

A Voice from the Past

Three years after saving an historic instrument from demolition, OU is on course to become a national center for organ restoration, performance and scholarship.

By **LYNETTE LOBBAN**

Although temperatures had soared into the 90s with the last breath of Indian summer, John Schwandt had an entirely different reason for breaking a sweat as he stood in the doorway of a north campus warehouse. Just weeks after his August 2006 arrival at the University of Oklahoma, the young music professor had made the monumental decision to acquire—sight unseen—a 50-ton pipe organ that was sitting squarely in the sights of a wrecking ball. The instrument now was arriving in the first of four semis pulling off I-35 and up to the loading dock.

In fascination Schwandt, along with Steven Curtis, director of the School of Music at the Weitzenhoffer Family College of Fine Arts, watched as six men unloaded a three-story wooden beam and hoisted it across their collective shoulders like a felled tree. “Get ready,” said one of the movers as he passed by. “This is just one note.”

Like a boy handed the leash of a dragon, Schwandt was both ecstatic and a bit terrified. If the decision was a mistake, it would not be one easily overlooked.

“This was one of the scariest decisions of my career,” says Schwandt, a nationally acclaimed performer, teacher and organ consultant. “We made the decision to acquire the Möller sight unseen. We’d never heard it—we’d never even seen it.”

Early in the interview process, OU President David Boren had told Schwandt that one of his first duties would be to identify and procure a significant, historic American organ for the Paul F. Sharp Concert Hall in the Catlett Music Center. The massive instrument arriving from Philadelphia in pieces like a giant erector set certainly filled the bill.

The M.P. Möller Organ Company of Hagerstown, Maryland, long had been recognized as the most prolific builder of organs in America. Founded in 1875 by Danish woodworker Mathias P. Möller, the company grew its own timber, cast its own metal alloys and crafted more than 11,000 organs largely by hand. Even so, in 1929 Möller was humiliated when rival Midmer-Losh won the prestigious contract to build the pipe organ that would grace the new municipal center in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Word on the street was that Möller might make the *most* organs, but perhaps no longer the best. The sting was too much for the company to bear. So when the City of Philadelphia began taking bids for an instrument worthy of its spectacular new municipal hall, Möller pulled out all the stops.

“Möller went out of its way to get the job,” says John Bishop, executive director of the Organ Clearing House of Boston, who helped Schwandt secure the organ for OU. “It’s pretty safe to say the Opus 5819 is far and away the best organ they ever built.”

Möller’s magnum opus boasted two consoles—one for concerts

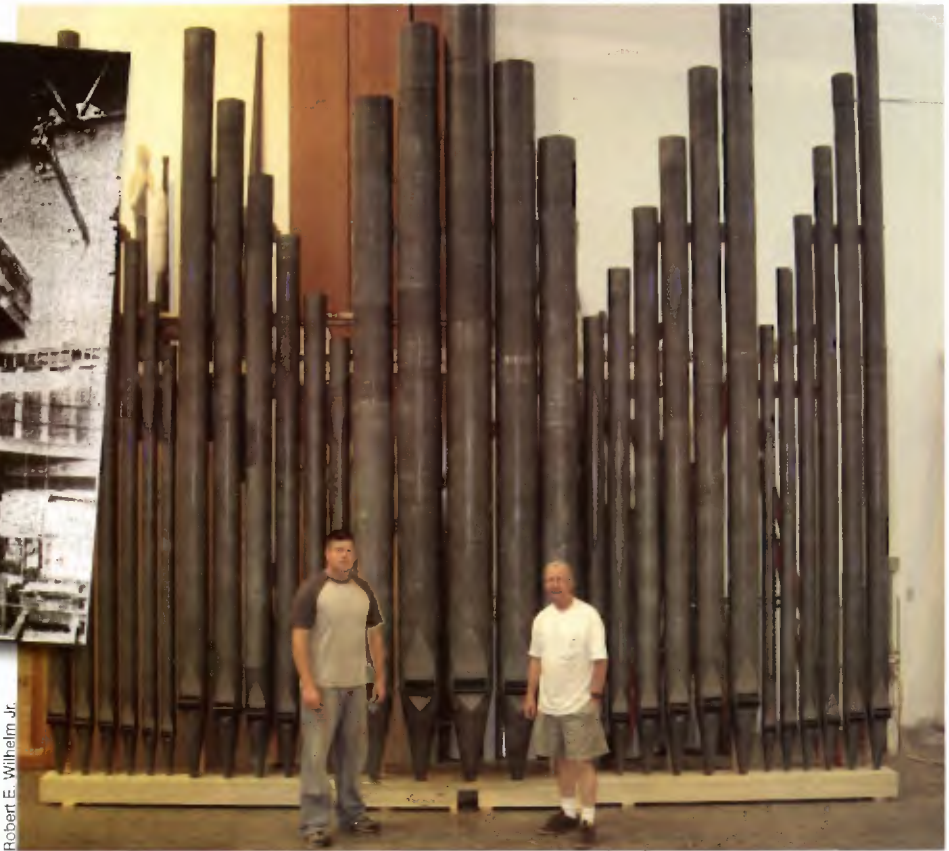


Robert Taylor
AOI director John Schwandt at the console of the Möller.



