

# *The Flentrop Organ in the First Unitarian Church, New Bedford*

CHARLES DRAKE, A MEMBER OF THE CHURCH AND ORGAN ENTHUSIAST, was instrumental in swaying the decision toward the purchase of the Flentrop. The 1905 Hutchings-Votey, never successful due to its tightly impacted chamber location, was exhibiting mechanical problems, no doubt exacerbated by years of temperature extremes in its uninsulated tower location. Once the decision was reached to replace it, and organ committee was formed in 1961, with Charles Drake as its Chair. Drake had met E. Power Biggs earlier, as a good friend of his, Johanna Giwosky, was organist at the Unitarian Church and Biggs would often visit her on Sunday mornings. Long an enthusiastic proponent of the Flentrop at the Busch-Reisinger museum at Harvard, and a friend of Biggs, Drake arranged for a bus trip, complete with box lunch, so the committee could visit the museum, complete with a private demonstration of the instrument by E. Power Biggs himself. The committee was thoroughly charmed by Biggs, and evidently by the instrument itself. The committee also considered proposals by Andover and Noack for two and three manual mechanical action instruments, and for a three manual electro-pneumatic instrument proposed by Aeolian-Skinner (the “German Baroque” stoplist drawn up by then president Joseph Whiteford, was rather bizarre). Once the committee saw the dramatic Biggs/Flentrop presentation, it was a done deal. A contract was signed with the D.A. Flentrop company on July 1, 1962, for a 2 manual organ of 24 stops. The cost was \$31,800.00 US, with installation, packing, transportation and duty, extra. There was fortuitously an escalator clause in the contract (unheard of in those days). The projected delivery was August, 1966. A waiting period of this duration was extraordinary in 1962, and speaks to the



huge popularity of Flentrop instruments at that time. Ronald Isaac, a student of Donald Willing at the New England Conservatory, was the organist.

However, during a meeting held at Boston University on September 16, 1964, between Flentrop, Charles Drake, Donald Willing, and John Fespermann, possible changes to the original stoplist were discussed. Subsequently, at a meeting in New York City between Flentrop and Ron Isaac, the proposed changes to the original contract were formalized, although Flentrop refused Isaac's request to place the Hoofdwerk under expression. Although Flentrop agreed to the stoplist modifications, he did not personally like the changes, and

in hindsight, the organ would have been more versatile as proposed in the original contract. The stoplist as modified included one additional stop (the Quint  $5\frac{1}{2}'$  in the Pedaal), at no additional cost. The following changes were instituted: in the Hoofdwerk, the original Quint  $2\frac{2}{2}'$  was replaced with the Super Octaaf  $2'$ ; in the Rugwerk, the Quint  $1\frac{1}{2}'$  was replaced with the Cymbal II (actually a Scherp, and most likely not the high pitched mixture Willing envisioned), and in the Pedaal, the Mixtuur IV was replaced with the Fluit  $2'+1'$  and the Quint  $5\frac{1}{2}'$ . The final costs were established in this final version of the contract. However, due to a subsequent strike and resulting labor cost increases, Flentrop was forced to increase the price of the organ 34.88% to \$36,690.00. Additional installation costs, packing, transport and duty made the final cost a whopping \$50,159.00. This was surely not quite what the church envisioned when signing a contract for \$31,000 in 1962.

Flentrop, who was globally in great demand, could afford to pick and choose his contracts, as well as stipulating acoustical and architectural changes a church would need to undergo before he would agree to build an instrument. The New Bedford church had potential in spite of its many acoustical treatments: hard plaster on two-foot thick stone walls, a hard plaster ceiling with gothic vaulting, and rear gallery placement. It did however, have upholstered box pews (which were original and had to stay) and a carpeted floor over wide plank pine sub-flooring. The church had a verbal agreement with the Flentrop that the carpet had to go, and the floor was to be either wood, slate, or tile.

When the organ was delivered in the February 1967, it was discovered the gallery would not support the weight of the Rugwerk, and so the organ was placed in storage while the gallery was reinforced with steel I-beams with support beams going all the way to

bedrock under the sub-basement. This project started a rolling snowball of expensive renovations: the walls were painted, the pews reupholstered, a new state-of-the-art heating system was installed and the attached parish hall was renovated.

Due to the high demand for Flentrop organs, there were two installation crews always on the road doing installation and tonal finishing. To streamline the process and to reduce on-site labor, the organs were pre-voiced in the factory with the pipes voiced as loudly as possible. With the cut-to-length method of cone tuning, the pipes are cut exactly to pitch. This means that if pipes needed to be softened on site, they would be too long and could be shortened to be in tune (cone tuned pipes have to be laboriously lengthened if loudened, thus the efficiency of factory voicing at maximum loudness). By the time the church was ready to have the organ installed, the installation crew had to sandwich it in between two large jobs previously scheduled, with a narrow window of opportunity and a fixed completion deadline.

When the crew started the voicing, the old carpet had been removed exposing the old wooden subfloor. Flentrop's crew was used to working in old buildings with decrepit accoutrements, and thought nothing of the old flooring (expecting a hard floor anyway) and thus they began the tonal finishing to the somewhat resonant acoustic. Mid-way through the process, carpet installers arrived and began installing carpet oblivious to the organ builders need for silence. The Flentrop installers were so angry they were ready to leave, and the carpet installers likewise refused to delay their work. The Flentrop crew, working on a firm deadline, did not have the time to wait for the carpet installation to be completed, and then to revoice to the new acoustic the work they had already finished (the foundation stops), finally completing their tonal finishing of the remaining ranks (the upperwork and reeds).

