

Atlantic City Boardwalk Hall's Midmer-Losh Organ: An Update

Charles Swisher and Carl Loeser

Eleven years have passed since the Midmer-Losh organ in Atlantic City's Boardwalk Hall was last heard, when the ACCHOS CD/01 was recorded on November 3–4, 1998. The Atlantic City Convention Hall was renamed Boardwalk Hall and was closed for four years (1999–2002) to undergo a \$90 million renovation, which, sadly, did not include work on the organ. The hall is now considered one of the finest performing arts facilities of its kind in America.

Background

In the early 1920s, Atlantic City decided to build a massive Convention Hall; 30,000 people gathered for its dedication in June 1929. New Jersey State Senator Emerson L. Richards designed both the Midmer-Losh organ and the ballroom's Kimball organ. The Midmer-Losh Organ Company of Merrick, Long Island, installed the organ from 1929–1932. The organ is housed in eight chambers in a surround-sound configuration in the hall. Two ceiling chambers house the Fanfare and Echo organs, and two gallery chambers are located in the left and right forward and center areas of the hall.

The main console has seven manuals (located in a kiosk at stage level), and a movable console is available with five manuals. The organ has some 33,112 pipes and was listed for decades in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the largest pipe organ in the world.

In the 1980s and '90s, both organs fell into disuse and were neglected by management. In 1997, following an e-mail plea by Stephen D. Smith in London, the Atlantic City Convention Hall Organ Society, Inc. was formed to foster the preservation and restoration of both organs in the hall.

As it was, a lot of damage to both organs occurred during hall renovation. The architect at the time had the Kimball relay removed to make way for a stairway, and the left stage chamber relay of the Midmer-Losh was removed as the old balconies were demolished.

The Society has published two books, *Atlantic City's Musical Masterpiece* and *The Atlantic City Convention Hall Organ—A Pictorial Essay about the World's Largest Pipe Organ*. Two CD recordings and a DVD have also been released. The ACCHOS website (www.acchos.org) continues to attract countless thousands of visitors from 41 countries around the world.

Worldwide interest in the Midmer-Losh organ is greater than ever. On April 20, 2008, the entire organ class from the Royal Academy of Music in Denmark flew over to get a firsthand look at the organ, and they were delighted. Board member and tour leader Harry Bellangy said they were all like Charlie in the Chocolate Factory!

Current status

In 2007, Carl Loeser was appointed curator of organs, and in 2008, Stephen D. Smith, ACCHOS president and author, was named Honorary Curator of the Boardwalk Hall Organs in perpetuity. The restoration of the two instruments has begun, and the results thus far have been very promising. Here is a general summary of where things stand as of June 2009.

In 1930, the hall's first general manager wanted a straightforward theatre organ for the ballroom, but Emerson Richards had in mind an orchestral instrument that included some proper organ choruses. The resulting scheme of 42 voices—19 straight and 23 extended—was heralded as a "pioneer" organ and included the first brass stop installed by Kimball. Three wind pressures are employed among the 55 ranks and 4,151 pipes.

The Kimball organ was intact and fully functional before the building renovation,

and therefore its restoration is relatively straightforward. The original relay system and booster blower were removed during the renovation to accommodate a new stairway. The booster blower is being relocated and a new Peterson relay system is being installed in the organ to replace the original relay. Ken Crome is restoring the console at his shop in Reno, Nevada. The relay installation should be completed this summer, and the console returned by the end of the year. The main blower room and static reservoirs have been completely restored. The instrument should be playable once again by early next year.

Work on the Midmer-Losh organ will not be quite so straightforward. Most of the organ is in reasonable condition, with a few isolated areas of water damage and vandalism. It is a testimony to the diligence and concern of the staff at Boardwalk Hall that the organ survived the building renovation process relatively unscathed. Anyone who has worked in this trade, and been involved with protecting a pipe organ during construction work, will realize how difficult this must have been for an instrument of this size, spread out as it is throughout the building. In fact, the organ has suffered from benign neglect more than anything else.

