



A Perfect Marriage

The ultimate concert organ in a gothic hall with cathedral-like acoustics. Clark Kelly is a most happy fella.

by Lynette Lobban

PHOTOS BY ROBERT TAYLOR

The happiest man at the University of Oklahoma may be Clark Kelly, who has seen a life's dream come true with the installation of a world-class organ in the ideal concert setting, the new Grayce B. Kerr Gothic Hall.

Autumn had finally delivered on its promise of a cold snap, and University of Oklahoma students actually were jogging across Elm Avenue on their way to class. Charged by a brisk wind, they burst through the ground-floor doors of Catlett Music Center. As if stumbling into a church service, footsteps and voices fell mute, abruptly silenced by a wave of organ music cascading over the second-story railing, flooding the senses of those below. The man at the keyboard, unaware of his growing audience, continued to play until the final notes reverberated through the air like the breath of a giant.

The figure who has the power to stop traffic from his second-story perch in Catlett's Grayce B. Kerr Gothic Hall is not Superman, but OU's own Clark Kelly. The School of Music's mild-mannered organmeister soars whenever he plays the University's newly acquired C. B. Fisk Opus 111 and is gracious enough to take all who listen along for the flight.

"I've never been happier," Kelly says, his face ebullient and boyish behind wire-rimmed glasses. Only the gray in his hair vouches for the 19 years he has waited for this pipe-dream to come true.

Even at rest the concert organ is enormously impressive, a god-sized set of silver pencils gleaming from a handsome case of quarter-sawn white oak. However, Kelly says it is the setting that deserves as much credit for the magnificent sound as the 2,520 pipes. The narrow, deep and high dimensions of the Gothic Hall provide the perfect acoustics to showcase the range of the instrument. "It's the difference between shouting into a closet and shouting into a canyon," Kelly explains. "It's a match made in heaven."

Yet often some of the best romances need a little nudge to ensure a happy ending, and this one was no exception. If a marriage between an organ and a concert hall is possible, then Kelly deserves credit as best man and the late Mildred Andrews Boggess as matron of honor. Without their faith in this relationship, the eloquent Gothic Hall might never have found its voice.

Kelly first became infatuated with organ music when he was a junior high student in Little Rock, Arkansas. By

OU Western History Collections



Renowned OU organ professor Mildred Andrews waited 40 years for the instrument worthy of her talents and those of the organists she trained. Her bequest to the University and gifts from her students and friends finally achieved her goal, 12 years after her death.

"Throughout the turmoil of the '60s, she was able to maintain levels of discipline other teachers would have given up on."

then Boggess had been mentoring OU students for more than 25 years. "When I began teaching, I already knew of Mildred," Kelly recalls. "Her students were always among the very best. She had given up her own concert career to teach, and she had strong opinions on what it took to achieve your goals musically."

"Throughout the turmoil of the '60s, she was able to maintain levels of discipline other teachers would have given up on. She required female students to show up for lessons in dresses and males in dress slacks, even on the hottest days of the summer. She was able to draw out the very best in her students, but not without sacrifice."

Kelly says he feels privileged to have known "The Winningest Coach of the Console" late in her life when she had retired from OU and was newly and happily married to Rough Boggess. Even then, she remained devoted to her students through frequent correspondence and phone calls. Her one regret, which she voiced frequently and audibly, was that during all her years of teaching, she never had been able to provide a decent instrument for her students to play.

Ironically, when Kelly accepted his first teaching position in 1970 at the University of Central Arkansas, it was on the condition that a new organ for *his* students was on the way. After 10 years of waiting, he was recruited by the University of Oklahoma, once again on the promise of a pipe organ. But with the Oklahoma economy booming, Kelly had no reason to doubt.

At OU Kelly and Boggess quickly became good friends united in a common cause. The young professor, who had studied under Anton Heiller at Vienna's Academy of Music, and the retired professor, who had been a pupil



A student of Anton Heiller at Vienna's Academy of Music and a teacher himself for nearly 30 years, Clark Kelly never lost faith that he would one day preside over the ultimate concert organ.



As curator of Mildred Andrews' dream, Clark Kelly finds himself in the enviable position of being able to schedule the elite among the world's concert organists who are vying for the opportunity to perform in Gothic Hall.

of French organist Marcel Duprè, each knew what they wanted in a concert organ. Fortunately, they were in total agreement. As optimistic as kids with a Christmas catalog, they began searching for the perfect instrument. In 1981, they personally consulted Charles Brenton Fisk, one of the most prestigious organ builders in the world. But by the mid-'80s, the oil bust had changed dramatically the winds of OU fortune, and Phase II of Catlett, which included the organ and Gothic Hall, was put on hold.

Without a practice instrument of their own, music students had been given permission by Norman's First Presbyterian Church to use the organ in its sanctuary. Members assured Kelly that he could continue holding classes and recitals there as long as he liked.

Kelly further cemented the relationship between the church and the University when he became organist at First Presbyterian, and later choir master and music director. For nearly 20 years, Kelly and his students have provided music for weekly worship services, weddings, christenings and funerals—the ceremonies of life.

During the lean years of the 1980s, when OU coffers barely could cover the cost of music stands, let alone a pipe organ, Kelly recalls how the talent and enthusiasm of his students sustained him. "I had incredible people, too many to name," he says, "and that's what made my job worthwhile. That's what kept me going."

In 1986, a \$1 million pledge from the Robert and Grayce B. Kerr Foundation toward Gothic Hall kept Phase II of the project alive, but funds for the new organ seemed remote.

A year later, in failing health, Boggess charged Kelly with continuing the quest.

"Don't give up," she told him. If he had been paying close attention, he might have noticed a slight smile at the corners of her mouth. For when she died in August of that year, the woman who was known as "Miss Andrews" to more than three decades of OU students bequeathed \$490,000 to the University, earmarked for a concert organ. Unimpressed by the attempts of others, she had quietly taken up the cause herself.

Boggess' friends and alumni rallied around the cause, soon pushing the fund to \$750,000. She had waited 40 years for this, and now they were going to make sure the Mildred Andrews Boggess Memorial Organ was the very best. The drawings C. B. Fisk had made for the University years before were unearthed and dusted off. Kelly

was ecstatic, but found himself in the frustrating position of having the funds for an organ without a space to put it. As if no force could stop the momentum, OU officials received \$4 million from a state bond issue in 1992, and the construction of Gothic Hall began.

Although the setting of Catlett is secular, there is clearly reverence in this hall. "It's as if from the dawn of the organ in the early days in Europe, this is the kind of room that was meant to be," Kelly explains. "It's a rare thing indeed for a public university to have an organ of this caliber. This is an organ Bach would have loved to have played." If he were lucky.

Kelly already is getting calls from the elite of internationally known concert organists who are vying for a place on next year's schedule. Dame Gillian Weir rearranged an Asian tour for a chance to play at the organ's dedication ceremony in October. The first two concerts of the year 2000 will feature national artists Marilyn Keiser and Todd Wilson. Kelly says he hopes an endowment can be established for continued funding of such performances.

"It's the most marvelous way to reach out and connect with the community. I don't think anyone can walk in here and fail to be impressed," Kelly says. "It's all so incredible for our students. Think about how much great piano music there is—it's all been written in the past three centuries—but organ music's been there since the 1200s. We have eight centuries of music to explore. It's a dream."

Finally, for the best man, a dream that has come true.