

In the wind . . .

by John Bishop



**It was a dark and stormy night . . .<sup>1</sup>**  
In the early hours of January 24, 1908, a cold westerly wind gusting to thirty miles an hour buffeted Portland, Maine. With the temperature hovering in the mid-teens, the wind chill factor was between forty-five and fifty degrees below zero. Around 2 AM, two men walking up Exchange Street toward Congress Street smelled burning rubber, noticed a red glow in City Hall, and ran to the Central Fire Station.<sup>2</sup>

Ironically, the fire was caused by a short circuit in Portland's Gamewell Fire Alarm, which was housed in the city electrician's office in City Hall. The fire, fanned by the strong winds, spread rapidly through the building. Firefighters responded from neighboring towns, but their primitive equipment was not equal to the emergency, and by morning the grand building was a smoldering wreck encased in ice. Government records were lost and the city's fire chief was seriously injured, but there were no fatalities and the fire was confined to the single building.<sup>3</sup>

City leaders were quick to respond. Less than six months later, Mayor Adam Leighton announced the appointment of the famed architectural firm Carrère & Hastings (designers of the New York Public Library) to design the new City Hall, which would include a large auditorium. An Australian pianist visiting Portland pointed out that many British and Australian city hall auditoriums included large pipe organs, and Mayor Leighton called on his friend, the publishing magnate Cyrus H. K. Curtis, who responded with a gift to the City of Portland for a large concert pipe organ to be installed in the new auditorium. The organ would be named for Cyrus Curtis's namesake. Mr. Curtis set two ground rules: the organ would be built by the Austin Organ Company without any direction or interference, and the cost should not exceed \$30,000.<sup>4</sup>

**The life of the Kotschmar**

The 101-rank Kotschmar Organ is 100 years old as I write today. As the City of Portland was forced to stop funding for the organ and its programming in the late 1970s, a not-for-profit organization called Friends of the Kotschmar Organ (FOKO) was formed in 1981. You can read about the history of the organ and of FOKO at the website [www.foko.org](http://www.foko.org), and you can see the organ's stoplist at [www.foko.org/stop\\_list.htm](http://www.foko.org/stop_list.htm).

The organ was expanded by Austin in the 1920s and physically moved across the stage by a house-moving company in the 1960s. Merrill Auditorium was reconstructed in the 1990s and the organ was removed from the hall, to be returned when the hall was ready—on a shoestring budget, through the Herculean efforts of the organ's curator and the FOKO Board of Directors. After a century of ups and downs, it's great to report that programming has expanded to include significant educational outreach, bringing the pipe organ to public schools in the Portland area. FOKO has even had a portable three-rank pipe



The Kotschmar Organ, Merrill Auditorium

organ built that travels to schools to enhance these efforts. Hundreds of great organists have played recitals on the organ, and it remains a beloved icon in the center of Maine's largest city. If you live in one of America's more populous

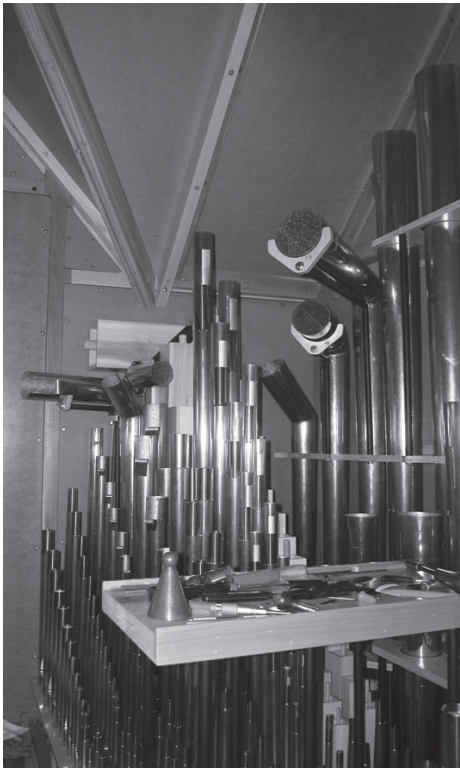
states, you may imagine Portland to be larger than it is. With an art museum, symphony orchestra, municipal organ, and opera company, the city boasts an unusually rich cultural life for its population of just over 66,000 people!

