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Portland's Music Man

Meet James Kennerley:
Organist supreme,
thrilled to play Maine

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Portland municipal organist finds new role 'absolutely thrilling'

James Kennerley publicly takes over with his Kotzschmar Memorial Organ debut on April 18. He's already been practicing – and he loves what he hears.

By Stephanie Bouchard

Standing center stage in Portland's Merrill Auditorium, in a slim-cut, blue suit with red tie and matching socks, James Kennerley is looking around the empty concert hall. Portland's newly hired municipal organist – the city's 11th – is not imagining all 1,900 seats filled with cheering organ music lovers.

He has a more immediate need demanding his attention.

He has just been asked to play the auditorium's renowned pipe organ, but in order to do so he first has to plug in the organ's console – the large cabinet at which an organist sits that is essentially the organ's command center. Trouble is, he literally just got the keys to the hall, but not the full tour.

To the rescue comes Kevin Schneck, Merrill's technical director. With the console plugged in and re-positioned on stage

"This moves easily!" Kennerley declares in surprise, while Schneck jokingly responds, "I'm incredibly strong!" as the two push the console across the stage.

Kennerley sits down on the bench and faces the console for the first time since he was in Portland for the fall announcement of his appointment to the position.

Looking over the console's five keyboards for the hands (there is also a keyboard for the feet) and 239 stop knobs, he says, "This organ has so many bits to it. It is quite the instrument."

King of instruments

At 2:23 a.m. on Jan. 24, 1908, a fire was discovered on the third floor

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Look at all the pedals; part of the Kotzschmar organ in Portland.
(Photo by Jill Brady)

CHECK HIM OUT

James Kennerley's first concert as Portland's new municipal organist is at 7:30 p.m. on Wednesday, April 18 at the Merrill Auditorium in Portland. Go to porttix.com for tickets. You can also hear and see Kennerley performing online at his YouTube channel or visit www.jameskennerley.com.

of Portland's City Hall. Despite aid from several communities, including some in New Hampshire, City Hall was destroyed; only the walls were left standing.

Plans for rebuilding immediately launched. Under discussion was the possibility of adding a pipe organ to the new building. Today, the idea of including a musical instrument as part of municipal building may seem odd, but times where different then.

While many think of organs as

church instruments, during the early 20th Century they were common in municipal buildings, movie theaters and even department stores.

The origins of the pipe organ can be traced to ancient Greece. It was a popular instrument with audiences, musicians and composers because of its musical versatility and breadth. Guillaume de Machaut, a 14th Century French poet and composer, declared it the "king of instruments," a sobriquet that has stuck for more than 600 years. It can make all the sounds of the instruments in an orchestra and then some, sounding like a booming canon or the whisper of the gentlest breeze.

Hearing of the city's plans to possibly include a pipe organ in the new City Hall, Cyrus H. K. Curtis, a Portland native and publisher of magazines such as the Ladies' Home Journal and the Saturday Evening Post, offered to pay for the creation of a pipe organ in the new building in honor of

his friend, Hermann Kotzschmar, who died three months after the fire.

Kotzschmar had, over nearly 60 years, transformed the cultural life of Portland through his musicianship and compositions. Many people, then and now, heralded him as the city's musical jewel.

On Aug. 22, 1912, the newly completed city hall opened, and with it, the Kotzschmar Memorial Organ debuted with a series of dedication concerts.

While many people believe the organ consists of the console played by the organist and the 191 pipes facing the audience in the hall, the organ in Merrill Auditorium is much, much larger. It has been enlarged twice since it was originally built. Today, its main chamber is 60 feet long, 16 feet wide and 40 feet tall. Parts of it are throughout the hall, including in the ceiling.

And those pipes you see along the stage? Most of them are just a façade – only the 12 in the center actually “speak.” In total, the organ has 7,101 pipes; 5,554 behind the façade.

A month prior to City Hall's grand opening, city administrators created a municipal music commission charged with hiring a municipal organist to care for the organ and perform concerts. The commission eventually was abolished, but the municipal organist position remained. It is one of only two such positions in the U.S. today. The other is in San Diego.

Nonprofit support

Since 1981, the municipal organist's salary and the maintenance of the organ are supported by the nonprofit organization, the Friends of the Kotzschmar Organ (FOKO). The city allocates a small stipend in its budget each year and provides assistance through its technical and public building staff.

“It was an important instrument when it was built in 1912,” said Ray Cornils, who retired at the end of 2017 after 27 years as the city's 10th municipal organist.

At the time, it was one of the largest instruments in the country, and while that is not the case today, it is an instrument that has stood the test of time and is renowned around the world.

“There was something that the builders had brought (to) this organ that was really special,” Cornils said,



James Kennerley tries out “his” new instrument. (Photo by Jill Brady)

and everyone – musicians and audiences – talked about it, and they still do. Organists come from around the world to play it and audiences to hear it.

On stage at Merrill Auditorium, Kennerley, 33, is improvising a demonstration of the Kotzschmar Memorial Organ, getting acquainted with the instrument he fantasized about as a child in his native England.

“This organ is super, super famous,” he said. “You play lots of instru-

ments which are wonderful, but you play an instrument like this and you think, ‘Oh, now that’s special.’ ”

‘Absolutely thrilling’

“The sound of this is absolutely thrilling,” he added. “The tonal range is absolutely huge. It’s a massive range of sounds. As an organist, that’s kind of what we live for – exploring those various colors and combining and contrasting them. It’s really, really cool.”

Unlike most trained professional

musicians, Kennerley didn't begin formal music lessons until he was a bit older – around age 9 or 10 – and didn't start on the organ until age 13 or 14.

While he began his formal lessons on the piano, it was always the organ that captured his imagination.

When he finally reached the level of proficiency on the piano that his music teacher thought he needed to have before moving to the organ, he felt like he'd been set free. "I would practice for hours and hours and hours," he said. "I thought it was the coolest thing – and still do."

His obvious enthusiasm for the instrument was one of the things that got him the job as Portland's municipal organist, said Brooke Hubner, FOKO's executive director.

"We knew we couldn't replace Ray (Cornils). He's a one-of-a-kind musician and is such a wonderful person, but we wanted someone who had that same sort of enthusiasm and this ability to draw people in," she said. "James has that same sort of excitement about the instrument and you know, you feel like you can go have a cup of coffee (with him) and just talk about organs for an hour."

Kennerley is no slouch in the musicianship department. His musical curriculum vitae is impressive. He is renowned as a singer, composer, keyboardist, conductor and improviser. In addition to his role as Portland's municipal organist, he is the organist and choirmaster at Saint Ignatius of Antioch Episcopal Church in New York City and the music director of Ars Musica Chorale, a New Jersey-based, 80-voice choral society, and the New Jersey State Children's Chorus.

In these months leading up to his first concert as the new municipal organist, he has a lot to accomplish. He will make two or three trips a month to

Portland from his home in New York City to practice and familiarize himself with the organ and to begin to craft music and education programs for the rest of this year's season and beyond.

But probably the most important thing he has to do before that debut concert in April is come up with a way to top Ray Cornils' famous red sequined jacket.

"I must say, everybody has said to me 'Are you going to do the sequin jacket?' " he said. "I've been doing some searching on eBay and other places."

Rest assured, music lovers, you're in good hands. ■



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