

THE BOSTON MUSIC HALL AND THE GREAT ORGAN

At the midpoint of the nineteenth century Boston was experiencing something of a musical “growth spurt.” At least four different orchestras were giving concerts in halls of varying sizes, and their repertoire included symphonies by Mozart, Beethoven, Haydn and Mendelssohn. The Handel and Haydn Society was regularly performing oratorios and other choral music by their namesake composers and others, and in 1849 a chamber music group had formed, taking its name from another popular composer, Mendelssohn. Visiting divas introduced Bostonians to the latest operatic music, and foreign artists such as German pianist Alfred Jaell, Norwegian violinist Ole Bull and Jenny Lind, the “Swedish Nightingale,” performed in Boston on their international tours. Audiences grew impressively, filling some of the largest venues such as Tremont Temple, which seated 1,500. In 1850 Lind drew such a large following that her concert had to be held in a vast unfinished space above the new Fitchburg Railroad Station, and was something of a disaster, since Barnum had over-sold even that huge venue.

Clearly, Boston needed a large and centrally-located concert hall, and in January of 1851 this need was broached at the annual meeting of the Harvard Musical Association. By assent of the membership, a committee comprised of J. B. Upham, R. E. Apthorp, John S. Dwight and George Derby was appointed to begin looking into the possibilities, and they wasted no time. By the end of February the Music Hall Committee had selected a site in the middle of a block between Tremont and Washington streets, and by April an architect, George Snell, had been engaged to draw up plans, and a budget of prospective costs and income had been calculated. In the same month the Harvard Musical Association issued a circular signed by members George S. Hilliard, Jonas Chickering, J. B. Upham and George Derby regarding the proposed hall. It requested that the “liberal patronage” that Bostonians had already responded to with regard to literature and the fine arts would “not be withheld in this appeal for a kindred object.”

The appeal was successful, for this HMA committee, aided by other members, raised \$100,000 in sixty days. One fourth of this sum was given by members of the HMA, the most generous subscri-



ers being Perkins, Apthorp, Chickering and C. P. Curtis. A charter was procured authorizing Jonas Chickering, Henry W. Pickering, Edward Frothingham and their associates and successors to hold real and personal estate to the amount of \$150,000. The desired lot was purchased and construction soon began. By June of 1852 the newly formed Boston Music Hall Association was advertising that their yet to be completed 3,000-seat hall, with its lower lecture room, would be available for rentals of various kinds. At that time, it was stated that it would be furnished with an organ, and when the completed hall was opened in November of 1852 with great ceremony, there was one there. This was, however, an old one rented from the Handel and Haydn Society until such time that a new organ could be obtained. Indeed, \$1,000 from the proceeds of the opening concert had been set aside as seed money for that very purpose.

Dr. Jabez Baxter Upham had been a member of the HMA's initial Music Hall Committee from its inception, and in an address given before the HMA in January of

1858 he had stated that “almost immediately after the completion of the Music Hall the matter of procuring an organ of the first magnitude began to be agitated.” Without question, Dr. Upham was the chief and most relentless agitator, recruiting many members of the HMA, notably John Sullivan Dwight, editor of *Dwight’s Journal of Music*, to the cause. In 1853 he made an exploratory trip to England, France and Germany, visiting organs both historic and recent, and soliciting preliminary proposals from several organ builders. For this he was criticized by some American builders and their supporters, yet he seems to have had his heart set on something from the land of the great composers from the very outset.

Although Upham continued to work behind the scenes, the first publicity for the organ project did not appear until March of 1856, when *Dwight’s Journal* made note of the effort being made “to place in the Music Hall a Grand Organ.” In the same month, the *Boston Atlas* reported that a subscription paper had already been circulating, “with most gratifying results.” The Music Hall had proven to be successful, and its shareholders, undoubtedly including many HMA members, were now 1,035 strong, and ready for the newest challenge. 734 of them attended the annual meeting of the Boston Music Hall Association in June, where they voted unanimously to procure a “grand organ” for the Hall, equal to the finest in Europe. \$10,000 was appropriated on the spot, with the understanding that an equal amount should be obtained by subscription, plus \$5,000 from concert proceeds—a figure guaranteed by Upham himself. By the time that the trustees of the Music Hall Association met in October, the subscription amount had been raised, and Upham was authorized to go back to Europe, choose a builder, and sign a contract. This he did almost immediately, retracing some of the steps of his earlier trip to visit organs and organ-builders in England, Holland and Germany.

Upham’s choice eventually fell upon Walcker of Ludwigsburg, whose monumental organ in the Cathedral of Ulm had particularly impressed him, and a contract for an equally monumental instrument was signed. Upham returned to Boston in February of 1857 bearing this forty-page document, and E. F. Walcker began the work of designing and building an organ for Boston. The Bostonians were both curious and interested in the project, and some, when they traveled abroad, made a point of visiting Walcker’s factory to view progress. Alexander W. Thayer, best known as one of Beethoven’s earliest biographers, stopped by in 1858, and the following year Samuel P. Tuckerman, organist of St. Paul’s Church in Boston also paid Walcker a visit, noting that completed parts of the “Boston organ” already filled two rooms of the factory.