The console for the Mini Mo, below, once entertained guests in the Peacock Room of the Waldorf Astoria in Manhattan. By the time the instrument came to OU, it had been covered in red vinyl paper. Tender care from the technicians at OU's American Organ Institute restored the console to its former beauty. The inset shows the original console for the Opus 5819, which is on display in the foyer of Sharp Concert Hall.





and one with unique sound effects for accompanying silent films. In addition there was a roll player that performed popular tunes of the day from a roll of punched paper, similar to a player piano. Each of the 6,000 pipes was custom built by Möller's finest craftsmen to ensure correct tone, color, transparency and timbre.

Robert E. Wilhelm Jr.

Dan Sliger, left, a music education major, and John Goulding, a retired organ builder from Indiana, worked together to build the toe boards and upper racks for Mini Mo. The inset shows the installation of the pipes in the municipal center in Philadelphia during the 1930s.

"There is not another organ like this anywhere in the world," says Bishop. "It has the most magnificent sound of any Möller organ I've ever heard."

Bishop should know. His company specializes in preserving historic organs, especially when they are in danger of losing their buildings. Or in his words, "We network between people who need organs and organs that need people to need them."

He is the first to admit not all instruments are worthy of rescue. The Opus 5819, he asserts, is in a class by itself. Unfortunately, the building that housed the instrument was going down. The University of Pennsylvania purchased the former Philadelphia civic center to build a teaching and research hospital on the site. When the community rallied to preserve the historic contents of the building, Penn spent nearly \$500,000 to have the organ dismantled and moved to another location. When that building, adjacent to the civic center, also was scheduled for demolition, Bishop's intervention saved the organ from destruction a second time.

Officials at the Hospitals of the University of Pennsylvania told Bishop they would give him the priceless instrument rather than see it destroyed. It was around this time that Schwandt called Bishop about locating a pipe organ for Sharp Hall. One dollar transferred ownership from Penn to OU.

"The timing was perfect," recalls Schwandt, who took it as a good sign that Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* had been the last medley played on the instrument before it was dismantled.

"The agreement was struck in two weeks. That's miracle number one—to get two major research universities to agree on any-



Robert Taylor

Jeremy Wance tunes the Tibia Clausa, a type of stopped flute. The rectangular box above his head creates the sound of an airplane.

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Miracle number two was moving the organ to Norman. “We needed someplace to put it,” says Schwandt. Clearly a spare office or broom closet would not do. With campus real estate at a premium, Schwandt looked to property east of OU’s north campus for storage and assembly.

“Organs come with surprises, not all of them good,” he admits. “My first surprise was seeing it in 2006—that after 70 years, it was in this good of shape. It was literally buried treasure, perfectly preserved.”

One of Schwandt’s areas of expertise in the organ-building world is tonal work, where he is known as a “voicer.” He works meticulously on pipes to get them to represent authentically the sound of woodwinds, brass or strings. After students cleaned and polished the pipes, it was Schwandt’s job to ensure they sang as good as they looked.

“The first set I worked on was the strings, and I expected an OK sound, but I was totally blown away. They were just gorgeous,” beams Schwandt. “When I blew into one pipe, out came this beautiful, round, ‘rosin-on-bow’ voice of a bass violin. It gave me chills.”

The restoration of the instrument, largely the work of students, is an important component of OU’s American Organ Institute (AOI). The institute, founded and directed by Schwandt, focuses on a comprehensive curriculum from organ technology to performance emphasizing a triptych curriculum of



Robert E. Wilhelm Jr.

John Goulding, left, and Jeremy Wance install racks for the basses of the main strings. Shorter pipes like those in the foreground require only a lower rack board, but longer pipes need upper racking to provide adequate support.



Robert Taylor

Tuning knife in hand, AOI shop manager John Riester prepares to work in the solo division chamber in the Paul F. Sharp Concert Hall. Some of the largest pipes in the organ are in this grouping, including the trombone, one of four sets of pipes that are 16-feet in length.

classical, theatrical and sacred music study. The AOI mission is to produce the world's greatest organists, organ technicians and organ scholars by emphasizing scholarship, performance, technical skill and craftsmanship.

"Right now OU is the only university in the nation to have a degree program in organ technology. There's not another university in the country that has the size or the comprehensive nature of the shop that we have, or an organ of this magnitude," he says.

The program bridges a long-standing gap between organ builders and organ performers. "When organ students go to work, they inevitably are called on to spearhead a rebuilding project or a search for a replacement instrument," explains Schwandt. "And, it is a long-standing irony that most organists know nothing about it. They don't have the background or the lingo to talk with builders or technicians. The knowledge that OU students gain will be extremely beneficial to their careers."

