Hemisphere.

Curtis named the organ for Hermann Kotschmar, the most prominent musician in the city, who had been brought to Portland by Curtis' father. Curtis' parents showed their admiration and affection for Hermann Kotschmar by naming their son for him, the source of the initials, H.K.

The auditorium was first renovated in the mid-1960's. At that time the stage was enlarged and deepened. The organ was jacked up and rolled back in its entirety into new, somewhat smaller space. As a result the wind chest was shortened somewhat and some major pipes were lost, including the 32' bombarde.

In the 1990's, the Kotschmar Organ was removed to storage to clear the way for the second renovation of the auditorium. The space lost for the organ in the first renovation was restored. Through the huge effort of the Friends of the Kotschmar Organ, and local organ builder and organ curator David Wallace, the organ was returned to the renovated and renamed auditorium, celebrated in news reports as the "restored" Kotschmar Organ. The hall reopened in 1997.

Realization and diligence.

Nearly ten years later, Friends of the Kotschmar Organ made funds available for the replacement of the unreliable and inadequate 32-foot Pedal Reeds, the most powerful and distinctive bass voices of the organ. In addition, during that decade substantial private gifts had been received which added a mixture to the Great division, and a state-of-the-art five-manual console. However, it was clear that much remained to be done as the instrument neared its 100th birthday. The FOKO Board of Directors instructed the Organ Committee to research options, and committee chair John Bishop invited pipe organ reed expert Christopher Broome to inspect the organ and prepare an estimate for the construction of the new stops. In January 2007, Broome visited Merrill Auditorium, accompanied by Austin Organ experts Victor Hoyt and James Bennett. They toured the organ with Bishop, and quickly concluded that the general condition of the organ was so poor that they could not recommend consideration of the invasive major work of installing the pedal reeds or any other new stops.

That conclusion was the basis of the show-stopping report of the Organ Committee at the next meeting of the FOKO Board. Board members raised the obvious question, remembering the 1997 announcement of the “restoration” of the KO. The scope of that work was reviewed to show that while the instrument was removed, altered to fit its new location in the hall, and that important repairs were made making the instrument generally fully playable, there was no restoration of the keyboard actions, and none of the critically needed repairs to organ pipes and the wind chest were accomplished.

To formalize the study of the condition of the organ and the need for a comprehensive renovation, FOKO Executive Director Kathleen Grammer planned a Symposium to be held in August of 2007. Seven acknowledged pipe organ experts¹ were invited for a weekend-long inspection and study of the organ, culminating in a public round-table discussion. John Bishop was moderator, Municipal Organist Ray Cornils participated, and *New York Times* editor Craig Whitney served as scribe, and produced a written report.

The Symposium participants were unanimous in recommending that the City and FOKO unite in a program to restore the Kotschmar Organ, and that the effort should begin with a professional assessment of the condition of the instrument. Consultant Jonathan Ambrosino was engaged to prepare the report, which was to form the basis of a *Request for Proposals* for submission to pipe organ builders.

Naming the project.

In the decades since the organ’s dedication, significant and constructive tonal changes had been made to the organ. A new five-manual console had been added, with modern solid-state switching control systems, and a large number of stops had been added to the organ in the 1920’s and late 1990’s. The Organ Committee quickly determined not to reverse those changes. Because in the world of musical instruments, the word *restoration* implies a purposeful reversal of all changes in order to return an instrument to its exact original condition, the committee named the upcoming project *The Centennial Renovation*.

Alliance with the City of Portland.

The Kotschmar Organ is owned by the City of Portland. In the late 1970’s, restrictions of the city’s budget led to the decision to eliminate funding the maintenance and use of the organ. A group of interested citizens founded the Friends of the Kotschmar Organ in 1981 with authority from the city to raise funds to maintain the organ, hire a Municipal Organist, and to present concerts. Over the years, FOKO’s activities have expanded to include educational programs and appropriate administrative staff.

With the planning of the renovation of the organ, it was essential for FOKO and the City to agree on the scope and cost of the project. Arthur Stevenson of the city’s administration attended the Symposium, so the City would be aware of the condition of the organ, the need for renovation, and the intense national interest in the organ as extolled by the Symposium participants.

Because the renovation of a pipe organ is an artistic effort, the City Council waived the mandated requirement of accepting the lowest bid for a project involving city property. This was a critical

step, allowing FOKO and the Organ Committee control over the artistic content of the project, even though the City would be the primary contracting party and the disbursing party of funds.