Work has begun on the right stage chamber, since it was the only portion of the organ that was kept in operating condition for many years and will require the least amount of work to be put back into operation. As many will recall from the 1998 recording, there were many dead notes. Although much of the chestwork in this chamber had been releathered over the years, many of the chest magnets had failed. They are of a compound type that, in addition to an armature, have an internal pouch and primary valve. The leather had failed in many of the magnets, and the zinc castings had become brittle, making it difficult to rebuild them. They had not been produced in decades, and no spares remained. The original magnets were manufactured by Klann Organ Supply Co., and Klann has been assisting in developing a direct replacement. Several prototypes are currently being tested, and it is anticipated that production of new magnets will commence before the end of the summer.

Once on hand, the new magnets will be installed where needed in the right stage chamber, and that should bring a large number of pipes back to life and allow much of the Great, Solo, and Pedal divisions to be put back into playable condition. If all goes well, this should be completed by early next year.

As an interesting aside, several of the old magnets were sent to Klann for evaluation. Paul Klann, retired from the firm, was visiting the plant one day and was shown one of the magnets, with no explanation given about them. He recognized them immediately and then expressed interest as to who was presently taking care of the Convention Hall organ in Atlantic City.

Restoration plans

The Swell division will be the first non-playable portion of the organ to be restored. This will include rebuilding the windchests, cleaning and repair of the pipes, and some repairs to the blowers and winding system. The pipes and windchests are being removed, and rebuilding work on them has begun. Again, if all goes well, the Swell division should be back in operation by the end of next year. Following the Swell restoration, the remaining parts of the left stage chamber will be restored, including the ranks of the Swell-Choir, Unenclosed Choir, String I, and Pedal Left.

As funding permits, the gallery and ceiling chambers will be restored, although the specific order for this has not



