

ORGANS OF THE OHS FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY: TROY SAVINGS BANK MUSIC HALL

TROY, NEW YORK

J.H. & C.S. ODELL, OPUS 190 (1882)

Stephen L. Pintel

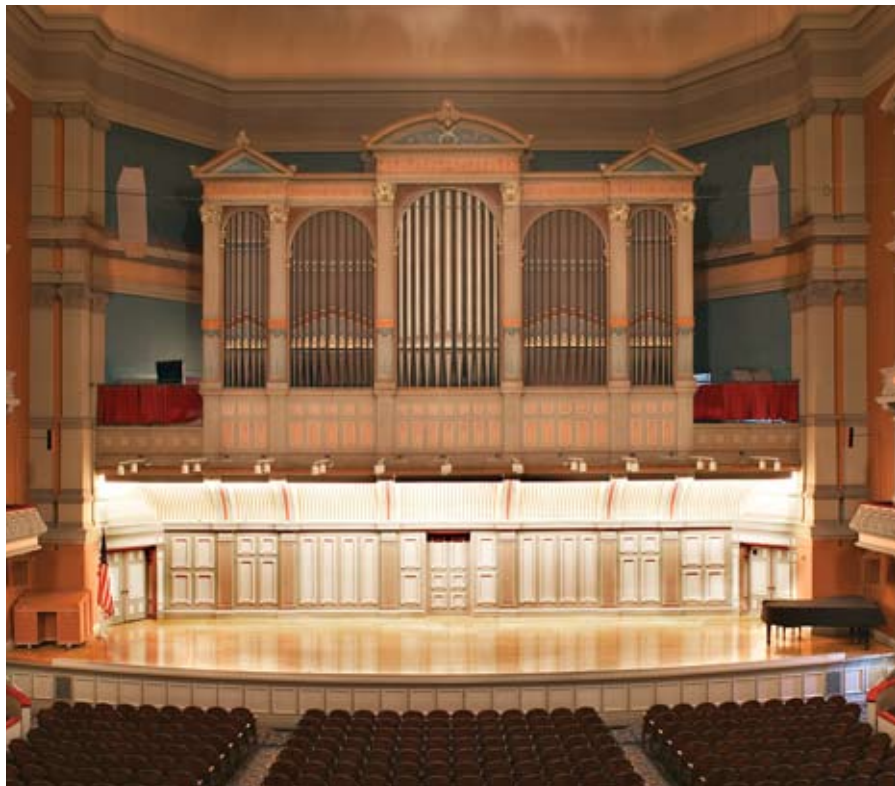


Photo: Victor Hoyt

BEGINNING WITH this issue, a series of five articles will focus on the organs of the 50th anniversary convention of the Organ Historical Society. The conference, scheduled to run between June 25 and 30 in Saratoga Springs, New York, this summer, is unique for the number of unaltered (or nearly unaltered) instruments. The splendid three-manual Odell organ in the Troy Savings Bank Music Hall, which opens the series, is not well known to members of the American Guild of Organists, but will be featured at the convention.

Music Hall, as it was known in the 19th century, was a cultural gift to the people of Troy by the Board of Directors of the Troy Savings Bank in gratitude for the community's liberal patronage following the Civil War. By any standard, Music Hall is a fabulous venue, reminiscent of America's gilded age—a period of unprecedented expansion in commerce, finance, industry, and transportation. According to Arthur Weise, the city's 19th-century historian, the Troy Savings Bank was incorporated on April 23, 1823, as the Farmer's Bank.

After several temporary locations, the bank settled permanently in 1875 at its present site on the northeast corner of Second and State Streets. The magnificent granite building (in Italian Renaissance style) was designed by George B. Post, a New York City architect, and when completed cost \$435,000, a large amount for the time. A published history relates: "Post's design was selected by default: due to his pioneer work in crafting metal to simulate stone in a building's superstructure, his was the only estimate to fall within the [bank] board's projected budget."

