

## History of the Hook / Ryder Organ in Sleeper Hall at the New England Conservatory

This entry describes this instrument's second intervention by the Ryder concern. Hook originally installed this instrument in a reception room/performance hall immediately behind the balcony seating in the Boston Music Hall. The New England Conservatory had rented facilities there from their founding in 1867 to their acquisition of the former St. James Hotel in 1883. A 1995 commemorative history of NEC suggests that Sleeper Hall was built in 1886 to meet the school's need for a dedicated performance space, while one interpretation of a contemporary 1880s newspaper article describing the dedication of the new space in 1886 could be read to suggest it was a rebuild and enlargement of an existing space. The aforementioned modern history states that prior to the construction of Sleeper Hall, faculty and student recitals and all-school lectures were held in the Dining Room, the largest room in the hotel and having the largest seating capacity. Yet another historical account passed on to me stated the organ was originally installed in the Ballroom, although no contemporary school catalogs prior to 1886 give any description of a ballroom. However, it would have been unusually for a hotel of this grand scale to not have a large ballroom-style function space.

George Ryder moved the organ from the Boston Music Hall to some space within the former hotel in 1883 and according to a late Ryder opus list assigned his organ number 114 to this activity. In 1886, Ryder again moved the organ, this time onto the stage of the newly-christened 600-seat Sleeper Hall in a purpose-built location, and added a pedal "bass" stop commensurate with the acoustics of the larger space.

The assignment of a job number by Ryder might suggest a larger-scale project than simply moving the organ from point A to point B, which could therefore suggest when the bulk of the modernizing alterations were made.

My rushed 2017 examination of the extant organ in Barre, Vermont, was inconclusive as to which Pedal stop was added-- the Open Diapason 16' or the open wood Flute 8'. The Diapason is on a dedicated chest and the remaining two pedal stops share a common chest-- a typical disposition of pipework for the time. The action for the Diapason uses a common-axle square rail (typical for 1872) while the 2-stop chest employs individual-capsule supply-house squares, typical for post-1880 work. Diapason notes 1-12 are painted in brick paint, already out of use in the 1870s, and the pipes and chest appear to be all of a piece. It is possible Ryder disposed the pedal in the 1886 location with both new and re-purposed pipes and parts, especially in the action. A detailed forensic examination will sort this out.

The typical Hook disposition for a medium-sized instrument in the 1870s would have a two-stop pedal-- Bourdon 16' and open wood Flute 8'-- the combination producing a particularly effective synthetic Diapason 16'. This academic organ's twin sister in the Pittsburgh Female College (No. 753) had just such a pedal. The typical 3-stop Hook throughout the 19th-century when including a wood Diapason 16', specified a pitch-defining Cello at a mezzo dynamic well into the 1890s as the third stop, and the open wood Flute 8' would then only reappear in much larger dispositions.

The Flote 8' became more common in dispositions by other builders from the late 1880s onwards as ensembles became ever more foundational and thick. By the process of elimination then, it makes sense a large Diapason 16' would have been added to engage the acoustics of the resonant hall as the logical addition to the extant 2-stop pedal.

There are other anomalies which will require much closer forensic examination to determine their provenance, and once the organ left its original home in the Music Hall, was subject to alterations in 1883 and 1886 by Ryder, possibly by Woodberry & Harris in 1888, and again in 1896 when Ryder moved it to Barre, Vermont.

The organ now has oblique stop knobs on square shanks. While the later were common on Hook organs of the early 1870s, they did not begin using oblique knobs until ca. 1890, in spite of their being invented in 1868. The present disposition contains several stop names atypical for Hook nomenclature which are likely from Ryder's knob replacement. The action as now disposed in Barre employs the Hook roller boards, but the remainder of the action is a mix of Hook and post-Hook components, surely indicative of alterations necessary to fit a succession of installations. The pedal compass of 30 notes is unusual and forward-looking for 1872, but not necessarily for a teaching/concert organ, and the large Walcker in the adjoining hall in BMH had a 30-note compass-- introducing this range to the United States. It will take closer examination of the chests and pipework to determine if the original 1872 compass was 27 or 30 notes, but undoubtedly the straight and concave pedalboard is the work of Ryder. The original organ had Hook's typical ratchet hitch-down swell pedal controlling horizontal shades. This was rebuilt by Ryder as a balanced swell pedal with a metal shoe (Hook used wood shoes), while retaining the horizontal shutters.

The oldest image of the organ does not show the outside single-pipe flats-- a very distinctive feature to omit if they had in fact existed at the time of the drawing. This has led one historian to conclude Ryder expanded the case with the single-pipe flats when it was moved to Sleeper Hall and the earlier image is of the organ pre-1886. Comparing the Sleeper Hall image which appeared in the NEC catalogs between 1886 and 1896 and the case photo after its installation in Barre, shows an identical case and facade with only top elements cut-down or removed to accommodate the lower available height in Vermont. The current layout of the organ in Barre is as it was installed in 1896, either altered to fit here, or installed just as it had been in Boston. The Sleeper Hall engraving suggests the organ was installed at least partly unenclosed on the performer's platform (remarkably similar in size to the Barre preaching platform), and the 1905 Barre photo suggests a similar arrangement with side case returns, and the bulk of the organ extending into a commodious chamber. The historic case woodwork was unfortunately discarded in a regrettable post-WW II redecoration.

