

That theory was torpedoed within a week, when someone mailed in a copy of a program Mary Jean had played for a Hammond organ club (but it didn't say where!). Among the selections were such finger twisters as "Triumphal March" from the opera "Aida" (Verdi), "Bacchanale" from "Samson and Delilah" (Saint-Saens), "Toreador March", "Habanera" and "Farandole" (a wicked mess of counterpoint!) from Bizet's "Carmen", "One Fine Day" from "Madame Butterfly" (Puccini) and the "Pilgrim's Chorus" by Wagner — not to mention "Ein Feste Burg" (Martin Luther) and "Everything's Coming Up Roses."

The date on the program was January 28, 1968. Were we getting any closer?

We decided to carry the investigation to the University of Missouri in Kansas City. Even though Mary Jean's swingy portion of the dedication concert was seven years in the past, they might know something as to where she might be located.

The reply was terse, "For her current address try ATOE."

We did. The reply from the "Heart of America Chapter" was "Mary Jean Miller is our program chairman." The information was right in our own backyard — all the time.

Now we could ask all the questions and check the many leads which had been piling up. The last piece of info that came in prior to an exchange of correspondence with the long-sought lady was a newspaper clipping from the Kansas City "Star" dated May 24, 1959:

Mary Jean Miller, who will present a concert today at the Kansas City Art Institute for the Soroptimists Club, has played organ in 44 of the 50 states as well as in seven foreign countries. She graduated with honors from the University of Kansas and is a member of Mu Phi Epsilon sorority and the American Guild of Organists.

No wonder we could never locate her; she never stayed put long enough for us to catch up with her!

Finally, the great moment came; a telephone connection to "the heart of America," at last, Mary Jean Miller — in person! She now lives in Kansas City, Mo., with her husband, a retired Army Colonel by the name of Sam Ader, she told us.

Quickly — the sheaf of notes on her many engagements. We went down the whole list, one by one. Yes, she was the same Miller who played all those engagements, and she filled in some we hadn't unearthed in two years of trying to fit the pieces of her career together.

"Miss Miller, we would like to prepare a story about your career to run in THEATRE ORGAN BOMBARDE. Would you send us some notes regarding your philosophy toward music and theatre organ?"

"How about a few thoughts at random — right now?"

"Shoot."

"I have always loved and had rapport with the theatre organ. I have written many musical arrangements and the great majority are in theatre organ style — both electronic and pipe. The instrument fascinates me, draws me to it. Melodies must first be heard in the mind, the birthplace of all great music, and I have been able to apply my classical training and technique toward executing and expressing musical ideas beautifully on the theatre organ."

"How about the 9-ranker at the University? Been back there lately?"

"Oh yes — played a concert for the Heart of America ATOE chapter on it not too long ago. It's a little beauty — and the chapter technicians keep it in excellent shape."

"Now about the material for a story —"

"Story? It seems to me that all those items you read me — they are the story."

"Nothing more?"

"You might add that my home town is Bismarck — Illinois."

"But the story . . ."

"Just tell your readers that you finally found out 'what became of Mary Jean Miller' — that she's alive and well in Kansas City."

Thus ended our quest for the elusive Mary Jean — but we sure wish we could have gotten her story. — Hal Steiner

The 3-9 Wurlitzer organ referred to in the above story was originally installed in the Plaza theatre in Kansas City, Mo. It was removed from the theatre and installed in Russell Stover Memorial Auditorium, the performing hall of the University of Missouri's Conservatory of Music (at Kansas City), as the "Cliff C. Jones Memorial Organ" in 1961. It was dedicated in November of that year. In recent years the Heart of America Chapter of ATOE has maintained the instrument and sponsored chapter concerts in the Auditorium. Thus, the acceptance of a theatre organ as a cultural asset by yet another institution of higher education marks one more milestone in the theatre instrument's long and often rough path toward recognition.

Photo copying: Bill Lamb

DENNIS JAMES THRILLS RTOS

If there is ever an award to a young theatre organist who shows the greatest potential, that accolade should go to Dennis James. That fact was demonstrated most profusely on January 25 as the 18-year-old New Jerseyian performed at the Rochester Theatre Organ Society's 4-22 Wurlitzer in the Auditorium Theatre. In spite of the cold weather, the place was about half full. Dennis deserved a full house, however.

His program was heavily on music of the modern era. But, when he performed the tunes which were composed in the Twenties, the audience came to life. Though all his renditions were done in professional style, we shall dwell on the highlights.

"If My Friends Could See Me Now," a rouser, led off the program. He discovered the honky-tonk piano in "Love Is Blue." A big highlight was his rendition of "Colonel Bogey March," and if one couldn't visualize scenes from the "Bridge on the River Kwai," he didn't have it. Although we knew that there were many sound effects in the organ, hitherto ignored by previous organists, it remained for Dennis to use them in "Makin' Whoopee" which brought chuckles from the responsive audience.

"Cumana" was an excellent South American number, and "Praeludium de Festivum" showed the artist's competence in baroque. "Cabaret" was done in fluid style, and the biggest number of the evening was his reading of "American in Paris", complete with taxi horns, Folies Bergere theme and other Paris sounds. The regular program closed with three George M. Cohan rousers, topped with "You're a Grand Old Flag" which brought the audience to its feet as the console was lowered. Two encores followed with some of the best music of the evening. Final medley was from the Roaring Twenties, using honky-tonk piano as solo in a couple; "Five Foot Two", "Ragtime Cowboy Joe", "Baby Face" and "Sweet Georgia Brown."

Advice to all touring organists: If you find your audience uninspired, switch to numbers the like of Dennis James' last medley. It does wonders, especially when the bulk of your audience is composed of those people who remember those numbers.

—Lloyd E. Klos