Over the past five or six years, the people of FOKO have come to grips with the fact that the Kotschmar Organ is in failing condition. It sounds great, and has been played energetically and regularly all along. But to reuse a well-worn phrase, it's time to pay the pipers, all 6,760 of them! To shorten the long story of a complicated path, FOKO, the City of Portland, and the people who love the Kotschmar Organ have come up with the perfect gift for the organ that has everything in celebration of its hundredth birthday—the millions of dollars necessary for a full-blown, soup-to-nuts renovation, which will take place in the workshop of Foley-Baker, Inc. of Tolland, Connecticut. The City of Portland has set a bold example for government support of artistic and cultural activities by providing a matching grant of \$1.25 million toward the renovation of the organ, an amount readily matched by private gifts.

**Centennial celebrations**

The new City Hall and the Kotschmar Organ were dedicated at two o'clock on the afternoon of August 22, 1912. At two o'clock on August 22, 2012, a large gathering of pipe organ professionals and enthusiasts were gathered in a meeting room at the Holiday Inn by the Sea in Portland in a plenary session concluding a week-long Centennial Festival celebrating the Kotschmar Organ

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Console and façade

and its role in the life of the city. Michael Barone, host of Minnesota Public Radio's *Pipedreams*, was moderator. The panel included the panoply of performers assembled for the festival: Scott Foppiano, Walt Strony, Peter Richard Conte, Fred Hohman, Fred Swann, John Weaver, and Municipal Organist Ray Cornils. (Felix Hell and Tom Trenney had left the festival early because of other concert engagements.)

A couple of hours later, the Friends of the Kotschmar Organ hosted a Gala Centennial Banquet attended by about two hundred people. And on Wednesday evening, we enjoyed the Centennial Concert played by Ray Cornils, Peter Richard Conte, and the Kotschmar Festival Brass. You can see the festival schedule, the specifications of the organ, and learn the history of the organ and of the Friends of the Kotschmar Organ at the website, [www.foko.org](http://www.foko.org).

I serve on the board of directors of the Friends of the Kotschmar Organ, where I am chairman of the organ committee. Seems natural enough, doesn't it, that someone serving as a volunteer on the board of a not-for-profit organization would take a role from his professional life? But there's something very funny about it. Throughout more than 35 years working as an organbuilder, I've been involved in hundreds of conversations with organ committees from all sorts of institutions, but always as an organbuilder, as a contractor, never as the "customer." Since the conversation about renovating

the Kotschmar Organ started early in 2007, I've been on the other side of the table. The organ committee and I prepared requests for proposals and sent them to a list of organbuilding firms, we reviewed and compared the various proposals we received, chose the contractor, and spent many hours in conference with the staff of Foley-Baker planning the project. It was an extraordinary learning experience, rounding out my understanding of the process of conception and planning of a major organ project, and I am grateful to Foley-Baker, the organ committee, and all my colleagues on the FOKO board for this very rich experience.

#### Wait, wait, when can we work?

Planning the schedule of this project has been unusually delicate. Merrill Auditorium is a grand home not only for this wonderful organ, but for many other activities as well. It is home to the Portland Symphony Orchestra, the Choral Arts Society, the Portland Opera, and the Portland Ballet. (How many cities of 66,000 people can boast such a lineup?) Each year, many high schools, colleges, and universities hold their graduation exercises there, most of them accompanied by the organ. The City of Portland uses the auditorium for meetings and conferences, and very importantly, the hall is the premier venue in the State of Maine for all sorts of cultural activities, from rock concerts to comedians, from classical musicians to this summer's live sell-out production of National Public Radio's ubiquitous favorite show, *Wait, Wait, Don't Tell Me!* That means two things—thousands of people throng from all over the state to hear this wide variety of events, and the rental of the hall for high-profile programs is of primary importance to the operating budget of the auditorium.