In spite of NEC's founding director, Eben Tourjee being an early proponent of A435 as an International pitch standard as early as 1867 (and the original pitch of the large Walcker until it was raised ca. 1870), Boston pitch rose to A450 immediately after the Civil War and the Hook

was built to that pitch in 1872. Documentation suggests the organ's pitch was not lowered until 1888-89 by Woodberry & Harris. It remained at this pitch in Barre until the church insisted it be raised to A440 to match the piano in 1979, instead of vice versa.

The organ was replaced in Sleeper Hall by an electric-action three-manual Farrand & Votey in 1896 following a renovation of the hall and stage, (and another smaller E-P organ in a teaching studio), and the Hook & Hastings was moved to the First Congregational Church of Barre, Vermont, again by George Ryder.

The organ was hand-pumped during its tenure at the Boston Music Hall but supplied with a water motor once it was moved to the St. James Hotel. The 1886 college catalogue mentions the college's fine collection of organs for student practice, including this one, and implies they were powered by a steam engine. The would make sense for a suite of adjoining rooms fitted with organs powered off a single crank-shaft, but it would have been impractical to fit that device to a concert organ located in another part of the building. However, it's not out of the question the steam boiler piped steam to multiple engines. The organ was powered by a water motor in Barre until that was replaced with an electric blower at some point in the mid-20th century.

Sleeper Hall served the college's need for a performance hall, but the hall and stage were seriously undersized for accommodating the school's orchestra-- a major element of its performance program. While the school was perpetually under-funded, it always maintained large plans for the future. When Walcker was unceremoniously removed from the stage of the Music Hall so it could accommodate a larger orchestra, it was bought by an NEC trustee, with the plan that the school would build a genuine concert hall, with a stage generously sized to support a full orchestra. The organ was to be rebuilt as a 5-manual organ and increased to 125 stops, which at that time would have made it the largest organ in the world. Sadly, this never came to pass, and the Walcker was disposed of at auction.

The school published its concert schedule in their annual catalogs, and there were at least 2-3 major performance events open to the public in Sleeper Hall each week, in addition to the rehearsals and student/faculty recitals regularly occurring there. Except for solo instrument or solo voice concerts, an organ performance would typically open a program, and mixed instrument student recitals could feature one or more solo organ pieces, and it was used extensively to accompany the school's choruses, and in particular the choir used in the training of the church musician degree. The organ degree program consisted of years 1 and 2 developing technique suitable for performing church repertoire. Theory, harmony, counterpoint, conducting, and music history were required courses. Year three was devoted to conducting and the accompaniment of choral and large oratorio pieces. If a student elected to continue to years 4 and 5, this advanced level specialized in concert repertoire, especially Bach, Mendelssohn, and Rheinberger, and improvisation.

The school also offered a 3-year diploma degree in tuning, focusing on the tuning and repair of pianos, reed, and pipe organs. Internship work in local piano and organ factories was available for advanced students.

The New England Conservatory Organ Diploma program was perhaps the most demanding in the nation, and based on European-style conservatory training. There were typically 25 students per semester in the Diploma program and graduating an average of 6 per year, with seven professors supporting the program: Henry Dunham, Samuel Whitney, George Whiting, James Hill, Frederick Lewis, Allen Swan, Charles Whittier. Students had the choice of class or private lessons, although the school philosophy was class lessons were the more valuable, based on European experience. Female students boarded on the property on the American plan (meals included), and male students were encouraged to room in the number of boarding houses in the surrounding neighborhood. Day students and visitors ate in the a la carte Cafe. In addition to musical disciplines, the school also offered diplomas in art, sculpture, and elocution. These last three were spun off in the 1890s to a sister facility across the river in Cambridge, as was the tuning school.

The school boasted electric lights in all rooms, (all the illustrations of the main function rooms show gas chandeliers), steam heat, and a large supporting staff of cooks and housekeepers. There was an extensive library of literary and musical materials, an infirmary, and a gymnasium. Students were encouraged to find paid Sunday service work at the local churches. All students in the diploma program were required to take a term of organ tuning and maintenance instruction. Organ recitals were given frequently by domestic and foreign artists to encourage the broadest possible exposure to international composition and performance styles. After the move to the St. James, the school commissioned two practice organs from Ryder with two manuals and pedal, and a third was ordered in 1886. There were no doubt reed organs and pedal pianos, but these were not listed in the catalog.

As of this writing in 2020, while this important historic organ is still extant in Barre for the moment, it is under serious threat. In 2018, the church inexplicably bought a second-hand pneumatic organ of a quality decidedly not equal to the Hook and will dispose of the Hook if it has not been sold by the time they have the funds to install its replacement. It is currently listed on Church Organ Trader for a unrealistic and ridiculously inflated price.