An Organist Speaks . . .

ADAPTING THEATRE ORGAN VOICES FOR A HOME INSTALLATION

by John Seng

John pays for his groceries by concertizing on electronic organs, but when he's off duty he heads for Mundelein (near Chicago) to play his own 4-24 instrument. It was originally a special 14 ranker played from a console once used by Jesse Crawford in the Chicago theatre. The rebuilding job evolved the ideas that John advocates in this article.

All who heard John Seng's 4-24 organ in the Mundelein Seminary during the 1965 ATOE convention were aware that it had a different sound, a certain brightness which adds much to the Seng style of playing. The instrument is the result of several years of experiments and rebuilding, during the course of which the entire stop rail was redesigned. Wondering if some of his experiences in the field of utilizing existing pipe-work to better advantage could be made available to our readers, we asked John to prepare an article, with application to smaller instruments foremost. His suggestions offer a somewhat radical departure from "tradition" but there can be little argument with his placing of voices where they are most effective and most needed at the expense of ranks better relegated to other areas or manuals.

I sometimes feel that we all are occasionally so caught up in the lore of theatre organ that we lost sight of the real reason for the existence of the instrument. Lest anyone has forgotten, it is to make music. It is a hard core fact that Wurlitzer was a commercial builder of theatre organs who, during the peak production period, produced slightly over one theatre organ per day. There were, then as today, many models from which to choose. I was once told by a Wurlitzer installation man that the reason so many organs of inept specification and vanilla sound were built was because "a poor organist would sound better on them."

If you, dear reader, happen to be one of the lucky people who has purchased a pipe organ and is planning to install it in your home, perhaps you would like some suggestions from an upstart who has played about two hundred organs around the country.

A. If you are one of those poeple who is hellbent and determined to "install it exactly as it came from the factory," remember the factory just didn't intend the organ for the small confines of your home. The four Tibias and two Posthorns from the NY Paramount would be unbearably ugly in close quarters. In fact many sounds which were pleasant in the theatre become crude when you're four feet away from them.

B. The nearest thing the "factory" did to "home" installations were studio installations which, since they were usually played by better musicians, had the most sensibly planned specifications and were, in almost every case, far superior in sound to their theatre sisters.

C. Don't get caught up in the senseless "size race." I've heard seven rank organs that were really better sounding and far more playable than thirty six rankers.

D. Don't get "Tibia Happy." A home or studio organ, good or bad, will never sound as it did in a theatre. The largest studio Wurlitzer ever built had only twenty-one ranks and it had one well-voiced medium scale Tibia of moderate volume. If you must have two Tibias, your organ should be at least eighteen ranks large, and this second Tibia should be a soft subtle voice on its own tremulant.

E. Don't fall for the "perfect conditon" syndrome. An organ is only in perfect condition when every pipe plays on every designated stop on every manual; when every stop is movable on each and every piston button; when keys and pedals operate easily; when tremulant and wind noise are non-existent — and on and on and on. Highly impractical — and so rare!

F. There follows a list of suggestions which the writer feels will greatly increase the "playability" of any stock organ, small or large. These suggestions are listed in divisions according to importance and pertain to either two or three manual organs.

PEDAL

Eliminate large, space-consuming 16' wood basses such as Wood Diaphone, Bombarde (except Bourdon) in favor of metal Diaphone, Tuba and String-type sound which will form a more cohesive pedal sound.

Add Accompaniment and Great to Pedal 8′ couplers.

Have good representation of 8′ pedal voices from all families, excluding Kinura, Orch. Oboe and Vox.

Add 4′ Pedal Flute 5 1/3′ Pedal Flute (Quint).

ACCOMPANIMENT MANUAL

Add Octave Coupler and Solo to Accompaniment Coupler (if organ is three manuals or more).

Eliminate all 16′ stops from the lower manual along with Orch. Oboe 8′ (or Krumet) to make room for more accompaniment playable at 8′ pitch on this manual.

ACCOMPANIMENT SECOND TOUCH

English Posthorn 8′, Trumpet 8′, Tuba 8′, Clarinet 8′, Sax 8′, Tibias 8′ and 4′.

Add 2nd touch couplers: Great to Acc. 4′ and Solo to Acc. 4′ if the organ has three manuals or more.

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John Seng is a young musician who knows what he wants in an organ. His own instrument at the Mundelein School reflects many of the suggestions he makes here.

LETTERS, continued

Musical snobbery, like any other form of snobbery is a sign of a lack of maturity. The need to dichotomize is a sign of an insecure, infantile mind.

Don't get the idea that I'm painting a black and ugly picture, or that I think these faults are universal. To the contrary, I attended a good example of interdisciplinary concertizing. In the middle of the northern Calif. chapter's Hi-Jinks last year, we got a chance to sit up in the choir stalls to hear Purvis work over the big Skinner at Grace Cathedral in Frisco. There was a big crowd and Mr. Purvis was well received to say the least. Richard Purvis is himself a fine example of what I'm yakking about with regard to broad tastes in organ music. Another example, George Wright now plays in church, you can bet he ain't playing no bump and grind music baby! Funny how the artists, the true artists, are themselves the most catholic in their tastes, and the least involved in controversies about these little divisions in our ranks. That might be because they are true musicians and if it's music and it's an organ, they dig it.

We should all only be like them maybe?