The second major factor defining the delicacy of the schedule is the fact that it's difficult to maintain an audience in a dark hall. The Friends of the Kotschmar Organ have cultivated an enthusiastic audience for the organ, comprising many local enthusiasts and countless tourists who plan their visits to Portland to coincide with concerts at Merrill Auditorium. How to maintain the presence of the organ and nourish the audience during its approximately twenty months of absence is the question that FOKO has been grappling with since the beginning of the conversation.

The five-week period necessary for the removal of the organ must have been the largest single block of time reserved since the hall was reopened after its renovation in 1997, for which the organ had been removed from the building.

A few paragraphs ago, I mentioned that the conversation about the renovation of the organ started in 2007, just ten years after the Kotschmar Organ was installed in Merrill Auditorium for the second time. As the auditorium had received a thorough facelift that included new theater seats, a renewed acoustical environment, and a new and larger stage equipped with all the machinery and gear necessary to support complicated theatrical productions, you can imagine that there was much fanfare about the organ's return to the hall having been cleaned, repaired, and modified to fit the new environment. In fact, the word "restoration" had been used.

When early in 2007, FOKO's organ committee reported to the full board that the organ's condition merited a thorough and very expensive overhaul, there was an eerie silence in the room. The next sound came from a board member who correctly commented, "I thought we restored the organ when the hall was rebuilt."

In August 2007, FOKO hosted a symposium, inviting seven acknowledged pipe organ experts to visit and inspect the organ and participate in several days of both private and public conversation. Theatre organist Walt Strony, Thomas Murray, Joseph Dzeda, and Nicholas Thompson-Allen of Yale University, Peter Richard Conte and Curt Mangel of the Wanamaker Organ, and organ consultant and historian Jonathan Ambrosino were the invited guests. Craig Whitney of the *New York Times*, and author of *All the Stops* (PublicAffairs, 2003), served as scribe for the public round-table discussion. The result of the symposium was a unanimous recommendation by the participants that FOKO commission a professional survey of the organ's condition, which would serve as the basis for a request for proposals for the renovation of the organ. Five years later, as I write today, the organ is being dismantled for its multi-million-dollar renovation.

#### The tricky "R's" . . .

From the very beginning of five years of conversations, FOKO board members have referred to this project as a *renovation*. In the world of the preservation of antiquities, the word *restoration* should be used very carefully. The word implies returning an artifact to its condition when brand new. If the Kotschmar Organ were being *restored*, the five-manual console built in 2000 would be removed and the original either repurchased and restored (with its mechanical "ka-chunk" one-level combination action) or faithfully reconstructed, and the significant voices added by Austin in the 1920s (and paid for by Cyrus Curtis) would be re-

moved. While the original organ was a glorious instrument, the various additions and modifications have improved the instrument for modern use by myriad artists.

The current project includes a faithful reproduction of the original Austin Universal Air Chest, which was significantly modified during the 1995–97 project, replacement of pipe valves and pneumatic note-motors with authentic parts supplied by the Austin Organ Company, and the addition of two new 32-foot voices. It would be inaccurate to refer to this project as a *restoration*. We believe that the effect, aura, and ethic of the original Austin organ will be retained and the essential character of the organ will not be changed.

#### The centennial star parade

The Kotschmar Centennial Festival was a brilliant convocation. The array of visiting artists was inspirational. It was both fun and rewarding to meet with the visiting faithful, many of whom were not professionals, but people so dedicated to the thrill of the pipe organ that traveling hundreds of miles to spend a summer week sitting in churches, conference rooms, and a concert hall is a joy. It was both thrilling and moving to see how the people of Portland came out to celebrate and support their most visible cultural icon. And in the light of all that, enriching for me to have such a broad opportunity to visit with my colleagues who have so much to offer on stage and at table.

Felix Hell gave us a brilliant performance of Liszt's *Fantasy and Fugue on Ad nos ad salutarem undam*. After the concert I caught a glimpse of John Weaver and Felix Hell embracing, the epitome of the deep experience between mentor and student. I've had many conversations with great teachers about the joy of working with gifted students, and that which I had with John Weaver at breakfast a couple days later was a classic about how a great performer takes what he learned from his teachers and builds on it as he matures as a performer and develops his vision of a given piece.

