

Alliance Letter

The Edward Hatch Memorial Shell Restoration

by Kimberly Shilland

Currently shrouded in a black protective covering, the Edward Hatch Shell is scheduled for substantial restoration and modernization beginning in late summer of 1989. A revitalized Hatch Shell will be unveiled on its 50th Anniversary, July 4th, 1990.

Concerts and performances at the Hatch Shell are part of summer's pleasures for native Bostonians and tourists alike. Arthur Fiedler first conceived the idea of the outdoor symphony concerts, free and open to the public, while walking along the Charles River at sunset. The first Esplanade concert was held on July 4th, 1929. It was made possible through the financial aid of generous donors and the instrumental support of the Metropolitan District Commission (MDC). The MDC also constructed the first wooden acoustical shell. Conducted by Fiedler with an orchestra of about 45 musicians, the first concert was more successful than even the optimistic Fiedler had imagined. According to a contemporary newspaper account, the crowds swelled to well over 2,500 persons within several seasons. This annual event now draws in excess of 250,000 people to the banks of the Charles.

The wooden shell remained until 1934, when wear and tear rendered it unsafe. After five successful seasons, it was evident that the Esplanade concerts were firmly established in the City's cultural life and a more substantial, welded-steel structure with a wooden lining was erected on the same sight. In the following seasons, the crowds continued to grow and Arthur Fiedler dreamed of enlarging the Esplanade orchestra (still only about 50 strong) to match expanding public expectations. These prospects for growth prompted him to discuss the possibility of expanding the steel shell with the MDC commissioner.

It is at this point, in 1938, the Hatch family enters into the story. Miss Maria Hatch, a wealthy spinster, died in October 1926, leaving behind a substantial trust fund. In her will, she stipulated that from this fund, a memorial to her brother Edward Hatch be erected: "My intent is to construct in or near the City of Boston, a park, playground or memorial to be open to the public at such times and under such regulations as may from time to time best minister to the public need for a beauty spot, with authority to erect such buildings, fountains, roadways, walks or other works, to set out such trees, shrubs

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1939 - Hatch Shell Construction
Credit: Laning Humphrey

Hatch Shell

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and flowers as may best carry out the intent of this gift." In 1938, the Attorney General discovered that the trust fund left by Maria Hatch had never been used and that her appointed trustee had died. The Attorney General appointed two new trustees and eventually the need for a new concert shell and the requirements for a Memorial to Edward Hatch were happily fused.

The Boston Sunday Post of June 23, 1940, reveals that the elegant new Hatch Shell was paid for from Maria Hatch's trust fund, a sum totaling \$270,000. The architect assigned by the Trustees to design the Hatch Memorial Shell was Richard Shaw, whose sensitivity to the site is still evident today. The exterior was originally to be granite clad, although terrazzo was eventually substituted. The interior of the shell was lined with teak, augmenting its acoustic properties as well as being aesthetically pleasing. The shell was set into granite base, carved with the names of 50 prominent deceased composers. The generic design for the acoustic shell based on a franchised German model, was then modified to fit the needs of the particular site by Maurice Reidy Engineers and a Chicago firm.

It was a grand, imposing and durable structure. *Boston Sunday Post* journalist Warren Storey Smith said of it, "Esplanade Shell is imposing...built to last 100 years...both durable and beautiful. Three hundred thousand dollars spent on armaments is but a drop in the bucket. But that same amount expended on the Hatch Memorial Shell and the beautifying of the grounds before it should, provi-

dence and Mr. Hitler willing, shed its visual and aural blessings for many years to come." With its new terrazzo cladding, solutions to the drainage problems, and a redivision of the space beneath the stage, the Hatch Shell will certainly see its 100th Anniversary.

Just as in the early days of the Hatch Shell, there are many groups involved in the restoration project. The restoration is funded by the State Government's Division of Capital Planning and Operations and managed by the MDC. Notter, Finegold & Alexander have been named the architects of this unusual project. Water damage is one of the primary ailments of the Hatch Shell, which has necessitated the complete replacement of the exterior terrazzo cladding. The new terrazzo will have expansion joints to allow for climatic change, hopefully reducing the effects of the freeze-thaw cycles that plagued the previous cladding.

The drainage system for the dome and the base must also be improved. In many spots, the dark teak lining of the dome's interior has been damaged and needs to be replaced. Jules Fischer Associates is working on the new lighting system and theater effects while Jaffe Acoustics will update the sound system. Below the shell itself, the outdated services areas, such as conductor's dressing, practice, and storage rooms, and the restrooms (there is currently only one women's room, not anticipating the many female musicians of the future) will be cleaned and redivided according to current needs. Preservation Technology Inc. is serving as the preservation technician. With the help of these various groups as well as the continued assistance of the MDC, the renewed Edward Hatch Memorial Shell will provide and improved environment for its audience and its musicians.