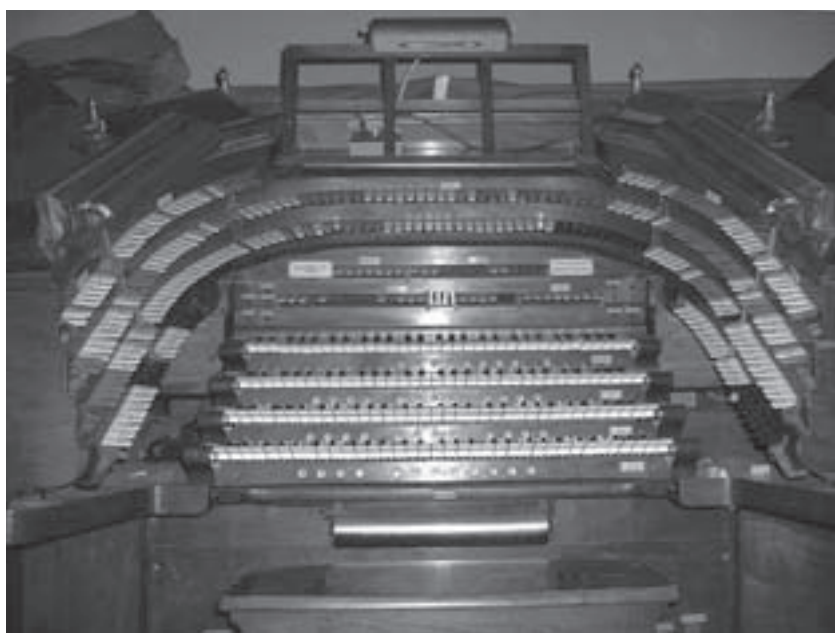
Early view of Boardwalk Hall



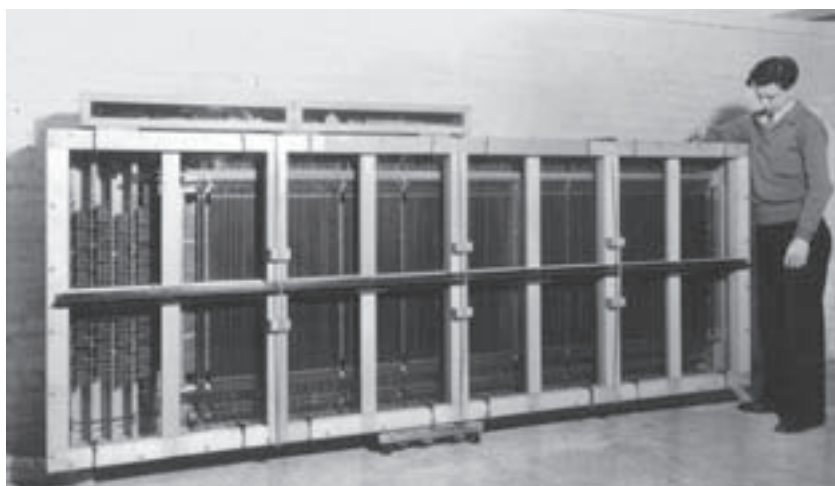
The 7-manual console in its kiosk



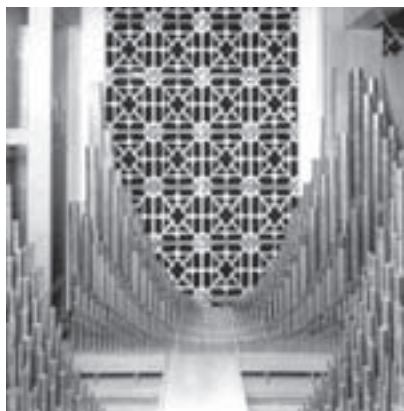
The 5-manual movable console for the Midmer-Losh organ. It is currently on display in the building's lobby.



The Kimball console—the largest horseshoe console ever built by Kimball



A portion of the original combination action for the Midmer-Losh. It was ruined during the hurricane of 1944 when the sub-basement was flooded with salt water for days.



View of the Unenclosed Choir in the left stage chamber



New prototype Klann magnet on the left and original magnet on the right



View of the restored blower motor for the ballroom Kimball organ. Curator Carl Loeser looks on.



Students and teachers from the Royal Academy of Music in Denmark who made a special trip to see the "World's Largest Pipe Organ" in Boardwalk Hall



The array of reservoirs for the right stage chamber on the Midmer-Losh organ

yet been determined. These include:

- Right Forward chamber (Brass Chorus and String II)
- Right Center chamber (Gallery I and Gallery II)
- Right Upper chamber (Echo including the 16' Bassoon made of paper mâché!)
- Left Forward (Choir)
- Left Center (Gallery III, Gallery IV, and the Chickering concert grand piano)
- Left Upper chamber (Fanfare and String III)

The Fanfare division is one of the real highlights of the Midmer-Losh. Stephen Smith wrote:

The Fanfare organ, with its blaze of mixtures and reeds, is intended to be a 'super' department. Its stentorian diapasons, 18 ranks of mixtures, and barrage of reeds (four of them voiced on 50 inches of wind) provide a stunning and formidable antiphonal opponent to the Main organ in the Stage chambers. It was reputed to have been Emerson Richards' favorite department, and one can well imagine the majesty of its sound pouring into the center of the Hall, filling the room.¹

A new control system for the entire Midmer-Losh organ will be designed, and the entire organ will be rewired. It is interesting to note that the entire coupling system for the seven-manual console was contained in the key contact trays for each keyboard, a very compact system. Not so with the original combination action, a portion of which is shown in the photo. It took up two entire rooms in the basement and, unfortunately, had a relatively short life, being ruined when the basement areas flooded during a hurricane in 1944.