On August 1, 2011, Portland's Mayor Nicholas Mavodones, the City Manager, and several members of the City Council were given a tour of the Kotschmar Organ by FOKO Board members in the hour before a meeting of the Council. Later that evening, the City Council approved a reissue of a funding bond that was to be paid through a surcharge on tickets for events at Merrill Auditorium. The same process had been used to partially fund the renovation of the Auditorium and the bond would be paid in the same manner. The bond would provide a matching grant of up to \$1.25M toward the renovation of the organ. FOKO would be required to raise all remaining funds to meet the anticipated cost of \$2.5 million plus fundraising and associated costs. FOKO immediately engaged Fundraising Counsel, and under the supervision of Campaign co-chairs Larry Rubinstein and Peter Plumb, fundraising began apace. Ultimately the campaign exceeded its goal, raising nearly \$1.5 million.

Defining the project.

Ambrosino's report was reviewed by the Organ Committee, adapted to create a *Request for Proposals*, and following conversations with Ambrosino, the RFP was distributed to Patrick J. Murphy Organ Builders, Quimby Pipe Organs, the Schantz Organ Company, and Foley-Baker, Inc. Representatives of those firms visited Portland during the spring and summer of 2008 to inspect the organ, and the FOKO Organ Committee received formal proposals from all four companies by October 2008.

Those proposals allowed FOKO to establish an approximate budget for the project, and other committees of the Board began the research necessary to develop a fund-raising campaign.

Between October 2008 and January 2009, the Organ Committee studied and compared the proposals, concluding that Foley-Baker, Inc. be chosen as contractors to renovate the organ. Central to the committee's decision was FBI's history of excellent and timely performance on the renovation of other monumental organs in large, busy, public buildings, notably those at:

- The Chapel of Duke University
- Boston Symphony Hall
- The First Church of Christ, Scientist (The Mother Church) in Boston

Also, as FBI is located in Central Connecticut near the factory of the Austin Organ Company, they had extensive experience working on Austin Organs, and had key employees who previously had leadership roles in the Austin factory.

On January 20, 2009, at a meeting of the Board of the Friends of the Kotschmar Organ, the Organ Committee made the following motion:

“After careful consideration of the recommendations of the August 2007 Symposium, and the ensuing report from Jonathan Ambrosino; soliciting proposals on the Request for Proposals; a comprehensive review of four proposals of selected organ companies; the Organ Committee

unanimously recommends that the FOKO board engage Foley-Baker, Inc. of Tolland, CT, to accomplish the renovation of the Kotzschmar Organ.”

The motion carried.

With the contractor chosen, the Organ Committee shifted its focus through 2009-2010 to the content and scope of the project. While FBI’s proposal was detailed and comprehensive, the committee wished to include some items that had been suggested by the competitive bidders. Numerous lengthy conversations with representatives of FBI were necessary to establish the actual scope of the project. Some of the important decisions included:

- A new 32-foot Pedal Reed (that started it all!).
- A new 32-foot “Haskell-Bass” Double Open Wood Diapason.
- A new 4-foot Clarion in the Swell.
- The replacement of various generations of solid-state controls with a single new comprehensive system. The recomposition of the earlier-added Great Mixture.
- The relocation of the Pedal 32-foot Bourdon to improve its projection of tone.
- The construction of a new Universal Air Chest to match the dimensions and air capacity of the original Chest, which had been altered and reduced in size in the 1960’s hall renovation when the organ was pushed backward to accommodate a larger stage.

Reaching agreement.

During the 2010-2011 season, the Organ Committee drafted a three-way agreement defining the scope and terms of the project, to include the City of Portland, FOKO, and FBI. While the City administration left the artistic matters to FOKO and FBI, they were particularly interested in the insurance coverage provided for the times when the organ would be in transit, and in workshops and warehouses away from City property.

The schedule of the project was precisely determined in negotiation with the management of Merrill Auditorium. The new Universal Air Chest, which is the ground floor and foundation of the organ, would be constructed before the start of work in the auditorium. The organ would be dismantled immediately following the “Centennial Concert,” held on August 22, 2012, the day of the 100th anniversary. With the organ removed, the organ chamber could be reconditioned and painted, new electrical services installed, and the new Air Chest would be installed before the start of the auditorium’s busy fall season. That decision allowed FBI to take advantage of periods of low activity in the auditorium through the winter and spring, a lengthy free period during the summer of 2013, and the 2013-2014 academic year, so the instrument would be mechanically complete before the longer free period in the summer of 2014, during which the renovated organ pipes would be installed, voiced, regulated, and tuned. The renovated organ would be dedicated on September 27, 2014.

The Centennial Festival.

In the days leading up to the Centennial Anniversary, FOKO hosted a spectacular week long festival of concerts, master classes, and exhibitions to celebrate the Centennial of the Kotzschmar Organ. The Festival concluded on August 22, 2012 with a Gala Dinner and Concert on the day of

the Centennial. Merrill Auditorium was filled to the rafters with music lovers joining in the festivities, hearing performances by a procession of luminaries. At the close of the concert, the lights inside the organ were turned on, and the entire staff of Foley-Baker, Inc. marched onstage wearing hardhats and carrying a huge stepladder. While Ray Cornils and Peter Conte led the audience in an emotional rendition of *Auld Lang Syne*, the organ's gold facade pipes were removed and carried off the stage, signifying the ceremonial start of the renovation project.