Begun in July 1871, the structure was finished on March 25, 1875. Even now, the massive, six-story structure dominates the Troy skyline. The ground floor houses the bank's offices; the upper five stories comprise the concert space. Music Hall is 106 feet long, 69 feet wide, and a towering 61 feet high. Internationally recognized for its faultless acoustics, it has been a sought-after venue by the world's most distinguished musicians, including Yo Yo Ma, Isaac Stern, Emmanuel Ax, Midori, and the Juilliard String Quartet. After

attending a concert there, Harold C. Schoenberg, the well-known music critic of *The New York Times*, referred to it as "one of the acoustical marvels of the world," which embraced "a kind of sound you can reach out and touch." George Szell, who conducted performances of the Chicago Symphony in the hall between 1947 and 1963, proclaimed, "I never really heard my own orchestra until I performed in Troy Music Hall. Acoustically, it is the finest auditorium in the United States." The wonderful acoustics are usually attributed to the placement of the organ high over the stage. The scalloped shape of the organ floor focuses and projects any sound made beneath it, acting as an acoustical shell.

At the hall's dedication on April 19, 1875, Theodore Thomas (1835–1905) led the Thomas Orchestra with Cincinnati-based soprano Emma Crauch before a packed house. Concertgoers raved about the majestic stone staircases and its incredible 12½ foot-wide crystal gasolier with 14,000 prisms that reflected the light of 260 burners. Both of these period attributes are unfortunately gone now. The organ, J.H. & C.S. Odell, Opus 190, originally cost \$12,470, and was built in 1882 for the Fifth Avenue residence of New York millionaire William Belden. Belden actually owned two Odell organs; an earlier instrument, Opus 172 (1879), costing \$6,700, was built for his City Island residence.

Belden, a notorious financier and stockbroker, was a colorful character in New York City's history. He was a co-conspirator in "Black Friday," the infamous stock market debacle of September 24, 1869. Working with shysters Jay Gould (1836–92) and "Jim" Fisk (1834–72), the three investors artificially inflated the price of gold, causing the market to suddenly crash. Thousands of Americans lost their life savings. After years of prosecution and his ultimate banishment from the Exchange, he proceeded on to railroads. A series of shady deals left him bankrupt by the late 1880s. Not only was he forced to sell Odell Opus 190 in 1889, he also lost his Fifth Avenue mansion four years later. Financial misdeeds, however, were only a part of his human frailty. After a much publicized affair with a Miss Etta Wolcott—of course, Belden was already married—she became so enraged with him during the evening of May 4, 1878, that she returned to his Fifth Avenue residence with a gun, allegedly to shoot him. She was arrested, and the story appeared in all the tabloids. Finally, after swindling millions of dollars from his deceased brother's estate, it took eight years of legal proceedings to redirect the inheritance back to his brother's legitimate heirs. Belden was an unscrupulous scoundrel, and at the end of

his life was largely shunned by New York's high society.

In 1889, he sold the sumptuous organ to the Board of Directors of the bank; it was not a gift as several historical sources imply. In an undated letter, Edmund Cluett, the bank's representative, authorized the Odells to proceed with the project:

Gentlemen,

I enclose Mr. Wm Belden's order for the pipe organ now at 815 5th Ave., and which has been purchased by the Troy Savings Bank. You will please remove the organ to your factory at once and put it in order to deliver in the Troy Music Hall not later than August next. Your terms for said removal, viz. \$2,800, are hereby accepted.

Edmund Cluett,
Chairman, Com^e

The brothers John H. (1830–99) and Caleb S. Odell (1827–92) had served their apprenticeships under Richard M. Ferris (1818–58) in New York City. Known primarily for their consummate woodworking skills, the Odells went into business on their own after Ferris's death in December 1858. Two other brothers, Thomas (1809–74) and William Robjohn (1803–78), who were adept at pipe making and voicing, joined them. The four men working collaboratively earned a prominent place in the annals of New York City organ-building. Although the firm had built 280 organs before 1890, the Music Hall commission established their reputation as leaders in the profession. This contract was also, at least symbolically, the culmination of the Odell brothers' careers as organbuilders.

