

History of the Organ

This organ was originally built by the W.W. Kimball Co. of Chicago for Westminster Presbyterian Church when it was located at the corner of Broadway & Columbia. As originally built, the organ was free-standing and encased in a dark-stained, quarter-sawn oak case with two massive towers joined by a wide flat of pipes. The first 17 pipes of the Great 8' Open Diapason were *en façade* and was painted gold.

When the new edifice was built in 1920, the organ was moved and reinstalled “as is” at the front of the church on the left side. No records have yet been found to determine who moved the instrument; however, it is not unlikely that it was Arthur D. Longmore, the Kimball representative and a Seattle resident.

The organ served in its original form until 1945 when its tubular-pneumatic action was electrified by Balcom and Vaughan as their opus 430. At that time, the organ was removed from its original case (which was placed in storage in the attic) and relocated to two side-by-side chambers at the front of the chancel. The two Pedal ranks were divided between the two chambers with the wooden 16' Open Diapason going to the Great and the 16' Bourdon going to the Swell. Used Wurlitzer swell shutters were installed to make both divisions expressive. A used Wurlitzer metal Harp stop was also added. The original Kimball keydesk was removed from the case, and paneled out to make a free-standing console.

Balcom and Vaughan files state that the original Swell 8' Stopped Diapason was placed on a new unit chest and made to play at 16, 8, 4, 2-2/3, and 2' pitches. It does not indicate if any other ranks were added or changed, but the listing gives the size as 2-15. This is in conflict with the opus list which later also lists the church for their opus 586. The entry says that the organ was enlarged in 1953 from 13 to 15 ranks.

From clues in the organ, one can surmise that what was added in 1945 was the Swell 8' Vox Humana and the 8' Voix Celeste. The original 8' Gambe was also replaced with a new 8' Salicional, and was placed in storage in the attic. The 1953 additions would then have been the unified 4' Octave on the Great and the Swell 8' Trumpet.

In 1985, John Woodruff of Portland, Oregon was chosen to embark on a program of restoration, rebuilding, and augmentation. Over the subsequent eight years, the organ gradually fell into a state of increasing disrepair as the project dragged on. Mr. Woodruff was finally discharged from any further work, and the organ sat incomplete and largely unplayable.

In the early 1990s, the Marceau firm, then of Portland, Oregon, had made a proposal to Westminster to provide a new instrument utilizing the Kimball pipework. According to Rene Marceau (in a phone conversation on Saturday, September 14, 2013) the specification was to be inspired by Hook & Hastings. The Marceau firm had removed a 2-manual, 3-rank, 1948 Moller Portable from St. Theresa's Catholic Church of Seattle ca. 1991, and it was subsequently installed as a temporary loaner organ for about two years. Sadly, the Marceau proposal—which had been approved—was canceled. The Moller was also relocated.

When I examined the organ on October 14, 1994, only four stops were playable on the Swell: 8' Violin Diapason, 8' Salicional (intermittently), a 2-2/3' stop controlled by the 4' Flute tablet and made from the original Great 8' Dulciana, and the 8' Oboe. The Great 8' Melodia had been placed on the chest where the 8' Stopped Flute had been, but was not playable. On the Great, only three ranks occupied the 4-rank chest, and of those only two were playable: the 8' Open Diapason and the 4' Harmonic Flute. The Swell 8' Stopped Flute was on the toeboard intended for the 8' Melodia, but not playable. Neither of the two Pedal ranks were present in the chambers, so there were no Pedal stops. The rest of the pipework was distributed in boxes in both chambers, in the room through which the chambers were accessed, in a small room above and behind the Great division with the static regulator, and in the attic beyond.

The original Kinetic blower had been replaced by a Spencer at some point in time. It was located in an enclosure in the attic, and its output was conducted through the wall into a small room where it fed a double-rise static reservoir that had been generously patched with duct tape and still leaked fiercely.

The organ was to have been acquired by Madrona Presbyterian in Seattle in 2009. But at the last minute, they backed out and the organ was all but destroyed. The church wanted the chambers for storage, so the windchests (which had been re-leathered) were discarded. The fate of the console is unknown. The first 7 pipes of the Pedal 16' Open Diapason were cut apart and milled down into shelving for a church project.

Much of the pipework was taken by The Pipe Organ Foundation of Mercer Island, Washington. The Kimball Swell 8' Oboe was acquired by the Marceau firm and installed in the Swell division of First Free Methodist Church in Seattle in 2012. In 2010, the double-rise regulator was acquired by Puget Sound Pipe Organs for Resurrection Lutheran Church in Des Moines, Washington, where it was restored and installed on that church's 1889 Whalley & Genung tracker. The balance of the Pedal 16' Open Diapason, the entire 16' Bourdon, and the original case remain in the attic along with miscellaneous treble pipes.

James R. Stettner
September 14, 2013

Sources: Eugene M. Nye compilation; Balcom and Vaughan opus lists and files; church history; information compiled by John Woodruff; JRS; extant chests and pipework.