Another major perk for music lovers is that OU is home to not one, but two exceptional pipe organs. A decade ago, the University dedicated the Mildred Andrews Boggess Memorial Organ in honor of OU's revered organ professor who died in 1987. During her 37 years at OU, Professor Boggess established a nationally renowned organ program and produced more Fulbright Scholars and national organ competition winners than any other organ teacher in American history.

The Boggess Memorial Organ, a C.B. Fisk, Opus 111, is known for its "historical eclectic" style which authentically renders the music of the Baroque and Romantic eras, along with some 20th-century music, with stylistic flair.

In contrast, the Möller is orchestral and symphonic. If Bach would feel at home on the Fisk, John Philip Sousa would shine on the Möller. "There are colors on this organ that are not within the scope of the Fisk," Schwandt explains. "There are strings, flutes, imitative reeds like French horns and English horns in addition to the more expected classical organ registers. This organ is like a one-person orchestra."

Then, there is the theatrical side of the instrument. When AOI pipe shop manager John Riester boasts that the organ has all the bells and whistles, he is not embellishing.

"Because the organ was designed for silent film accompaniment, you need to be able to produce a wide range of sounds," explains Riester. "The theater console gives you access to locomotive whistles, thunder, a car horn, the surf, doorbells, even songbirds."

A gala event "Old Wine, New Bottles," recently showcased both the Fisk and the Möller with three days of concerts featuring OU faculty and guest artists in a range of musical styles, from choral masterworks to the Prokofiev classic, *Peter and the Wolf*.

Another highlight was Fritz Lang's 1927 masterpiece, *Metropolis*, with accompaniment provided on the Möller by Clark Wilson, who created a theater organ accompaniment based on the movie's original orchestral score. Schwandt plans to display the

theatrical side of the Möller in future silent film events.

AOI officials hope the well-attended gala will generate interest in the completion of the installation, which will allow audiences to experience the organ's full range and depth. The OU Regents provided funding for the initial installation, which included one-sixth of the instrument's 6,000 pipes.

"Since we lacked the funds for a full installation, our challenge was to create a 'Noah's ark' version," says Schwandt. "Necessity is often the mother of invention. Instead of using every pipe, we selected and installed a representative sampling."

The scaled back version of the organ is affectionately known as the Mini Mo, if an instrument with 1,000 pipes can truly qualify for a pet name. Schwandt and Riester say they knew going in that

one of the challenges would be to compress an instrument whose parts sprawled across six rooms into a space on the west end of Sharp Concert Hall.

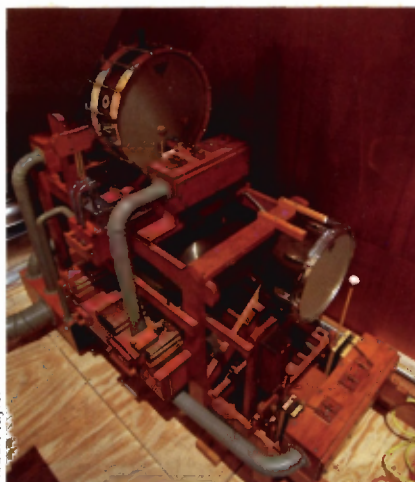
Assisting in the project is Brantley A. Duddy, a technician and organ builder, who first met the Möller when he was a teenager in 1947. Duddy has tuned and cared for the instrument since its heyday in Philadelphia. In addition to his firsthand knowledge of the organ, he was able to locate two of the original drawings, which have proved invaluable in designing a plan for total installation.

Robert Wilhelm, AOI's resident engineering expert and "technical guru," has generated dozens of CAD (computer-aided design) drawings of chamber layouts along with a spec sheet detailing the instrument's mechanical, electrical and other requirements relating to the addition to Sharp Hall. Soon, a stenographer's notebook was filled with sketches, notes, comments and other engineering information. One idea was to stack the pipes to keep the increased footprint of Catlett—and accompanying construction costs—at a minimum.

The installation, even one sixth of it, is still awe-inspiring. "Simply put, this organ is one of the greatest musical instruments ever created," wrote Jeff Weiler, pipe organ historian and technician for the organ at the Chicago Symphony Hall. "The American Organ Institute, and thus the University of Oklahoma, is heir to a musical legacy of inestimable value. It is an appropriate and enviable centerpiece for a world-class program of organ instruction and is highly deserving of a careful and historically informed restoration."

Three years after making that career-changing decision, Schwandt is still enthusiastic about the Möller and what it means to OU. "Something like this has never been done before, and that's what inspires me," he concludes. "The restoration is truly an interdisciplinary effort. We have student workers whose majors range from electrical engineering to criminal studies."

And when the work is finished, everyone can enjoy the music.



Robert Taylor

A restored "toy counter" provides sound effects, including a snare drum, gong crash, warbling birds and circus siren.

Lynette Lobban is associate editor of *Sooner Magazine*.