Ostensibly, the Odells were concerned that the small scales of the pipework would be insufficient in the hall, despite the organ's location high and centered over the stage. A number of alterations were made to increase the sound. The Great was enlarged from its 1882 state with the addition of a four-rank Clarion Mixture, a new (or revoiced) Principal, Twelfth, and Fifteenth were inserted, and a new 16' Double Open Diapason (with open metal pipes all the way to the lowest note) was mounted in the case front. A new 16' Double Open Diapason of wood was supplied and the wind pressure for the Pedal 16' Trombone was increased from four to six inches, seemingly to match the 8' Solo Tuba (which was always on six inches of wind). A further proposal by the Odells to add a 32' Subbass and a 10 $\frac{1}{2}$ ' Quint to the Pedal was rejected by the bank's board as too expensive, but would have added immeasurably to the grandeur of the instrument. Finally, a new and shallow case was built. Accepting the proposed alterations, Charles Hanaman, the bank's treasurer, wrote:

Mess^{rs}. J.H. & C.S. Odell, New York, N.Y. Gentlemen:

I am at last, after much delay, in a position to give you final instructions as to the additions, etc., to be made in the organ for Music Hall. You may alter the two bellows and put on horizontal feeders to adapt it to the Ross Piston Motor at the price named in your favor of the 6th inst., viz.:— 105.⁰⁰. You may add the "Mixture" in the Great Organ and arrange it with four ranks of flue pipes as you suggest in your letter of May 23 when you name the price as \$300. You may add the set of polished Aluminum Pipes, which you spoke of when here at \$350. The other additions, the "Cello," we will leave out. Our indebtedness to you will then be as I understand it:

Your letter April 23 rd —Removing Organ from Mr. Belden's House and rebuilding it to suit Music Hall & setting same up all complete and ready for use	2,800.—
[Your letter] June 6—	
Altering both bellows	105.—
16 ft. Double Open Diapason in Pedals	500.—
Mixture (4 ranks) in Great Organ	300.—
Set of Aluminum Pipes (Being lower octave Manual Open Diapason)	530.—
Total	4,055.

Please say if the above figures are correct as you understand it. The Aluminum Pipes are to be polished as I understand it?

I send you today blueprints of the Organ Case in order that you may arrange the pipes to fill the openings as far as possible, the space not filled by speaking pipes will have to be filled out with dummy pipes I suppose.

The Carpenter is at work on the platform and expects to have the floor laid by the end of next week. If you desire to give any instructions about holding any of the work on the case back to accommodate your work, please let us hear from you.

Very respectfully,
C. E. Hanaman,
Sec'y & Tres.

Responding, Mr. Odell wrote:

Mr. Hanaman
Dear Sir,

Your favor of the 25th [is] rec[eived]. Also the Blueprint of [the] Organ Case. The figures you sent for the extra work are correct. Will enclose copy of the same. The Bass of the Great organ Double Open that is to stand in front will not be polished as you state in your letter, but covered with Aluminum foil which gives the appearance of frosted silver. The above written pipes are all the pipes that belong to the organ that can go in front. The organ is complete with inside pipes, which are made altogether different from display pipes, and will not answer for that context. I will lay out the display pipes and give you an estimate of what they will cost. There will be quite a number of them. The organ will not connect with the case when

the keyboard comes. This part had better be left unfinished till we get the keyboard set. That is the lower section on the north side. The lower section on the south side should be made so it can be taken out also. The inside of the case needs to be made without projections, so the display pipes can go upon a straight line behind the case.

[Unsigned, but likely William H. Odell]

Because the organ came without a case, a carpenter was hired locally to fabricate a new one. A notice in the October 14, 1890, issue of the *Troy Times* informed readers:

The Music Hall Organ—Decoration.

