

# Rochester Hosts Convention

by Lloyd E. Klos

In August 1923, many of the country's leading theatre, concert and church organists descended upon Rochester, N.Y. for the sixteenth annual convention of the National Association of Organists. The five-day affair used the Eastman Theatre and adjacent Kilbourn Hall for its headquarters, and the city hasn't seen the likes of such an event since, or will it ever.

An adjunct group to the NAO was the Society of Theatre Organists, which held sessions in conjunction with the parent organization. This group was organized in 1921, and existed solely "for the purpose of advancing the ideal of motion picture accompaniment."

The convention registry list was a veritable Who's Who in the organist profession; T. Tertius Noble of St. Thomas Church in New York and president of the NAO; Eric DeLamarter of the Chicago Symphony; Palmer Christian of Chicago; Dr. Healey Willan of Toronto; Vera Kitchener and Frank Stewart Adams of New York; Robert J. Berentsen of Brooklyn; Firmin Swinnen of Philadelphia; and Harold Gleason, John Hammond and Guy Fraser Harrison of Rochester were heard in recitals, motion picture demonstrations and discussions.

Many papers were read, and round-table discussions were held, with the sessions open to the public. The event was well-publicized in the daily press, and the writer will strive to bring out the more interesting aspects, with prime emphasis on theatre organ activity.

The convention began on Monday evening, August 27 with an informal get-together in the corridor of the Eastman School of Music. On Tuesday morning, registration was held, followed by addresses of welcome by Major Clarence D. Van Zandt and Dean Hoing of the University of Rochester. A business meeting was held prior to lunch, reports from officers, committees and state presidents, and election of nominating and resolutions committees.

Tuesday afternoon was devoted to two recitals. The first was in Kilbourn Hall where Harold Gleason performed works on the 4-manual Skinner. The second was held in the Eastman Theatre on the 4-manual Austin Organ, Vera Kitchener, STO, the soloist.

Following supper, the conventioners returned to Kilbourn Hall where the NAO president, T. Tertius Noble, presented a program of selected works.

Wednesday morning was devoted to a meeting of the Executive Com-

mittee, greetings from representatives of various organist groups, among them the Society of Theatre Organists, represented by its president, Robert J. Berentsen. Of note was a greeting from David J. Marr, founder of the Marr & Colton Organ Co., and representing the Organ Builders Association.

Following lunch, was a reading of a paper by Hamilton C. MacDougall of Wellesley College on "The Country Organist", a recital in Kilbourn Hall by S. Wesley Sears of St. James Church in Philadelphia, and winding up with a demonstration of the Eastman Theatre organ by Robert Berentsen.

At 8 P.M. a festival concert was held in the Eastman Theatre with Vladimir Schavitch conducting. Artists included Frank Stewart Adams, Eric DeLamarter, Guy Fraser Harrison, Firmin Swinnen and Palmer Christian.

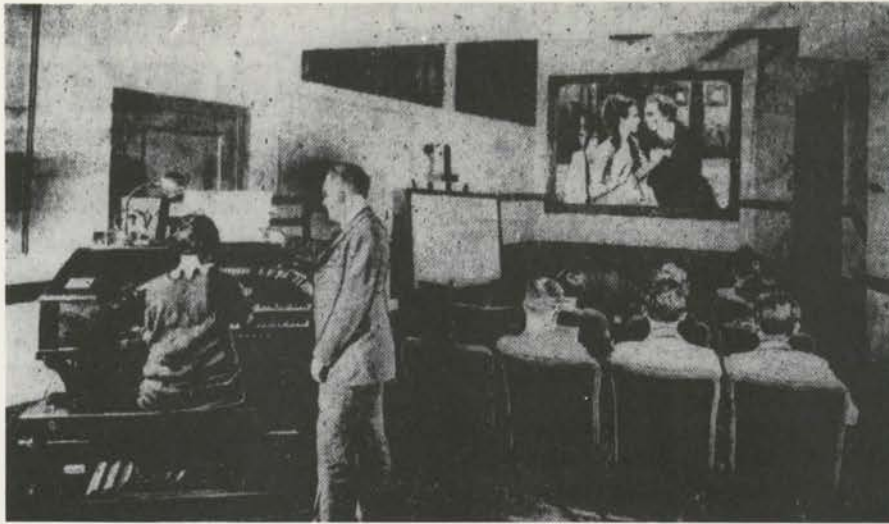
On Thursday morning, the Society of Theatre Organists took over the scene which was held in the Eastman Theatre to give members an opportunity to use the organ and have pictures shown to illustrate how the true theatre organist adapts his music to the themes of the screen stories. Following the address of welcome by the theatre manager, William Fait, a survey of the STO for 1922-23 was read by Mr. Berentsen, the president. He said that this society "was three years old, had 75 members, and that mighty few of them think that the wage scale is most important."

Frank S. Adams played an organ sketch adapted to the comedy "The Apartment House." He gave an example of the many humorous, highly comical, even side-splitting possibilities of the up-to-date motion picture organ.