Once the Midmer-Losh can be heard again, there will be a very pleasant surprise for everyone. Prior to the renovation the reverberation time in the main hall was over 7–9 seconds. Following removal of the asbestos-laden ceiling, a new more porous material was substituted. A small group of us were present in 2002 when the right stage chamber was fired up briefly in its new acoustic setting. The results were exciting. The reverberation time had been reduced to 5–6 seconds. All present agreed that the organ spoke with more precision, improved clarity and diffusion in the great space. This chamber alone with its 132 ranks well tuned, including the 64' Dulzian, will provide an impressive experience next year.

The Unenclosed Choir

One of the very special parts of the organ is the Unenclosed Choir in the left stage chamber. Stephen Smith says:

It may come as a surprise to learn that the entire rationale behind the "core" of the Convention Hall organ can be summed up by looking at the stoplist of just one of the instrument's departments. Even more surprisingly, it's one of the smallest departments and its stops are voiced on the organ's lowest wind pressure.

The department in question is the Unenclosed Choir (Quintaton 16, Diapason 8, Holz Flute 8, Octave 4, Fifteenth 2, Rausch Quint 12-15 & 19-22). It is this tiny department that encapsulates the message Emerson Richards was trying to put across to the American organ world at the time. That message was about the need for tonal cohesion and harmonic structure—in a phrase, "proper choruses." Richards said this Unenclosed Choir was to be a "little Great organ . . . similar to the Silbermann organ familiar to Bach." Of course "proper choruses" were nothing new; they had been included in organs for decades. However, that was in the past, and Richards and a growing number of other organists considered that the organ had "gone off" its tonal tracks since then. "Proper choruses" were out of favor; while an ever-increasing variety of flutes,



The restored Spencer blower for the ballroom Kimball organ

strings, and diminutive reeds—usually at 8-foot pitch—were the vogue.

The Convention Hall instrument was to be the world's largest organ and it would probably be the most publicized too. What better place could there be to make such a statement? The problem was that there were so many statements and so many attractions, that the Unenclosed Choir's message was all but lost! Despite this, that message did, finally, get through. However, it wasn't because of the Unenclosed Choir alone, nor was it due solely to the efforts of Richards—although he undoubtedly took the lead role in changing opinion and, thereby, preparing the way for a return to "proper choruses."²

There are a number of videos that have been posted on <YouTube.com>. Some are from ACCHOS, but a wide variety of other posts are there as well.

Monthly tours are now available on a regular basis. The tours last about two hours. Detailed information is on the website at <www.acchos.org> and reservations can be made by sending an e-mail to <acchostour@gmail.com>. ■

Notes

1. *The Grand Ophicleide Newsletter*, Issue No. 42, page 11.
2. *The Grand Ophicleide Newsletter*, Issue No. 23, page 9.

Charles F. Swisher is a senior audio and acoustical consultant with wide experience in the design of systems for speech and music reinforcement, electronic architecture, video, recordings, and multi-media productions. He holds a bachelor of science degree in electrical engineering from the University of Illinois. Prior to joining Jaffe Holden Acoustics of Norwalk, Connecticut, in 1968, he worked for Ampex Corporation and Vega Electronics Corporation. He is a Fellow of the Audio Engineering Society and an audio consultant specializing in church sound system design and recording projects.

Since 1994 he has been executive director of the American Pipe Organ Museum, Inc., a non-profit foundation to establish a national home to showcase the history of American pipe organ design. He became vice-president of the Atlantic City Convention Hall Organ Society, Inc. in 1997.

Carl Loeser is curator of the Boardwalk Hall pipe organs in Atlantic City, New Jersey. A New Jersey native, he has worked in the pipe organ field for 30 years. Following college, he pursued a career in electrical engineering and concurrently started a side business doing organ maintenance and tuning. In 1988, he switched to pipe organ work on a full time basis. He has assisted in the installation of new organs and provided service for Schantz, Casavant, Reuter, and Austin. He has also done extensive rebuilding and restoration work. Among these projects was the complete restoration of the Ethereal Division of the John Wanamaker organ.

Photos by Harry Bellangy, Fred Hess & Son, Antoni Scott