Howard S. Dickerson has received the contract for decorating the front of the new Music Hall organ, and work was commenced yesterday. The ornamentation will be in rich colors, to be in harmony with the rest of the interior of the hall. The new organ almost entirely conceals what were the handsomest decorations in the hall, and the new ornamentation is intended to replace them. The woodwork of the organ will be painted in different shades of drab, pink, azure blue, brown, and gold. All the moldings and relief parts will be in gold. The dummy pipes will be painted drab, ornamented with rich maroon and gold. The aluminum speaking-pipes in the center will not be decorated. The contract requires that the work of decorating shall be completed by November 6.

The installation progressed through the months of August, September, and October. The *Troy Times* of October 18 announced that the opening, slated for November 5, would feature Samuel P. Warren (1841–1915) of Grace Church in New York City. The first notes from the organ were heard on October 20; the *Times* that day reported: "The organ is today in the hands of three tuners sent out under the supervision of Bernard Eckhardt, of the J.H. & C.S. Odell church-organ factory of New York. Mr. Eckhardt began sounding the instrument at the hour stated above [i.e., 9:45 A.M.], the tuners [voicers?] having arrived this morning from New York." The issue of October 29 related that the organ was complete:

This morning Mr. [Caleb S.] Odell, the senior member of the New York firm which built the organ, was in the city, and the committee of gentlemen which has had the matter in charge met him at the hall, where the organ was tried by several local organists, the water-motor which furnishes the power having been connected. The trial proved to the satisfaction of all present that the organ is an unqualified success, both in power and in quality of tone. Its position in the center of the platform is splendidly adapted to give the best possible effect. In most music halls the organ is placed at one corner. In such a position the organ is not nearly so effective as when

located as is the one at Music Hall. Being placed against the east wall the full volume of sound is thrown into the body of the hall. The location of the organ has also greatly improved the acoustic properties of the hall, by relieving the blankness of the east wall, which has always been a hindrance to the proper conveyance of sound. The organ will be further tested today. But all who have heard it agree that it is one of the finest that could be constructed for a music hall, and on account of its excellent location more powerful and effective than many organs much larger and costing much more money. The opening concert in the hall will be held Wednesday November 5, when S.P. Warren of Grace Church, New York, will preside at the organ.

As expected, the opening was played before a capacity audience and was a triumph for the city. The next day, the *Times* reported:

The Organ's Salutation.—Last night marked the beginning of a new epoch in the musical history of this city. It was also an event in the history of Troy's amusement-place. The grand organ which has been placed in Music Hall through the generosity of the management of the Savings Bank and the enterprise and supervision of some of Troy's best musicians, was formally inaugurated. The verdict of the large and appreciative audience that assembled was that the organ completed the desirable accessories of a music hall and was a noble addition to the musical resources of the city. Before the organ spoke for itself its face beamed a pleasant smile upon those who had come to hear its tones. Occupying as it does almost the entire wall space above the platform of Music Hall, it fills the space with a framework and a grouping of pipes which are beautifully decorated and which harmonize pleasingly with the splendid walls of the audience room. Moreover, the vast bareness which hitherto has characterized the stage is removed, and there is a comfortable environment for the singers, which has before been lacking. And the acoustic properties of the hall are much improved.

The organ . . . is an instrument of great variety of resource and of remarkable volume of tone. It is a hall organ and not a church organ, and those qualities which are desired for a music hall are made prominent in the instrument. It excels in the production of orchestral effects, and as a substitute for an orchestra will entirely fill all requirements. But it is not alone in the volume of tone and in the grandeur of harmony that the organ pleases, for its soft stops and solo effects are equally delightful.

For many years, organ recitals were common. Alexandre Guilmant (1837–1911), played the organ on his second American tour in March 1898. The organ remained at the forefront of the cultural landscape of Troy until well into the 20th century.



