

When I arrived at Bloomington, Indiana in September last year, I barely expected to be able to have anything to do with theatre organs. I had enrolled in the School of Music of Indiana University to begin studying classical organ. After unpacking and spending a few hours on the beautiful I.U. campus I instinctively headed into town to check the four local theatres, hoping to find an organ. To my dismay, all four organs had been removed or destroyed years ago.

A few weeks later I happened to meet William Bussell, a member of ATOE Central Indiana Chapter. He was tracing the whereabouts of Bloomington's only surviving theatre organ. We "found" the instrument in Studio 5 of the I.U. Radio and Television Building located on campus. New York's organ savant, Ben Hall, stated in a letter that the instrument had been installed in the Princess Theatre on January 15, 1923. The original was an Estey, opus 2672, with two-manuals and six ranks: Tibia 8', Flute-Bourdon 16', Open Diapason 8', Violin 8', Vox Humana 8' and Tuba 8'.

When the organ was being installed at I.U. an oboe was added, the Estey vox replaced with a Wurlitzer vox and the tibia and string replaced with similar ranks of lower windage more compatible to the peculiar acoustics of the studio. A 7 rank Klann direct electric chest and Reisner relays were substituted for the water-damaged Estey parts and the console was electrified with Reisner electric stop action and setter board.

Luckily, the original percussions survived consisting of Snare Drum (tap and roll), Castanets, Wood Block,

Theatre Organ on Campus

by Dennis James



Alan Earhart, Dennis James, and William Bussell.

Tambourine and Chrysoglott playing from the accompaniment manual; Chimes, Xylophone and Glockenspiel from the solo; and Bass Drum on the pedal.

Bill and I got permission from the university to work on the organ. Although the instrument was in working order it had not been used for several years. Both of us soon discovered that we knew nothing about pipe organ mechanics. We then contacted Alan

Earhart, a fellow student and experienced pipe organ technician. Alan immediately began organizing the work needed to prepare the Estey for use.

Days became weeks of work for our crew of three. We gave tools to interested students who wandered into the organ chamber in Studio 5, thereby initiating them to the mystical art of organ building.

The organ soon developed a schizophrenic personality of its own evident by the fact that three ciphers cropped up for every one we fixed and dead notes kept appearing and disappearing in the manuals. A new tremulant was needed, the ancient rectifier was unreliable and the traps ceased to function. By Thanksgiving Day the entire project looked hopeless.

At this point I decided to plan a concert for Sunday, December 17. Undaunted by our numerous setbacks we set to work so that within two weeks the organ could be played. Alan built a tremulant employing the principle of the Wicks balanced pedal valve. It was a strange device but it had the capacity to shake the huge volume of low-pressure air in the seven rank chest. The little Estey began to sound like a true theatre organ, so now, actually encouraged, we began adjusting magnets, cleaning contacts and repairing the traps.

The work lasted well into the wee hours of the mornings preceding the concert. By 4:30 Sunday morning the last rank was in tune. Then the old selenium rectifier burned out. The concert was saved, however, by an automobile battery boosted by a charger thoughtfully provided by ATOE members.

The concert was a resounding success as evidenced by the audience of eighty-six enthusiasts who turned out on a bitterly cold afternoon. Many students and faculty appeared along with the chapter members.

Many of the organ students who had never heard a theatre pipe organ were amazed. A typical comment was, "Imagine real drums hooked up to an organ!" Some even expressed a desire to find out about theatre organ playing technique.

The future looks bright for the little I.U. Estey. With funds to be donated by the Radio and Television Department and the Central Indiana Chapter of ATOE the necessary repairs can be made. Even more exciting is the desire expressed by numerous people on campus for the organ to be used as a part of the cultural life of the university. Such are the prospects of a theatre organ in the world of today. □

Closeup of right chamber at Princess Theatre. Note Estey console in lower left corner.

— Photo by Steven Fink