After hurried and somewhat heated exchanges with the home office in Holland, an agreement was reached whereby the tonal finishers would wait for the carpet layers to finish, install the remaining pipework without additional regulation, through-tune the organ and leave. For this reason, the instrument was never properly voiced for the present overly dry and absorbent acoustic. The organ thereafter seemed overly brilliant and rough, with weak basses, exaggerated speech and extraneous pipe noises (normally suppressed by a live acoustic), all of which was especially noticeable in the anechoic-chamber acoustics. Thus the organ existed in this less than ideal situation, never achieving the fame of similarly high-profile Flentrop installations in the United States. Flentrop knew the instrument would never enjoy ideal acoustics, and wisely compensated by using higher pressures and larger scales for the foundation stops than was his normal practice. This initial hunch later proved quite fortuitous.

The organ was dedicated by Donald Willing on April 23, 1967 amid great fanfare, but subsequently faded into obscurity. Apart from the reeds, the organ was never tuned again for 25 years. The original winding, which used inbuilt schwimmer regulators to regulate the wind pressure, was problematic from the beginning, with unsatisfactory dips and bounces in the wind pressure under demand. In August of 1978, The C.B. Fisk Company of Gloucester, Massachusetts, disconnected the erratically operating schwimmer wind regulators (which were built into the windchest pallet boxes), and instead wined the manual windchests from a single rectangular reservoir located within the main case, (the pedal schwimmers remained as originally designed). Fisk had earlier successfully performed the same modification on the famous Flentrop at the Busch-Reisinger Museum in Cambridge. The cost of this repair was \$1,150.00. Incidentally, Flentrop discontinued further use of schwimmer regulators shortly after this organ was built.

The three reed stops, contrary to normal Flentrop practice whereby the reeds were built in-house utilizing wooden boots and blocks, were instead ordered from a supply house (these pipes are of extremely high quality). This was undoubtedly due to the huge number of instruments passing through the factory at this time, and the probable resulting backlog in the reed department. These reeds therefore are not of the type or construction one normally finds in a Flentrop instrument of the period.

The construction and materials used are of the highest quality throughout, and it is obvious why these organs were in such demand and commanded such a premium price during the early years of the Baroque organ revival in this country.

By the early 1990s, the organ was quite badly out of tonal regulation. Tuning a cone-tuned instrument in this condition would be damaging to the pipework. Additionally, the organ had suffered two minor episodes of juvenile vandalism, plus a leaky roof caused flaking paint and plaster to fill the organ with debris – on top of the normal accumulation of dust and grime. In the spring of 1994, the decision was made to clean and restore the organ tonally to original condition. The contract for this work was awarded to S.L. Huntington & Co. of Stonington, Connecticut – specialists in mechanical actions instruments and restoration. A large group of enthusiastic volunteers from the church, ably washed all the metal pipes in the organ.

While it was originally intended to restore the instrument tonally, the story of the instrument's jinxed installation surfaced during research undertaken shortly before the project was scheduled to begin. Since the necessity for the carpeting to remain was a given, the acoustics could not be improved. However, it was decided to finally take the opportunity to tonally finish the organ to the existing acoustic. The "revoicing" of the organ was done with extreme respect for

the original voicing, and no changes were made to the regulation that could not be reversed. No cut-ups were changed, nor nicking added, no pipes were lengthened or shortened, and no reed tongues were replaced. The large-scaled foundation stops provided by Flentrop as insurance against the dry acoustics, were regulated to speak to full advantage, and the upper work was tamed, as were the overly prominent speech characteristics and extraneous pipe noises so evident in the unforgiving acoustic. The reeds were revoiced (by tongue curving only), for a less brilliant and more foundational tone. The resulting instrument is now more balanced to the dry, bass poor, high-frequency sympathetic acoustic. The subsequent removal of a small section of carpeting under the piano at the front of the sanctuary, made a major improvement in the acoustics, tantalizingly demonstrating how good the room could sound with all the carpeting removed.

The organ was formally rededicated in concert by Peter Sykes, on March 19, 1995. The organist of the church at the time, was Judy Brownell (Dautel), who had been organist for several decades. She jealously guarded, loved, and protected the instrument. It was her vision and perseverance that led to the instrument's refurbishment and rebirth, and the congregation dedicated the fund drive for its restoration, to her honor.

Of special note, is the large mosaic at the front of the church. This is the largest extant mosaic produced by Louis Comfort Tiffany. An amateur attempt at preservation several decades ago, unfortunately resulted in the application of a layer of varnish to the tiles, which has now yellowed with age and is masking the vibrancy and subtlety of the original colors. The cost of restoration will be considerable, but it is hoped that one day soon this magnificent artwork will once again be seen in all its majesty, an exquisite artistic counterpart to the D.A. Flentrop organ at the opposite end of the sanctuary.



The First Unitarian Church on 71 8th Street was a joint effort between architects Russell Warren and Alexander Jackson Davis and physically built by the brothers William and Seth Ingalls, for the low, low price of \$40,000. Russell's official title in the project was as a building supervisor. Warren was the first to submit designs for the first year, but eventually Davis came aboard and it said his influence on the fortress like church is more in line with his work, for example the Athenaeum in Hartford, Connecticut and Lyndhurst, New York. It was built in the Norman Gothic style or Early Gothic Revival style depending on who you ask and required 7,000 tons of granite. The church itself was established in 1708 in "Olde" Dartmouth, before making its way to the corner of Purchase and William Street in 1824 as the First Congregational Society of New Bedford. In 1868 a chapel was attached to the church which served as a meeting house and Sunday school. In 1874, she underwent some major renovations. In 1896, the Parish House was built in the rear. The Whaling Museum currently possesses original plans.