Thomas Heywood ([www.concertorgan.com](http://www.concertorgan.com)) travels the world with his wife Simone, who assists him at the console for his performances, and manages his career. Thomas has the hands and feet of a conjurer, allowing him to play fiendish passages, especially those in his own transcriptions, with abandon and most notably, joy. He bounds onto the stage as if he were winning an Oscar, then jumps on the bench and dazzles. He tested the repetition rate of the organ's aging action with his reading of the *Overture to William Tell*.

Fred Swann and John Weaver shared a recital on Tuesday night, August 21. While we celebrate the brilliant young players who are bringing new life to the pipe organ, the opportunity to hear two such masters play on the same evening is to recall the majesty, dignity, and depth of musical interpretation that can only be achieved through a lifetime of practice, study, and thousands of performances. I doubt that anyone in the hall failed to recognize the significance of that collaboration.

Tom Trenney, Scott Foppiano, and Walt Strony helped us appreciate the versatility of the Kotschmar Organ, which presents itself architecturally as a formal concert organ, but with its array of percussions like Harp, Marimba, Glockenspiel, drums, and Turkish Cymbal, can easily jump the line between the classical and the popular. Tom accompanied the silent film, *Speedy*, and Scott and Walt gave varied and colorful performances that showcased the widest ranges of the organ's resources, and their creative and colorful personalities.

Fred Hohman honored the memory of one of Portland's early municipal organists by playing transcriptions and original compositions by Edwin Lemare, whose virtuosity impressed early twentieth-century audiences, and whose creativity in understanding the capabilities of the organ console is still educating concert organists.

I've written before in the pages of this journal that I suspect Peter Richard

Misfortune turned to joy at St. Gabriel's Episcopal Church in Monterey Park, CA, which lost its new Rodgers organ as well as the altar and sacristy to fire in 2010. With the help of Robert Tall & Associates, organ consultant Tony Ha, and Church Keyboard Center of Pasadena, CA, the congregation once again is singing with a Rodgers organ - this time, an Allegiant 678 with a beautiful hand-crafted cabinet, double expression, toe pistons, 20 internal memory levels and 114 organ stops. The pipe portion of the installation was completed by Ryan Ballantyne.

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Ray Cornils and Peter Richard Conte at the console, with the (full house) audience singing "Auld Lang Syne." Those wearing hard hats are the staff of Foley-Baker, Inc.



Foley-Baker crew removes façade pipes

Conte to be armed with universal joints in his fingers rather than the more usual "up-and-down" knuckles that hamper the rest of us. As an audience member sitting 100 feet from the console in the Grand Tier of the auditorium, I heard sweeping performances of familiar orchestral scores. As a friend who has often stood next to Peter as he plays, I know he's capable of playing on four keyboards simultaneously while playing two independent parts on the pedalboard. You think it's super-human and impossible until you see it up close.

Ray Cornils has served Portland as municipal organist since 1990. He, like Hermann Kotzschmar, must be the premier musician of the City of Portland and the State of Maine. His rapport with city officials, board members, and with the audience is a joy to witness, and his approach to his role, complete with sparkling costumes and a smooth croon of a voice as he addresses the audience at Merrill Auditorium, speaks of his understanding and appreciation of the role of leader of the city's music.

#### Say good night, Gracie.

During the last piece of the centennial concert, attentive audience members noticed a light turning on inside the organ, and several people sneaking across the organ behind the façade pipes. As the audience stood in ovation, Ray and Peter slid back onto the bench and launched into a fresh four-hands arrangement of *Auld Lang Syne*. The entire staff of Foley-Baker, Inc., some twenty strong

in suits and hard hats, walked onto the stage with a huge stepladder, and started removing façade pipes as the audience sang and wept.

All this about a pipe organ? The pipe organ is the most complex of musical instruments, the most expensive, and the most difficult to care for. Organs are subject to the whims of weather, politics, and the global economy (try to solicit a leading gift from a donor whose portfolio has just crashed). For many, they are the symbol of lost ages, the ultimate icon of the dead white man. They are the timeless symbol of the church, which compels an ever-decreasing percentage of our population.