What Walcker was building, however, was only the internal portion of the organ, and this was clearly specified in the contract. The plan was to have the decorative exterior casework made in the United States, but it was not until 1859 that a design submitted by Boston architect Ham-matt Billings was chosen, and one more appeal for funding was circulated. Again this was successful, and in April of 1860 a contract was signed with Herter Bros. of New York, specialists in architectural woodworking, for the construction of the organ case in American walnut. By this time, the organ was virtually completed in Ludwigsburg, but a year later the Civil War broke out, which caused serious concern about the safety of the organ on the high seas. In August of 1862, a panel of experts from Germany and England inspected the organ, then set up and playing in Walcker’s factory, and pronounced it good in a lengthy report. Following their visit, the organ was taken down and packed for shipping.

That members of the Harvard Musical Association were clearly still interested in the organ project is evidenced by the fact that at their annual meeting in January of 1863 one of the Directors of the Music Hall (presumably a HMA member), “made the cheering announcement that the

Great Organ, so long expected, is now actually upon the ocean, on its way here." The Music Hall Association then promptly began to refurbish the Hall, now showing signs of a decade of heavy use, in anticipation of its arrival. After a certain amount of anxiety among insurance agents and investors, the brig *Presto*, having taken three months of somewhat *lento* progress from Rotterdam over stormy seas, docked safely in Boston with its precious cargo on March 23.

E. F. Walcker's son Fritz, along with four of Walcker's workmen, also arrived to undertake the task of installing the organ. During the long and probably hot Boston summer, the Walcker crew, along with personnel from the Herter firm, toiled to set up, regulate and tune the organ. By September, plans were being made for the grand opening, and by October the date of Monday, November 2, was set for the public event. A private event was held two days earlier, however, on October 31, for the formal transfer of the organ from the Organ Committee to the stockholders of the Music Hall Association and the subscribers. Nearly 1,000 gentlemen were in attendance, and were treated to an abbreviated version of the November 2 program, with only a few short organ selections, no Ode, but instead a lengthy monologue by Dr. Upham describing his labors on behalf of the Organ Committee, punctuated by applause whenever some of the more munificent donors were mentioned by name.

The November 2 event was a longer and more formal program, open to the public by ticket purchase, and ladies were welcomed. Attendees included eminent citizens, literati, musicians and music lovers, and "strangers from distant places." Charlotte Cushman, a popular classical actress, opened the program by reading a lengthy Ode written by Annie Field. The Ode was criticized by some of the media, but Cushman's delivery was praised. As in the Saturday event, the organ was again covered with a green curtain. After the reading of the Ode, Fritz Walcker brought the organ up to a crescendo as the curtain was slowly lowered, to the oohs and aahs of the attendees. Additional effect was provided by a carbon arc light (likely the first electric lighting effect in a Boston theater), which was shone on the organ as the curtain fell. Following this, five of Boston's most notable organists, John K. Paine, W. Eugene Thayer, B. J. Lang, S. P. Tuckerman and John H. Willcox, along with New Yorker George W. Morgan, played a full recital consisting of music by Bach, Handel, Mendelssohn, Palestrina, Purcell and Lefebure-Wely. The event garnered an astonishing amount of press coverage hardly equaled since. The following evening the Boston Music Hall Association hosted a gala dinner at the Revere House for members, donors, and local dignitaries, followed by speeches – including one by Dr. Upham. In the ensuing weeks the various organists who had performed in the opening program presented a series of seven well-attended "Grand Organ Concerts" to conclude the dedicatory events.

For most of the next two decades, the Great Organ was in constant use, not only for regularly scheduled recitals on Wednesday and Saturday noons, but as part of mixed concerts by various groups, accompaniment for Handel and Haydn Society concerts, recitals by students of the recently established New England Conservatory and Boston Conservatory, special municipal events, and even church services. However, orchestral music was gradually crowding out organ music in Boston's Music Hall. Various orchestras, including one sponsored by the Harvard Musical Association, were growing more professional and vying for the favor of Boston's music lovers. In 1881 one of these, Henry Lee Higginson, scion of a prosperous Boston banking family, bought a controlling interest in the Music Hall and proceeded to assemble a splendid orchestra of sixty members, who, along with a professional conductor, were paid out of his own pocket. Thus was born the Boston Symphony Orchestra. But space in the Music Hall was limited for the accommodation of such an orchestra, partly by the presence of the organ, which was being heard less and was falling into poor condition from various causes.

INAUGURATION
— OF —
T H E G R E A T O R G A N .

THE DIRECTORS OF THE BOSTON MUSIC-HALL ASSOCIATION
Hereby announce that their building, having been THOROUGHLY RESTORED, will be re-opened
On the Evening of Monday, Nov. 2d,

— W H E N T H E —
G r e a t O r g a n

Will be inaugurated with appropriate ceremonies. The proceeds of the evening will be applied towards the extinguishment of the organ debt and the formation of a fund to keep the instrument in permanent repair.

MISS CHARLOTTE CUSHMAN

Has generously offered to recite an ORIGINAL ODE, written for the occasion by a lady of Boston.

SEVERAL OF THE

Best Organists in the Country,

Having been invited to play in the various schools of Organ Music, generously give their co-operation on this interesting occasion.

Doors open at 6½, Exercises will commence at 7½ o'clock.