

"MOTHER" DEDICATED

by Bert Brouillon

The "Dowager Empress" is singing again, safe at last in the Exhibition Hall of the "Century II" Civic Center in Wichita, Kansas.

After a four year rebuilding and installation project by Wichita Theatre Organ, Inc., local organ enthusiast group, the "Mother" Wurlitzer was dedicated with a gala concert on Dec. 9, 1972, with Rex Koury at the console and support by a 31-piece concert orchestra.

It was a time of triumph for group president Mike Coup, publicist Dave Bernstorf and the group which labored so long to overcome obstacles such as the loss by fire of the original console in 1968. With the exception of retired aerospace worker Cloyd Coup, the principals in the organization are all under 30: J.D. Unruh, Tom Taylor, Marc Allen and Greg Dye.

It was 12 degrees above zero on Dec. 9 in Wichita but the weather in no way diminished the turnout; the

"Wurlitzer Pops Preview" program had been sold out for two days.

The audience, 3,000 strong, was seated at tables ala the Boston Pops concerts as Mike Coup made his opening remarks. Then master showman Rex Koury and the orchestra opened with the memorable newsreel march, "Paramount on Parade," after which the organ took over for a nostalgic "Perfect Song."

Rex Koury did his own MCing from the console and announced his program of mostly memory twirners e.g. "Rhapsody in Blue" in remembrance of New York's "Great White Way" where the same organ was featured at the New York Paramount from its mid-'20s opening until the late '40s. It was first featured by the great Jesse Crawford and Rex's "Crawford Remembered" included four of the poet's greatest hits. Also in the nostalgia class was a medley he called "Tin Pan Alley 1927." His own "Gunsmoke Theme", with plenty of support from the orchestra, proved an exciting treat-

ment. The orchestra was heard again with the organ during the "Fiddler on the Roof" selections.

After intermission the music continued with a Cole Porter potpourri, "Tin Pan Alley 1972", a Christmas group, then Koury's veritable "trademark" variations on "When the Saints Go Marching In".

Then Rex threw in an extra, his "Rhapsody Americana", followed by a rousing "Stars and Stripes Forever" finale which brought the entire audience to its feet.

The success of the opener will be followed by a youth pops concert on March 4, Gaylord Carter on April 18 and Billy Nalle on June 18.

There was a very proud lady in the audience, Theresa Papp, who came all the way from New York to hear the organ her husband, Dan Papp, first installed then maintained for as long as it was used at the Paramount.

Following the concert we had the following exclusive THEATRE ORGAN interview with Rex Koury.

Rex Koury at the new console of the "Dowager Empress" built after the original was destroyed by fire in 1968.



Programs are autographed following the dedicatory concert in December.



Q. What was your first impression of the Wurlitzer?

A. I arrived in Wichita about 10:30 p.m. on Dec. 5 and a half hour later was getting a preview of 'Mother.' What a thrill it was!

Q. It was in top shape?

A. Yes. however, next day (Wednesday), Mother got temperamental — one cipher after another.

Q. What caused them?

A. The weather turned dry and icy cold overnight. Not enough humidity. They raised the humidity by squirting water into the blower intake at regular intervals. Once the humidity reached the chambers and relay room, the ciphers let up.

Q. Any other technical problems?

A. No. By showtime she was in glorious voice — indeed the 'grande dame' of theatre organs. Had only one brief Vox cipher but she cleared her throat without help.

Q. Was it the first time you had played the famous Times Square Paramount organ?

A. No, I'd had the privilege of playing it as a student of Jesse Crawford in the early '30s. It sounded fantastic then and it sounds fantastic today. Smooth!

Q. What stops do you feel stand out?

A. Three lovely Tibias, and four Vox Humanas. Two Posthorns, and three of the finest Diapasons I've ever heard on a theatre organ. And some wonderful color reeds.

Q. How's the bottom end?

A. The pedal department really shakes the hall when topped off with the 32' Contra Bourdon, the Diaphone and the 32' Bombarde.

Q. It seems to have met all your concert requirements.

A. This has got to be the greatest Wurlitzer I've yet experienced. Playing it again was, for me, the purest and most wonderful nostalgia. I don't mind admitting tears came to my eyes more than once during the concert.

Q. Any comments about the installation?

A. As you know, the Century II is a tremendous convention and civic center, a huge round affair divided like pieces of pie. The Exhibition Hall, which houses the organ, is the largest cut.

Q. About how large?

A. Well, 3,000 attended the concert and they were seated at tables, not in rows of seats. Main floor and

balcony combined have over 60,000 square feet.

Q. Where are the chambers located in the pie slice?

A. Across the rear of the stage near the center of the building. There are four of them — Main, Solo, Orchestral and Brass, and they are elevated about 15 feet above stage level.

Q. What are the acoustic qualities of the hall?

A. Quite good, since the auditorium is mostly stone and concrete construction with plenty of glass and no deadening surfaces.

Q. Is the console on an elevator?

A. No, it's on a large dolly which is wheeled on stage from the left side wings. Backstage there's a special room to store it.

Q. Now, to the concert. Besides the 4-manual, 36-rank Wurlitzer there was an orchestra.

A. Yes, a 31-piece concert ensemble drawn principally from Wichita's fine symphony orchestra. It was ably directed by veteran local conductor Verne Nydegger. I can tell you this group compared very favorably with many of the excellent studio orchestras I've conducted in Hollywood.

Q. Any problems with orchestrations?

I noted items on the program such as the "Fiddler on the Roof" medley. Arrangements for a 31-piece orchestra plus organ aren't readily available.

A. The only problem was time. I wrote out all the orchestral arrangements except for the Cole Porter set. Of course I'd done most of the work before arriving in Wichita but last minute changes had me writing out conductor parts until two hours before curtain time, often during rehearsal breaks.

Q. Were you happy with the overall results?

A. Happy? This had to be an occasion I'll always remember — the thrill of a lifetime to turn around after "The Stars and Stripes Forever," played by both organ and orchestra, and find 3,000 applauding people on their feet. That was something an organist rarely experienced in the old days — believe me.

Q. How did you like Wichita?

A. It's a friendly place. I must tell you too that my visit was made all the more pleasant by the wonderful hospitality of Mike Coup, Dave Bernstorff and his folks, and the

members of Wichita Theatre Organ, Inc. They are one grand bunch.

Q. Did the premiere concert attract any outsiders?

A. Yes, organ buffs came from all over — Fort Worth, Dallas, San Diego, Los Angeles and even New York. And a special bouquet goes to young Rick Shindell, who drove down from Detroit and worked practically around the clock to help get the organ ready — with the flu, yet!

Q. Did the concert draw any press comment?

A. The Wichita Eagle reviewed the concert favorably in its December 10th issue, along with a photo of the concert poster with 'SOLD OUT' marked across it.

Q. Anything else?

A. Yes, the closing comment of the Eagle's reviewer, Joanna Wiebe — 'Mother, You're not getting older; you're getting better.' □



Letters to the Editor concerning all aspects of the theatre organ hobby are encouraged. Send them to the editor concerned. Unless it's stated clearly on the letter "not for publication," the editors feel free to reproduce it, in whole or part.

*Address: P.O. Box 1314
Salinas, Calif. 93901*

Dear Editor

As you know, but not yet all ATOS chapters, this well tremulated citizen has been engaged to write a bi-monthly column of theatre organ news for *MUSIC Magazine*. This magazine goes to 30,000 people and so obviously more than just members of the AGO in the USA and the RCCO in Canada. Readers want to know more about the theatre organ and what is happening in its use internationally and so such a column helps serve the