There was a palpable feeling of accomplishment and excitement among members of the FOKO community. By noon the following day, the stage of Merrill Auditorium was stacked high with wood crates, as the dismantling of the organ began in earnest.

The Foley-Baker Workshop.

The workshop of Foley-Baker, Inc. is in Tolland, Connecticut, just off Interstate 84. To accommodate the huge bulk of the Kotschmar Organ, they rented a large warehouse space in neighboring Manchester where parts of the organ were stored when not needed in the workshop, and where work on the larger components was accomplished.

John Bishop, serving as Clerk of the Works, visited the workshop nine times during the progress of the renovation, conferring with the FBI staff about their methods and materials, monitoring the schedule, and verifying adherence to the scope of work as defined by the agreement. A comprehensive list of every task involved in the monumental project, including prices, was included as an amendment to the agreement. Every month, FBI submitted an invoice that itemized each task completed. Before submission to the city for payment, each invoice was compared to the appended list, accurately tracking the progress of the renovation.

On February 15, 2013, Foley-Baker hosted an Open House for FOKO and interested members of the committee. An enthusiastic busload gathered in Portland in the early morning for the ride to the workshop, where the FBI staff had a continental breakfast waiting. A thorough tour of all facets of the project included staff members demonstrating and explaining their processes to the visitors. A sumptuous lunch was provided at a nearby restaurant, followed by a tour of the warehouse annex. That generous and transparent exposure to all facets of the organ's renovation, from bulky to meticulous, allowed members of the FOKO Board, project donors, and members of the press an intimate understanding of the scope of the project.

Completion.

While the Organ Committee had been convinced by the past performance of FBI in large renovation projects, it's still remarkable that the workshop renovation was finished on schedule. The Universal Air Chest and the major structure of the organ was installed in time for the scheduled arrival of truckloads of renovated organ pipes, and the painstaking work of voicing, regulating, and tuning each of the organ's more than 7100 pipes began, continuing through the summer of 2014. The renovated organ was dedicated on Saturday, September 27, 2014, a little over 25 months after the Centennial Concert.

The renovation was substantially complete at the time of the dedication, but as the artists who would perform in the dedication festival began arriving in Portland for concert preparation, the schedule for practice time clashed with the final details of the renovation. FBI worked for another

month after the dedication. On November 3-4, 2014, John Bishop inspected the organ, creating a “punch-list” that was submitted to FBI on November 12. This step was defined in the agreement as the start of the process of assessing the project, leading toward “signing off” on the completion of all itemized portions of the project.

As FBI attended to the list, they conferred with John Bishop and Ray Cornils, reaching agreement on each issue. With notification that all items had been addressed, Bishop performed the final inspection of the organ on February 25-27, 2015. Cornils joined for one of those days, adding his impressions and agreement. And on February 27, Bishop addressed a letter to the Friends of the Kotschmar Organ and the City of Portland, declaring that the terms of the agreement had been met, that the project was complete, and recommending release of the final payment.

The total amount paid to Foley-Baker, Inc. for the renovation of the Kotschmar Organ was \$2,359,694.80. In addition, FOKO had raised and paid for substantial fundraising costs and related expenses, as well as the significant costs of the closing and reopening celebrations. The final tally for the full project was slightly in excess of \$2.6 million.

The FOKO Organ Committee worked tirelessly from early 2007 through the completion of the project in the fall of 2014. Committee members included:

- David Wallace (former organ curator)
- Robert Faucher (former organ curator)
- Harold Stover
- Albert Melton
- Peter Griffin
- James Strand
- Chester Cooke
- John Wilcox
- John Bishop, chair

Ex officio members included:

- Larry Rubinstein
- Kathleen Grammer
- Ray Cornils
- Donald Doele
- Bruce Lockwood

Special thanks are due to the staff of Foley-Baker, Inc. for their dedication, wisdom, and skill that allowed a successful completion, especially:

- Michael Foley
- Philip Carpenter
- James Bennett
- Milovan Popovic
- Scott Summers

Special thanks are due to FOKO Executive Director Kathleen Grammer for her facilitation of countless meetings of many committees, necessary for accomplishing this project.

Special thanks are due to Gregg Carville, Technical Director at Merrill Auditorium for his important role in supporting the organ builders in their complex work on-site.

1. Participants in the Symposium included:

Joseph Dzeda, Curator of Organs at Yale University
Nicholas Thompson-Allen, Curator of Organs at Yale University
Thomas Murray, Yale University Organist
Peter Conte, Grand Court Organist, the Wanamaker Store, Philadelphia
Curt Mangel, Organ Curator, the Wanamaker Store, Philadelphia
Jonathan Ambrosino, Organ Consultant
Walt Strony, Theatre Organist