A demonstration of the Eastman Theatre organ by John Hammond endeavored to "show the technique of the profession and bring to the attention of the public the tremendous strides which the theatre organist has made. Few people realize the amount of musical knowledge which a really first-class theatre organist must possess, and the public was well paid for attending this session of the convention."



The Eastman Theatre was the site of National Association of Organists 16th annual convention in 1923. Motion picture studio for students training was located on the top floor.



A very rare photo of the former Motion Picture Organ Studio of the Eastman School of Music, located on the sixth floor of the Eastman Theatre. Here, aided by a 2-manual Wurlitzer organ, a screen, projection equipment, and a library of 70 silent films, covering a wide range of subjects, comedy, drama, romance, tragedy and current events, the student learned how to accompany the silent pictures. The instructor shown in this June 1924 photo is Robert Berentsen. — (L.Klos collection)

Hammond then played the music to the feature picture *"The Primitive Lover"*, in which he exemplified all that is highest in playing a picture. He specified three themes, partly from Puccini's *"Girl of the Golden West"*. A general discussion period followed.

Hammond then demonstrated the resources of the Eastman organ with a comedy entitled *"Toonerville Trolley"* and a feature *"Fruits of Faith"*. He explained to his hearers that there are two separate blowers and motors to the organ; a second touch is somewhat of a novelty; the so-called traps and unusual shifts attracted attention; the pipes over-stage and above the center chandelier are all hidden from the listener; most remarkable is it that this complicated large instrument, in use from 1 to 11 o'clock daily, should remain in such good condition.

T. Scott Buhrman, editor of *"The American Organist"* was scheduled to appear with a paper entitled *"Progress of the Theatre Organist"*. However, his place was taken by Dr. Alexander Russell of the Wanamaker Auditorium and Princeton University. He said that ten to fifteen million people see pictures daily, and their musical tastes are much influenced, sometimes even formed, by what they heard played. When the Wanamaker Auditorium was loaned to the Society of Theatre Organists for a public demonstration of ideals in picture playing, he was gratified to note that truly cultured and refined people attended. Playing a picture is a remarkable thing, for it

requires big memory, sense of humor, common sense and other important qualities. Humanizing of the intimate touch between the player and the audience is needed.

He paid a warm tribute to Mr. George Eastman's vision in this magnificent building, devoted exclusively to educational and moving picture purposes. Dr. Russell believes the public wants artistic pictures, combined with music of similar character.

Following the program, the audience was invited to inspect the studio where students were trained in the art of motion picture accompaniment. (See photo). With the aid of a 2/8 Wurlitzer organ, complete motion picture projection equipment, a library of 70 films of every description, and the most competent instructors, many students were graduated from the Eastman School as competent theatre organists. The studio was of great interest to all those who inspected it.

The remainder of the convention was devoted to discussion and recitals, with emphasis on church and concert work. The affair wound up in a spirit of gaiety on Friday when more than 300 organists and guests gathered at Newport on beautiful Irondequoit Bay for a picnic and banquet. Several trips about the bay on a steamer were taken before supper.

Of interest were the names of those elected officers for the coming year: President, T. Tertius Noble; Vice Presidents, Harold Gleason, teacher at the Eastman School, Henry S. Fry of

Philadelphia, Mrs. Bruce S. Keator of Asbury Park, New Jersey and Dr. Francis Hemington of Chicago; Secretary and Director of Publicity, Willard Irving Nevins of Brooklyn; Treasurer, John Doans of New York; Chairman of the Executive Committee, Reginald L. McAll of New York.

Several people were introduced at the banquet. Senator Emerson Richards of New Jersey, designer of the Atlantic City Auditorium organ, told the guests that, speaking for the New Jersey delegates, he would say that "it was simply a marvel how they had been surrounded by the home atmosphere in Rochester. This was true even to the mosquitoes."

John Hammond, Eastman Theatre organist, told the members of the association that he wanted them to know how greatly the Association of Theatre Organists appreciated their backing.

"We have had your support from the first", he went on to say. "We need the encouragement more than you know. The theatre organist is so apart from the people's hearing him play that he doesn't know what his audiences are thinking. Once in awhile, someone goes to the box office and tells the manager that he or she wishes that the organist would play some jazz.

"I don't mean that we should play from Bach's *"Fugue in E Minor"* when there is a comedy being shown; that wouldn't be good, but I wish they would encourage better music. I feel that the day is coming when they will, but it will come much sooner if we have the co-operation of the church and concert organists."

One of the most heartily applauded when he rose to speak was Mr. Skinner, of the Skinner house of organ builders. His was one of the best talks given. He said he would rather be an organist than anything else if he were not an organ builder.

Frank S. Adams, acknowledged to be the humorist of the association, and an ideal player of comedies on the screen, told stories.

And so, a most successful convention of organists was held in the Flower City. Today, it is a far cry from those days, as concert and church organists have their own convention, and it is a rarity when someone of the theatre organ vein is asked to perform in a special program before church and concert organists. □