Portland, Maine has ponied up \$1,250,000 to care for its treasure. Can your town, county, state, or nation be persuaded to do the same? Never, never take pipe organs for granted. ■

#### Notes

1. Edward Bulwer-Litton, *Paul Clifford* (opening line), published by Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, London, 1830. It is widely quoted as an example of "Purple Prose" celebrating the worst extremes in writing:

"It was a dark and stormy night; the rain fell in torrents—except at occasional intervals, when it was checked by a violent gust of wind which swept up the streets (for it is in London that our scene lies), rattling along the housetops, and fiercely agitating the scanty flame of the lamps that struggled against the darkness."

2. *Behind the Pipes: The Story of the Kotzschmar Organ*, Janice Parkinson-Tucker, Casco House, 2005, pp. 2–3.

3. *Lima Daily News*, Lima, Ohio, January 24, 1908 (<http://www.gendisasters.com/data1/me/fires/portland-cityhall1908.htm>)

4. *Behind the Pipes*, p. 14.

## On Teaching

by Gavin Black



### Organ Method I

*Note: This is the first excerpt from my Organ Method, as discussed in last month's column. It is the Preface to that book, and, as such, is written with the audience of prospective readers and users of the book in mind. I strongly welcome any and all feedback from readers of this column.*

#### Preface

This book is written and presented with one concrete purpose at its core. It is intended to offer to anyone who is interested a clear and reliable path towards becoming a highly competent player of the organ. I would like to examine a few of the specific implications of that concept.

1) First of all—and, in a way, most important of all—is the notion of "anyone who is interested." One of the greatest joys of my years as a teacher of organ and harpsichord has been the discovery that no two people who develop an interest in something do so for the same reasons, with the same background, or with the same expectations. Any approach to teaching that suggests, even unwittingly, that some of those reasons, backgrounds, and expectations are more suitable than others will have the effect of excluding or discouraging a portion of those who are—or were, initially—interested. In the world of organ playing, some of the notions that can end up excluding or discouraging potential students are those derived from the world of music and music teaching in general: that after a rather young age it is essentially too late to become a truly competent and skill-

ful musician, or that anyone who cannot develop perfect pitch, or become a good singer, or learn to take dictation cannot be or should not be a musician, or in general that only those "touched by the gods" can master the mysteries of understanding and playing great music.

I am well aware that, fortunately, very few music teachers or working musicians hold this last attitude. Unfortunately, however, I also know very well that many prospective students do—people are scared off by it. No one should be. Some other of these notions are specific to the world of the organ, and many of them are indeed inadvertent or unwitting. (Certainly very few, if any, music teachers want to exclude or discourage anyone.) The assumption that anyone who wants to become an organist should specifically first become a pianist is one such notion. (It is one to which I am personally sensitive, as it almost derailed me from pursuing organ in my teenage years.) Certain approaches to the learning of pedal playing are so prohibitively uncomfortable to some people that they convince those people—wrongly—that they are just not cut out to be organists. I am also sensitive to this one.

At an early point in my teaching career, I happened to encounter a couple of people who told me that they had really wanted to play the organ, but found it too uncomfortable to sit in some particular posture while learning to play the pedals. They had come to believe, perhaps because of something that they had read or that they had been told, that this posture was necessary, and they actually gave up. This felt to me at the time like a tragedy (both for their sakes and because I wanted there to be more organ students out there as I began my teaching career!) and it led to my developing my particular approach to pedal learning, the latest refinement of which is found in this book. Others are discouraged by being told that it is absolutely necessary that they work on some particular part of the repertoire that really—for the time being at least—doesn't interest them. I don't believe that there is any good reason for this—even for something as basic as requiring a student to play some Bach, for example—as I discuss later on in this book.

2) In order for it to be true that any interested party can work successfully on organ playing, it must also be true that this does not involve any "dumbing down." If I am claiming that a particular approach to working on organ can be successful not just for selected students but for anyone who is interested, then I must mean that anyone can reach a high level of competence and understanding—not just dabble a little bit. I firmly believe



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