

ANOTHER "FIRST" FOR BILLY NALLE!

Theatre Organ in Cathedral

by Ray Brubacher

Another "first" in theatre organ history was established on Sunday afternoon 23 July 1972. The setting was most unusual and impressive . . . the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, seat of the Episcopal diocese of the city of New York and also the largest gothic cathedral in the western world. The dimensions of this edifice are mind teasing to say the least, the ceiling of which is over fourteen stories from the stone floor and the main aisle of which is over six hundred and twenty five feet in length.

Many readers know of the massive AEolian-Skinner pipe organ with its state trumpet rank on fifty inches pressure under the great rose window. However, on this afternoon he would be hearing Billy Nalle performing on a Rodgers 340 theatre three manual instrument which had been placed in the great crossing of the cathedral. Some twenty two speaker systems had been placed in the vicinity.

Feelings of curiosity and speculation were running high among the fifteen hundred or so persons who had gathered at the crossing by 3:30 to hear first a short concert played on the Skinner. At 4 P.M. the movingly beautiful service of evensong was sung by the

cathedral men and boys choir and immediately at the end of the service, the dean of the cathedral introduced the featured artist.

To this writer the most singularly interesting problem at hand was how well Billy Nalle and the Rodgers would cope with the spectacular problem of reverberation present. When empty the echo time is almost nine seconds and even with the crowd that had assembled, reverb time counted out to over five. We had just heard how this echo period had not hindered but had enhanced the pipe organ and now it would be placed under a severe test with theatre organ.

The artist in the spotlight had chosen his program most carefully, giving serious attention to tempo regulation and phrasing to permit the accoustical conditions present to support rather than destroy the musical content. Due to questionable speaker placement however, much of this preparation and attention to fine details was simply in vain. It is a great pity that some of the speaker systems did not directly project into the seating area of the audience instead of being placed facing the ceiling causing the expression pedals to be constantly full open.

It is the opinion of the writer that Billy made one of the most serious efforts that has ever been made by anyone in the profession to give the theatre organ its more than rightful place as a serious musical instrument capable of sustaining itself without the benefit of a silver screen, Laurel and Hardy or D.W. Griffith. It is evident in his playing that this feeling of independence for the theatre organ is one which must be promoted by our organization just as the classic organ is promoted by the American Guild of Organists. That the administration at the cathedral officially recognized the instrument we love so dearly should be an incentive for us to promote it more and more in this respect. I sincerely hope that if such an event occurs again at this great house of worship, more careful consideration can be given to the installation of the instrument so that its capabilities may be more fully realized with a superb and dedicated talent such as is found in Billy Nalle at the console. Although, I must confess that "Clang, clang, clang, goes the Trolley" with five seconds of reverberation behind it is a most impressive get up and go sound in anyone's book. □

Billy greets the Cathedral audience.
(Photo by Ray Brubacher)



Billy Nalle at the Rodgers 340 in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine.
(Photo by Thom Laughman.)