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1 Double Open Diapason, 16 feet.	13 Bourdon, 16 feet.
2 Open Diapason, 8 "	14 Open Diapason, 8 "
3 Violin Diapason, 8 "	15 Violin Diapason, 8 "
4 Viol d'Amour, 8 "	16 Salicional, 8 "
5 Gemshorn, 8 "	17 Vox Celestis, 8 "
6 Clarinet Flute, 8 "	18 Stopped Diapason, 8 "
7 Octave, 4 "	19 Forest Flute, 4 "
8 Concert Flute, 4 "	20 Violina, 4 "
9 Twelfth, 2 $\frac{2}{3}$ "	21 Violin Tremolo, 4 "
10 Super Octave, 2 "	22 Flautina, 2 "
11 Trumpet (harmonic treble), 8 "	23 Mixture, 3 Ranks, 8 "
12 Clarion Mixture, 4 Ranks, 4 "	24 Cornopoean 8 "
	25 Oboe, 8 "
	26 Vox Harmana, 8 "
SOLO ORGAN.	PEDAL ORGAN.
27 Open Diapason, 8 feet.	37 Double Open Diapason, 16 feet.
28 Keraulophon, 8 "	38 Dulciana, 16 "
29 Dulciana, 8 "	39 Gamba, 16 "
30 Melodia, 8 "	40 Bourdon, 16 "
31 Orchestral Flute, 4 "	41 Flute, 8 "
32 Octave Flute, 2 "	42 Trombone (6 in. pressure), 16 "
33 Tuba (6 in. pressure), 8 "	
34 Clarinet, 8 "	COUPLERS.
35 Krum Horn, 4 "	43 Swell to Great,
36 Bells, 32 Notes,	44 Solo to Great,
	45 Swell to Solo,
	46 Great to Pedals,
	47 Swell to Pedals,
	48 Solo to Pedals,
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50 Swell to Great,	53 Swell Tremulant,
51 Swell to Solo,	54 Balanced Swell Pedal,

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In December 1924, the original Ross Water Engine and blowing apparatus—Troy made—were replaced with an electric Kinetic Blower by Arthur D. Beach (1869–1936), the son of Giles Beach, who was then a resident of the city. The Solo Tuba and Pedal Trombone had both been voiced on six inches of wind pressure, but the new Kinetic was only capable of producing a maximum of four inches, so the two largest stops in the organ were henceforth underwinded. At some point during the 20th century, perhaps also in 1924, the high-pressure reservoir and

wind trunks were bypassed, but fortunately remain inside the organ. By the 1960s, the leather of the main reservoir was in trouble. When the Organ Historical Society visited Troy Music Hall at its twelfth convention on June 22, 1967, the condition of the organ was tenuous but usable. In the 1968 *Handbook*, the Rev. E.A. Boadway describes the sound as “tonally quite rich and there are many pleasant stops, but the Principals are mild and the other flue stops are too heavily nicked. Reeds are required for power . . .” The original makers’ nameplate (extant then, but stolen at some

point during the intervening years) reads “J.H. & C.S. Odell/Builders/New York.” Attempts were made by Scott Cantrell and others to use the organ during the 1979 Region II Convention of the American Guild of Organists, but those efforts failed to produce enough results to make the instrument playable.

With Mechanics Hall in Worcester, Massachusetts, the Troy Savings Bank Music Hall is the only other major 19th-century intact American concert hall with an original period organ. What is different is that while the 1864 E. & G.G. Hook instrument at Mechanics Hall is partly reconstructed, the Troy organ is completely intact and fully restorable. The importance of this instrument cannot be overstated. This organ deserves a museum-quality restoration directed by an experienced and gifted restorer, and the project should be overseen by a committee of experts who are well known and broadly respected in conservation circles. The Citation Committee of the Organ Historical Society considers this an instrument of exceptional merit, worthy of preservation. Hearing and experiencing this instrument is in every way a fitting finale to the Golden Anniversary of the Organ Historical Society, and a noble conclusion to 50 years of American organ preservation.

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Stephen L. Pinel is archivist of the Organ Historical Society’s American Organ Archives at Talbot Library, Westminster Choir College, Princeton, N.J. He can be contacted at <slpinel@verizon.net>.