Yours Truly,
B. W. Bartlett

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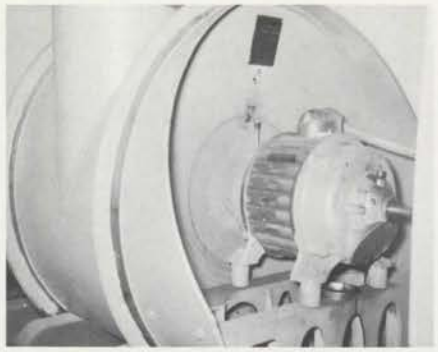
"TRAVELIN' BOB" REPORTS

Mr. Editor:

While visiting Colorado this year I met Bob Castle at the Denver Paramount and listened to him play for over an hour. He plays intermissions at the theatre on Sunday evenings. He's an excellent organist, too. The instrument is a 20-rank Wurlitzer and Bob told me he had restored all but the Culcima which is too soft to be heard anyway. There is no piano, but it has a good Harp. Both the theatre and the building owner want the organ to be used, so Bob feels that it is relatively safe for the forseeable future. I understand there is one other organ in a Denver theatre but that it's not playable at present.

One evening I had dinner at the Three Coins restaurant in the village of Louisville (near Boulder) where the 3-13 Wurlitzer from the Rochester, New York, Paramount is played by Dick Hull (he used to play it at the Paramount, too). This impressed me as a very nice installation and Hull is a wonderful performer. Very friendly, too. He plays several numbers in a row in the Don Baker way then takes a short break, then another group. He came to my table during one break for a visit and told me that he ordinarily keeps the volume low, realizing that not all present are organ fans. However, he opened it up for me on the next number and showed that the organ has plenty of power without being oppressively loud. Patronage is very good in this out-of-the-way location (several miles from the main highway).

Bob Wilson
Yakima, Wash.



This 10 horsepower motor rotates the "Orgoblo" fan blades. Note the sleeve bearing and associated oil cup, also the oil cup at the other end of the motor shaft. Keeping them full saves burnouts.

A FEW THOUGHTS ON BLOWERS

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May I reiterate, if you are not experienced in taking motors apart, either get a group of husky enthusiasts and move the motor intact to the repair shop or have a repairman take over the whole job. Before moving the motor, open the connection box on the side of the motor, unwind the insulating tape, mark the wires with tags, and unfasten them (do not cut them). If the motor has sleeve bearings, drain the oil. Be careful not to get oil on the motor's windings or on brushes (if any). Unfasten the motor from its mounting and move it to the floor, keeping the washers and spacers under each foot of the motor separate so they can be put back in the same positions. Lifting a motor requires at least two strong people, with a third person to keep track of the spacers, washers, nuts and bolts. Motors are heavier than they look, and by all means keep your back straight when lifting one! Otherwise, you can injure your back seriously. Do not lift from the end of the long motor shaft because, like your back, it may bend. Grab the shaft near the motor.

6. When work has been completed, remount the motor and reassemble the blower in reverse order of the way it came apart. Be sure to follow the instructions marked on the blower, such as "Align 'V' mark on fan with line on motor shaft," and "Be sure rotation is in this direction." Each fan wheel must be placed in the center of the space provided for it, so set the separating partition first, then the fan. Before applying power to the reassembled blower make certain that everything is free by turning the motor shaft a few rounds by hand.

The ideal time to change bearings is when the blower is dismantled for moving. And remember — blowers should never be reassembled with worn bearings.

Now that your blower is purring smoothly, remove and bury those filthy clothes! Better yet — burn them. Happy motoring!

— Chris, Manitowoc, Wisc.

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GREAT

("SOLO" on a two manual organ)

Add Great to Great 16' and 4' couplers.

Add Tibia unification at 5-1/2', 2-2/3', 2', and 1-3/5'. It is also advisable, if possible, to have other high end unification (flute, String, Diapason) for ensemble brilliance.

Eliminate Bourdon 16' Orch Bells - Sleight Bells and group Strings and Celestes on one tablet for each pitch at which they appear to make room for all 8' voices and the addition of these 16' voices as they apply: Eng. Posthorn 16', Trumpet 16', Tuba 16', Clarinet 16', Sax 16', Tibia 16', Vox 16'.

GREAT SECOND TOUCH

Eliminate all but English Posthorn 16' and 8' on a two manual organ. If Posthorn is not available then Trumpet 16' and 8' may be substituted.

Add Solo to Great 16' and Solo to Great 8' 2nd Touch Couplers to a three manual organ.

SOLO (3-manual organ)

Add 16' and 4' Solo to Solo Couplers.

Add Solo to Great 16' and Solo to Great 8' Couplers.

Add Vox 8' to Solo.

Add Tibia at 2-2/3' and 2' to Solo.

Add String Ensemble 8' (one tab to play all strings)

Eliminate all 16' stops (except Tibia) if necessary, to facilitate the above changes.

These changes will certainly add brightness, variety and ease of playing to your installation. They put the voices where they are needed by eliminating misplaced ones originally put there by "format" or the need to fill a stop rail.

The process isn't easy. It requires additional switches but the emergence of electronic switching has cut costs in that department.

The best time to perform the operation is before the installation when it's much easier to arouse the gumption to re-arrange the stop rail than after the organ is playing and such an operation would mean a shutdown.

But whenever it's done, the results are well worth the effort.

For further information about the John Seng Wurlitzer-style concert organ, see the BOMBARDE, volume II, No. 4 (Fall 1965).